

Why you can't be a Christian by yourself.

1 Peter 2:9-10; Matthew 16:13-20

Why should anybody go to church? Well, it's safer than riding in a car: "They cause 20 percent of all fatal accidents." It beats staying home: "17 percent of all accidents occur" there. It's safer than streets or sidewalks: "14 percent of all accidents happen to pedestrians." It's better than traveling "by air, rail, or water: 16 percent of all accidents happen on these." Only .001 percent of all deaths occur in worship services in church, and [by far most of] these are related to previous physical disorders. Hence, the safest place for you to be at any time is church. Bible study is safe, too. The percentage there is even less. Go to church! IT COULD SAVE YOUR LIFE!

How many times have you heard someone say something like, "He doesn't go to church, but he's a good Christian."? Surveys show that most Christians and Jews believe you *can* be a good Christian or Jew without regularly attending church or synagogue. But can you? What would that look like?

Think about what would happen if – or maybe it is happening – if Americans said, "I don't need to vote or pay taxes or cooperate with my neighbors or follow the laws or volunteer or serve my country or pay attention to what the politicians are up to - to be a good American." Are we going to let somebody else do it for us? Then how will we keep our freedoms? How will our children know what we stand for?

To say you don't have to go to church to be a Christian raises the question: who's going to be there to pass on the faith to the next generation like you if you aren't? What would it look like if everybody believed that? If everyone had the attitude that participation in the church community isn't necessary, then how would we ever have known anything about Christianity in the first place?

There *is* some truth in the notion that our faith isn't about going to church – especially if it means coming here on Sundays and pretty much doing business as usual the rest of the week. As Evangelist Greg Laurie said, "Jesus did not command the whole world to go to church. Jesus commanded his church to go to the whole world."

Thoughtful Christians have always understood that only God knows who the genuine members of the community of faith are, and it doesn't have much to do with a membership certificate or roll book. As a pastor I always had a hard time understanding people who never came to church and never supported the church with their money, but insisted their names stay on the membership roll no matter what. Do they really think they're fooling God or anybody else?

I'm not talking about the people who *can't* come or even the people who have been hurt by the way they've been treated by the church or understandably turned off by people who turned Jesus' good news into bad news - people like Ralph, who may not go to church but *do* live a kind of faith however hidden it may be.

"Ralph wasn't there the night of the "Heaven and Hell" performance. He was invited to something sort of like it once, a revival they called it, but didn't have the stomach for it. Never had much use for church or church people, and they didn't have much use for him. Swore a blue streak down at the loading dock. Smelled like tobacco and sweat and stale beer most of the time.

What nobody but the church treasurer knew was that it was Ralph who kept the checks coming when the food pantry was running low at the end of the month. All it took was a 'phone call, and Ralph sent whatever was needed. He'd made her swear on a stack of Bibles never to tell anybody. Said he wanted to make sure nobody would go hungry in his town as long as he could do anything about it. That's all. Never asked for a receipt or a statement for his taxes. Never wanted a "Thank you" from anybody.

Once in a while she'd try to work on him a little, but the answer was always the same. "I won't come to church. I've seen what religion can do to a man, make him think he's better, make

him a goody-two-shoes. I don't need to be saved from anything. You can talk 'til you're blue in the face or 'til kingdom come, but I won't come."ⁱⁱⁱ Will Ralph be there when the kingdom *does* come? I wouldn't be surprised.

Jesus warned the good "church" people of his day that they shouldn't assume they know who's inside and who's outside. Thoughtful Christians have always realized that there are people outside the church who are better examples of what God made human beings to be than many who are inside it.

Just going to church doesn't make you a faithful Christian. The late lawyer and author, Louis Nizer had it right: True religion is the life we lead, not the creed we profess.ⁱⁱⁱ And as humorist Garrison Keillor is supposed to have said, "Going to church no more makes you a Christian than standing in a garage makes you a car." But that's still no excuse to say that being a part of the church community doesn't matter.

I once read about a couple who considered themselves part of a church but never attended worship or participated in other activities. The wife was in the hospital, seriously ill, and the pastor was called. As he was leaving, the husband stepped outside the room, and, pulling out his checkbook, asked the pastor the name of the church treasurer. The pastor did what few pastors probably actually do. He said, "You know, your check is welcome, but what we'd really like is to have you come to church and bring it with you." And he did.

American individualism is a disease. We worship independence and scorn interdependence.

Dr. Andrew Weil points out that "Human beings are highly social, communal animals. We are meant to live in families, tribes and communities, and when we lack those connections, we suffer. Yet many people pride themselves on their independence and habitually distance themselves from others. Some may indulge in isolation as a defensive strategy -- possibly developed in reaction to painful emotional experiences. Others may never have learned how to connect meaningfully to anyone or anything beyond themselves."^{iv}

Jim Wallis, author of God's Politics, wrote several years ago, "We have forgotten we are God's people, and we have fallen into the worship of American gods. Now God's word to us is to return. Church historians may someday describe our period as the 'American captivity of the church.' ..."^v

Jesus spent more time putting together a community of his followers than he did preaching the good news of God's love. So we should realize that community isn't an option for Christians. It's essential to our faith. The church in America, especially, has bought into the myth of individualism - in our hymns and songs, in our prayers, in our organization. We've made so much of the individual's relationship to Jesus and responsibility to God that we've lost almost any concern for our accountability to the community. We tend to see the church as a nothing more than collection of individual Christians who come together for convenience, instead of an extended family of faith who may not be blood kin but are brothers and sisters in Christ. Our spiritual growth has been left to our individual efforts instead of being the job of us all as a community on a journey of faith together. We've held up as saints people who lived alone instead of celebrating the faithful who came from a community, were nurtured by a community, and remained a part of a community of Christians.^{vi}

What's wrong with this? Well, for one, it's not in the Bible. The Bible speaks of the *people* of God, and even when the people forget or betray God, the lone prophet isn't the solitary saint who remains faithful but a messenger to call us to *be* God's people again. Second, Jesus modeled for us what we're supposed to do – not save souls but make disciples – to invite others to join us on the journey *together*. Third, that's the way the first Christians did it. The early church was a people who nurtured, supported, cared for each other, and witnessed to their faith

as a community. And fourth, Jesus said to. He commissioned us to go make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the Body of Christ, welcoming them into the life of faith *with us*.^{vii}

As United Methodist Christians, we also take a vow as members to participate in the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service. Why? Because the church is body of Christ in the world just as Jesus was the Incarnation of God in the world – God's Word made flesh.

If you're going to live that faith, you need others - to encourage you, cry with you, laugh with you, and hold you accountable for growing in faith. Christianity requires a team effort. As the song goes, "The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, the church is a people."^{viii}

Professor Stanley Hauerwas and now Bishop William Willimon wrote in *Resident Aliens*, that "Through the teaching, support, sacrifice, worship and commitment of the church, utterly ordinary people are enabled to do some rather extraordinary, even heroic acts, not on the basis of their own gifts and abilities, but rather by having a community capable of sustaining Christian virtue. The church enables us to be better people than we could have been if left to our own devices."^{ix}

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist showed his appreciation of this in the accountable discipleship of his class meetings, which were sort of like 12 step groups for Christians.

In answer to the question, "Who Needs Organized Religion?" the late William Sloan Coffin, said, "If Christ is God's love in person on earth, churches ought to be God's love in an organization on earth. If love is what it's all about, where are we going to celebrate this love unless in community with loving people? Essentially what a church or temple ought to be is a community of loving people who believe that our lives consist of an abundance of love - not of an abundance of possessions."^x

The ship is an ancient symbol for the church, Deep below the main floors of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem in a spot excavated by archaeologists is the first Christian graffiti scratched in the rock face by the first pilgrims. It's a picture of a ship with the words, "We came."

"...A young Korean...was learning the English language. He came upon the word "fellowship" and said, 'I understand that. It means fellows in the same ship.'^{xi} Aren't we all in the same boat?

There's a wonderful Presbyterian statement of faith that describes the church through the ages and today: "The church's story with God did not end with the latest events recorded in Scripture. Across the centuries the company of believers has continued its pilgrimage with the Lord of history. It is a record of faith and faithlessness, glory and shame. The church has been persecuted by hostile societies, but it has also known times of privilege and power when it joined forces with dominant cultures. It has sought holiness through separation from society, as well as through involvement in the world's affairs. It has experienced life-giving reformations. □ It has known missionary expansion through the world, □ but also periods of dwindling resources and influence. It has divided into rival orders, sects and denominations, but it has also labored for cooperation and union. We confess we are heirs of this whole story. We are charged to remember our past, to be warned and encouraged by it, but not to live it again. Now is the time of our testing as God's story with the church moves forward through us. We are called to live now as God's servants in the service of people everywhere."^{xii}

The author of 1 Peter was writing a letter to a community of faith trying hard to find its identity in a non-Christian society. The writer says that these new Christians are just babies in the faith. They aren't ready for solid food. But he challenges them to become what, by God' grace, they already are. "...You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,

God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people,
 but now you are God's people; once you had not
 received mercy,
 but now you have received mercy.^{xiii}

In the Bible the phrase *a people* describes a group united by the bonds of shared interests, a common tongue, a common fate, and shared concerns. It is more than a collection of individuals. We are not saved one by one but as we take our place among the community of God's chosen people.^{xiv} There are no solitary Christians. We can't have a relationship with God isolated from our relationships to each other as the church. You don't become a Christian by reading a book or watching a TV program, but by living in the community of God's people.

"...This community has no right to be, but God has loved and re-loved this community into existence. The Church exists because of God's unconditional, unqualified, community-creating love." God nurtures us to maturity in faith and life together."^{xv}

You've heard the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." Well, it takes a whole community loved by God to grow a mature Christian.

Writer Anne LaMotte, in her book *Traveling Mercies*, wrote, "I make [my son Sam go to church] because I can. I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. [People with a deep sense of spirituality] follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful.... Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food."^{xvi}

"...*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*"

Because we belong to God we're called to live by a different set of values and to invite others to join us. We can't do that alone. We can't be Christians without each other. We're called to a way of life in community that stands in ever-sharper contrast to the values of the society around us. And we have our doubts about whether God can really use people like us to change lives and make disciples. We know we have a long way to go if people are going to find in us the kind of welcome and community they're longing for. But to all our doubts God's answer is a resounding "Yes!"

You *are* a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...
 Once you were no people,
 but now you are God's people!

ⁱ "For Safety's Sake," www.gracelandgentle.org.

ⁱⁱ Kim Leslie, "I didn't know what I was doing"

ⁱⁱⁱ A.Word.A.Day, 20 Jul 2005.

^{iv} --Andrew Weil, M.D., "Connectedness Is Vital to Your Well-Being," *Going Bonkers?*, December 1997.

^v Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 31.

^{vi} *The Community of the King* by Howard A. Snyder (in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, 186.)

^{vii} *The Community of the King* by Howard A. Snyder (in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*, 186.)

^{viii} Donald Avery and Richard Marsh, "I am the Church"

^{ix} Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon. *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 81.

^x William Sloane Coffin, "Who Needs □Organized Religion?" *Questions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 31.

^{xi} Pastor Lloyd John Ogilvie as referenced by Hal Brady, 14 November 1993, Dallas, Texas. □□

^{xii} <http://www.creeds.net/reformed/PCUSA1985/1985-7.htm>

The 197th General Assembly (PCUSA, 1985) made its own the action of the 177th General Assembly (PCUS, 1977) with reference to *A Declaration of Faith* which is as follows: "That 'A Declaration of Faith' be adopted as a contemporary statement of faith, a reliable aid for Christian study, liturgy, and inspiration . . ." (Minutes, PCUS, 1977, Part I, p. 168), with the understanding that only the current [Book of Confessions](#) has constitutional standing.

^{xiii} 1 Peter 2:9-10 *NRSV*

^{xiv} Bruce Vawter, *Proclamation 2*, Easter, Series A, 42.

^{xv} Walter Brueggemann, *Proclamation 4*, Easter, Series A, 39.

^{xvi} □-Anne Lamott, *Travelling Mercies* □ (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 100.