

Church Myths

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I have used these five lessons to address the question: "Why should I join a church?" If you are reading through by yourself, I encourage you to keep a Bible by your side to check my references. Wrestle not with what I say, but what God might be saying. If you are part of a group study, then read through these lessons and write questions & comments to share with the group. For each lesson, here are the three basic questions you should ask:

1. Does the lesson make sense? What questions or objections do I have?
2. How does this lesson challenge my view of my self and my church?
3. Based on what I have learned, should I do anything differently?
4. Do I know someone else who believes these myths? How can I help them reconsider?

May God use this study to bless you and others through you. In Him, Chuck Horvath

1. Are you a "casual" Christian?

Matthew 7.21: Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.

I don't know that many pastors preach on this verse, but they should. No other verse is so directly targeted at people who assume they are saved but are actually living a lie!

But wait, you say: I believe in Jesus and the Bible says I'm saved. Yes and no. Part of the problem comes with a shallow understanding of the word "belief." There are two false meanings of this word that snare many casual Christians. The first is simply that belief means intellectual assent. I believe that Jesus did walk the earth and now is in heaven. I believe that He died for the forgiveness of sins. James has an answer for this kind of belief: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-- and shudder." (James 2.19-22)

Then there is false belief #2. This one is normally linked to adult baptism. A person says "I believe" and has a *wonderful* experience when he or she is baptized. Others say they "feel" the presence of the Holy Spirit and that feeling proves they were saved. Sadly, they are wrong again. It is not "I'm baptized, I'm done."; rather, it should be "I'm baptized, I've just begun." You may have felt a spirit, but that doesn't mean it was the Holy Spirit. As John warns us: "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world." (I John 4.1) Remember, Satan was called the "angel of light" and he did not lose his looks when he fell from heaven. Indeed, imitating God with a poisonous twist is his specialty.

Which brings us to the correct definition of belief: it is a *life-changing* faith in Jesus as God. Here we start with Hebrews 11.1: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." The basis for this faith is the Bible. Without the Bible as the Word of God, then your "belief" becomes only your own ideas of what is right and wrong. (If you don't believe the Bible is God's Word, then check out II Timothy 3.16-17.)

If you do believe the Bible is God's Word, then the next question is this: when is the last time you read it (at least the New Testament)? Here we see how this life-changing faith comes into play. People who see faith as thinking or feeling can skip the doing. But a life-changing faith means your actions change. Here we come back to James 2.16-18: "... one of you says to him, Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed, but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, You have faith; I have deeds. Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."

Having Jesus as Savior is not enough: we must obey Him as Lord. As God, He gave us the Ten Commandments, not the ten suggestions. As God, He tells us to make disciples (not just believers). As God, He tells us to "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-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10.24-25)

Now Jesus puts this idea of a life-changing relationship with Him another way: "If you love me, you will obey what I command." (John 14:15) True love is life-changing. Has your life changed?

2. Why Should I Go To Church?

Last month I talked about casual Christians: "believers" who don't become disciples. This month I take on the next major challenge I hear: "I don't need to go to church: I have my own relationship with God." The classic version of this line is "I feel closer to God on the golf course than in a church."

This approach, like that of the casual believer, shows a misunderstanding of what the Bible says. This first misunderstanding is a common one: people think "church" means a building (as in the "Red Brick Church"). You're not really at fault here: the Bible translators are. The Greek word that you see in English as "church" is **ekklesia** (*ecclesia*). A better translation is "congregation." You see, the Greek word never means a building, but the people whom God has chosen and gathered together. You don't "go" to a church building, rather, you "become" part of a church family.

This leads to the next misunderstanding: that your relationship with God is purely personal. This reflects an American preference for individualism, but that is not what the Bible says. This time we cannot blame the translators, but the English language itself. You understand that "me" refers to one person while "us" means the group. But when I say "you," do I mean an individual or the group? From that one word, we cannot tell. In the Greek, however, **su** means "you singular" and **`umeij** means "you plural." In the New Testament, most of the "you's" are **`umeij**. The Bible is written to the church family, not to individuals. We can see this in the very way that most epistles (letters) were written to churches, not individuals. Of the four letters that did go to individuals (I & II Timothy, Titus, Philemon), three were written to pastors giving them advice on how to *lead* their congregations.

In the New Testament, the "church" is called the "Body of Christ" (I Corinthians 12.27; Ephesians 4.12). Paul talks in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12 about how the body has different members that must work together. You cannot be an "arm" if you are not linked to the rest of the Body. In fact, a part of the body that is cut off... dies.

All of the Bible's commands about "loving one another" (see John 13, for example) happens when we interact with each other. Hebrews 10.25 tells us: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another..." God wants us to come together as His children.

The final reason for being part of a congregation is based on this fact: the easiest person to lie to is yourself. God knows that we need brothers and sisters in Christ to help us grow and to keep us from those "comfortable" lies we tell ourselves about how good we are. We don't grow in Christ or serve Him as "lone-wolf" Christians. We may start out with the best intentions, but without the encouragement and building up of other Christians, we go off track or just stop thinking about God altogether. We need each other!

So the local congregation is God's blessing to His children. It builds us up and gives us the chance to serve Him. If you aren't going to a local congregation, try it out. See what you're missing.

3. Why Should I JOIN a Church?

This series started with a common misunderstanding about Christianity: that being a believer is not enough. Christ calls for *disciples*, not believers! Then we talked about another misunderstanding: that the church is a building. The church is *people* who come together as the Body of Christ. Church is a *we*, not a *me*.

Now we come to a third misunderstanding: that church is Sunday morning worship. To understand why this is wrong, we need to look at our next image of the congregation: that we are the family of God.

Think of how important it was to have parents and brothers and sisters when you were little. You depended on them for food, clothes, fellowship. You learned to read and write and right from wrong. You shared in special times like birthdays and dinners together. As you grew, you began to contribute to the family life. You helped with the cooking. You bought gifts for others where before you just got them. And, if you're older, you became the provider for your own sons & daughters, nieces & nephews.

You are born into your natural family. There is a built-in commitment there. You must choose to commit to your church family. (Or, to use the image of John 3.3, you must be "born again.") Becoming a member is a choice you make. Jesus made this family connection very directly:

Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matthew 12.49-50)

As you read through the New Testament, you can see how we are called brothers or sisters. In Galatians 6.10, he says "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." We are Christian brothers & sisters when we obey the will of our Father and love (*agapê*) one another.

Okay, so let's come back to Sunday morning worship. For most Protestant groups, this hour breaks down into three main areas: singing, praying, and preaching. All three have a place in the family. Singing is fun. It can bring us closer to God even as we praise Him through song. David tells us in Psalm 39.3 that: "He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD." We are told to pray, both in private and as the people of God. And in the earliest Christian services, people met to learn about Christ from the apostles (Acts 16.13). This pattern has been preserved through the years in the sermon.

The worship service is like the Sunday dinner or a holiday gathering in a family. It is a time to celebrate what God has done in our lives and encourage us for what He will do in the future. This Sunday celebration, though, is not just about you. Many people think the choir sings to entertain them and the pastor prays and preaches just to make them feel good. Actually, we gather to worship God. The singing is for Him and the preaching is what He wants us to hear from Him. We should feel good as we come close to God, but that is just the by-product of being His children. As His children, we come to serve, not to be served. Paul gives a wonderful prayer about the church in Ephesians 3.14-21. It ends with this: "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

Church is much more than Sunday worship. It is Sunday school. It is sitting with fellow Christians to comfort them when they hurt. It is reaching out to your community. It is meeting together to discuss what God our Father wants us to do next. It is all the ups and downs of family life. The church is not some "extra" that gets in the way of our relationship with Jesus Christ. It is at the heart of that relationship. After all, as we read in I John 4.20: "If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."

Joining a church is a very natural choice when you have a correct understanding of just what "church" really means.

4. Why Should I Join THIS Church?

Matthew 18.20: For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

In the last three newsletter articles, we started with the challenge to be disciples rather than just believers. Then we began to consider why disciples should first go to church and why they should join a church. We learned that "church" is people, not buildings, and a whole set of family relationships, not just an hour worship service on Sundays. If you already are a member of a congregation, these articles may have helped you understand a little more of what a church is. That's fine. If you are not a member or do not even attend a church regularly, then maybe these articles have challenged you to really think about your relationship with Jesus Christ and His Body. With this article, we come to the strongest objection I hear from those who do not join a church. "What you've said about the Church is great, but when I go to church, I don't see this wonderful congregation you describe. I see people who get angry over the smallest thing, people who don't practice what they preach, people who try to force me to be just like they are, " And the list goes on and on. It gets even worse if you judge a congregation by what you hear. People in any community are fast to believe the worst when they hear gossip about a church. In such cases, they don't even come to "see" with their own eyes... they just believe whatever someone tells them. Now link that to our habit of complaining when we're unhappy and saying nothing when we're content, and most churches come out looking pretty bad. Sigh.

Here we come to the next myth we have to face: "seeing is believing." Most of us only see what we want to see or what we expect to see. Thus if we are not going to church, we look for the reasons why we are *right* to stay away. We see the failings of members and want no part of that congregation.

Not only do we fail to see the many good things that may be happening in a church, we fail to see what the Holy Spirit is doing. We see only with the eyes in our heads. But Paul tells us that "We live by faith, not by sight." (II Corinthians 5.7) In Hebrews 11.1, we have faith defined: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Seeing with "the eyes of faith" brings us back to the first article, where we considered how true faith *was a life-changing faith*. Such faith does not only change our lives, it changes how we see. As Paul says in Romans 12.2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will."

On this earth, there is no perfect congregation. Rather than focus on problems, we have to see what the Holy Spirit is doing to make our brothers and sisters-- and us-- more like Christ. We come together because the local church is where we grow together in Christ. Such growth is not always fun, which is why committing to membership helps us stick it out when quitting would be easier.

With the eyes of faith, we should look to bless and be blessed in our church. The order is important here, I think. While we may feel good if we go to a "fun" church, we are truly blessed when God is using us to bless others. This gets us back to serving Christ as we love one another. That love becomes real not when we "feel" it, but when we live it with others. When we are involved with a specific congregation.

When I asked, "Why should I join this church?," I did not mean the Berkshire Congregational Church only. God is bigger than Berkshire! And if you don't go here but go to Union Center or Owego or Richford, His Church is not diminished in any way. So it is not that you have to join here, but that you have to commit to some church. Whichever one you choose, it won't be perfect. But if you look with the eyes of faith, you will see where the Holy Spirit is at work. And, as you commit to that family in faith, He'll use you in that work even as He grows in you.

5. The Membership Myth

This series has centered on the reasons to join a congregation. It was written for the casual Christians who don't attend. In this conclusion to the series, I focus on those casual Christians who are members of a congregation but don't come. They have bought into the final "myth" of the American church. They believe that membership is their right. Often they view the church as the place to go for the "big three": getting hatched, matched, and dispatched (baptized, married, and buried).

Church membership is not a right: it is a privilege and a responsibility. As we have seen in the previous articles, the local congregation is God's gift to help us grow in Christ and serve Him. It is where we find refuge from the spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6) that we battle every day at work. What a privilege! With this privilege comes responsibilities. Paul tells us in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12 that each of us has spiritual gifts to develop and use to bless the church. God's commands about love and encouragement can only be obeyed within the fellowship of other Christians. (See Romans 15.5, I Corinthians 12.25, Galatians 5.13, James 5.16, I Peter 1.2. It is surprising how often "one another" appears in the New Testament.)

As members, then, we have the responsibility to live up to these ideals. We come to (and join) a church because this is what God wants us to do. We learn to give, not get. We learn to build up our brothers and sisters by being He-centered rather than me-centered. And something special happens: church becomes fun!

People who see church membership as a right twist things around. It becomes about them, not about God. They become judges, not servants. How many people leave a congregation when they don't get what they want? They are offended. It is sad that so many churches are not the refuge from spiritual warfare, but the place where Satan sows the most discord! When members stress their rights, we get the kind of tension and backbiting that drives young Christians away. How many people stop coming because they have been hurt by church members? Ouch.

How we view membership is very important in a Congregational church when the Congregation comes together to discern the will of God. At every church I've pastored, there are members who show up at these meetings to vote what they want. After all, they have the right to do so. But how can they know what the Spirit is doing in this Congregation when they have not been a part of the weekly worship and the other activities such as Sunday school or small groups?

It is in congregational meetings that we see the final harm of the membership myth. People come together and vote and majority rules. These meetings become no different from a town meeting. We read our By-laws more than the Bible. When politics rule, the Spirit does not.

The Bible talks about how God leads His people through the Pastor and Elders (see Numbers 9.11-17, Acts 20.17-36, I Peter 5.1-5). When a congregation calls people to these positions, they are not voting them in, but recognizing them as God's choices. If these are truly God's chosen leaders, they will be open to what God wants for the congregation. This includes being sensitive to the spiritual maturity of the congregation and how fast (or slow) they can grow. These leaders are not dictators: they are accountable to God Himself for what they do (Hebrews 13.7).

If God called these leaders to lead, He also called us members to follow! When you have a question, come to them privately to discuss it. When you have an idea, come to them and share it. And when in doubt, follow their leading.

Here we come to the final responsibility of membership. If you are going to oppose the leadership of the church, you need a Biblical reason for doing so. A congregation is not a democracy, it is a theocracy. We gather together to find God's will, not push our own preferences.

It is not by chance that a Spirit led church is a joyful church. When members give thanks for the gift of Christian fellowship and focus on studying the Word and serving their Lord rather than micromanaging everyone else, they are free to focus on God. Since we belong to Him, He should come first.