

DO WE NEED THE CHURCH?

Hebrews 10:24-25

Critical Searching Inquiries Series
September 30, 2012
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One of the very popular attitudes among people that seems to be growing in our country today is the attitude that you don't need the church in order to be a Christian. In fact, there are growing numbers who say very boldly that they are Christians, and maybe even Lutheran or Catholic, and yet they never attend or have any association with an actual church.

This popular attitude is often explained that what mostly matters is that they believe in their heart, that they pray often and that they try to live by Godly principles. They just don't believe you need the church or a formal worship ritual to do that. They say they can easily do this in a boat, on a walk in the woods or in their own home.

And then, of course, some often lift up many of the church's sins and failures. They point to clergy abuse, to scandals and fights in churches, to the hypocrisy of members, to the fact that churches often mostly ask for money. And so many are saying, "Who needs the church?"

Along with this are the large numbers of people who do belong to an actual local church and who do participate in worship once in awhile, and yet who really don't feel that regular worship or regular involvement is that important for their faith. They belong mostly because they feel it is a good thing to do—good for business or for their social standing in the community.

I was at a conference onetime where one speaker talked about the challenges today of the three T's—Travel, Toys, and Tournaments. More and more people today have large and small toys, they have the money and ability to travel, and some have every weekend filled with tournaments—which means that worship can easily become more rare and sporadic.

And getting out of the discipline of weekly worship, and filling up one's time with other things, can easily lead to a feeling among some that they really don't need worship and the church. Oh, it is important when they are able to attend or for special holidays, or events. And yet in the busyness of all these other things more and more people feel they really don't need the church.

So the Critical Searching Question we will focus on today is, "Do we need the church?" Is the church essential for our faith in Jesus and our growth in discipleship? Or is the church just an archaic relic from the past? What is the real purpose of the church?

A little history lesson: You may remember that the Roman Catholic Church, which started under the emperor Constantine, based its teachings and doctrines on the understanding that the church itself holds the "keys of the kingdom," the understanding that it is through the church that one's sins are forgiven; it is through the church that one receives eternal life.

This Roman Catholic teaching is based on Matthew 16:18. After the disciple, Peter, made the confession that "Jesus is the Messiah," Jesus said, *"And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...I will give you the keys of the kingdom; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

The Roman Catholic Church understands that these keys to the kingdom, this responsibility to forgive and not forgive sins, and to grant eternal life was given to Peter and to the Popes who they believe apostolically succeed Peter. These keys were given to the church as a treasure for them to preserve and to pass onto believers.

So in a pure Roman Catholic understanding a person cannot really be saved outside of the church. That is why it is a rule or obligation of the church that people worship each week; that the Sacraments can only be done by a priest; that one needs to go to confession to a priest; and that one needs to be buried through the church. The belief is that being faithful to God through the church guarantees eternal life.

This understanding has also allowed the Catholic Church in history to excommunicate certain people, which basically means that being separated from (kicked out of) the church these people were condemned to hell. This, of course, gave the church lots of extra power. Fortunately most Catholics no longer follow this strict interpretation.

Now on the other hand when Martin Luther and the other church reformers came along their interpretation of Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18 was that Peter's confession, "*You are the Messiah,*" was the rock upon which Christ's church was built.

Therefore the Reformers challenged the idea of a Pope, and church hierarchy, and rather taught that any person can pray and go directly to God for forgiveness. They taught that any believer can share with other people God's promises of forgiveness and salvation. In other words, the keys of the kingdom were given to each believer in Christ and not to a church structure.

So in the Protestant movement the emphasis is on the "Priesthood of all Believers" and not on the power of the clergy or church hierarchy. The focus is on people having a personal faith relationship with Jesus and praying directly to him without saints or mediators. The focus is on being saved by grace through faith where all who believe in Jesus will live forever in heaven.

Most of the Protestant churches then came to focus on the importance of strong preaching on Biblical truth; on people of all ages learning to understand the Bible through classes and studies; and on people being trained and equipped to witness to, and provide care and love to others. The focus is on each person living their faith in Jesus each day in all they do.

Now in these two distinctive understandings of the church there are certainly various understandings and outgrowths that are prevalent today. Some certainly believe even today that they need to make it to church once in awhile, periodically take the Sacrament of Holy Communion and go through various rituals like Confirmation in order to be saved.

And there are others who feel that since a personal faith in Jesus is what is important and since one can go directly to Jesus in prayer, and worship, that they don't need the church at all. As I mentioned earlier there is a growing number of people who say they believe but see no purpose for the organized church.

So what is the purpose of the church? Do we really need this place or is it just a relic from the past? The remainder of this message I will look at some ways I believe the church is still relevant and important. Hopefully these thoughts will help you to answer this question for yourself.

In Acts 2:46 Luke writes, *“Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*

And in Hebrews 10:24-25 the writer says, *“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day appearing.”*

The church, my friends, is not a building. It is not a denomination. Our mission at Messiah is not to make Lutherans but to make Christians using the best of our Biblical heritage. And yet what makes this church unique are the people. As this community of people is growing in faith together and as each one is encouraging, and praying for others we are Christ’s church.

Granted being a church community can be a challenge. Sometimes people get mad at each other. Sometimes feelings are hurt. Sometimes things are not done perfectly or the way we would like them done. That is a reality of being in community.

And yet rather than doing church by ourselves or having a house church of people who think and agree with everything you do God has called his children to live in harmony, to forgive each other, to be united in a mission greater than oneself. A tremendous witness to the world, according to Jesus, is when a church community made up of sinful people truly love each other.

A second purpose for the church is to encourage one another and to hold each other accountable. On one’s own it is easy to interpret the Bible whatever way we like; or to get lazy in our Bible study and prayer life; to not grow in the stewardship of giving toward a tithe and not being involved in service, and mission, to others.

To just meditate and worship by oneself does not often grow one’s faith and discipleship. Ah, but together with others we can learn the Bible relying on the insights and learning of each other. With a trained and educated pastor we can have someone who can teach and preach Biblical truth, and can train and equip us to use our gifts and talents.

And together in the community of a church we can learn and be challenged to grow in our stewardship of giving, realizing that learning to give is essential for your growth in faith. And in the community of the church there are places to serve, children to teach, people to care about, people to reach out to. The reality is that together in the Body of Christ we can accomplish so much more for God’s kingdom than by our own individual selves.

My friends, it is true that the Church of Jesus Christ has often been characterized by fighting between denominations and within congregations; as a place with some pastors and people who have had moral breakdowns; as communities often filled with hypocrisy where faith and love are not shining through. And believe me we don’t need churches like that.

And yet a church where Jesus is the center and where Christ’s love, and community are present, is a beautiful thing. A church where it is not about them or about certain individuals but is totally about Christ and his mission is a tremendous community to be part of. May the Holy Spirit help you to know the wonder and gift that Christ’s church is meant to be.