

(FAQ) DO WE NEED THE CHURCH?

Hebrews 10:24-25

Frequently Asked Questions Message Series

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A very popular attitude that seems to be gaining steam in our country today is the attitude that you don't need the church in order to be a Christian. In fact there are lots of individuals who say very boldly that they are Christians, perhaps even Lutheran or Catholic, yet they never attend or have any real association with an actual church.

This popular attitude is often explained that what matters most is that they believe in their heart; they pray and attempt to live by Godly principles. These people just don't believe you need the church; you don't need a formal worship ritual to do that. They explain how they can just as easily do this in a boat; on a walk in the woods; in their own home.

Of course there are those who also like to 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. Their conclusion is "Who needs the church?"

Added to these people are those who do actually belong to a local church and who do participate in worship once in awhile; yet they don't believe that regular worship or regular involvement is that important for their faith. They belong to a church mostly because they feel it is a good thing to do—a good thing for their kids; a good thing just in case they may need the church's help.

I attended 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; some have most every weekend filled with tournaments (which means that worship can easily become quite rare/sporadic.)

Yet getting out of the discipline of weekly worship; filling up one's time with other things (as good as they are) can easily lead to a feeling that you don't need worship and the church. Oh, it is important on special holidays and events; yet in the busyness of all these other things lots of people truly believe they really don't need the church.

Therefore the Frequently Asked Question we are focusing on today is, "Do We Need The Church?" Is the church essential for your faith in Jesus and your growth in discipleship; is the church just an archaic relic from the past? What is the real purpose of the church?

A short 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 an individual 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 of heaven; 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/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.

Therefore in a pure Roman Catholic understanding a person cannot actually be saved outside of the church. This is why it is a rule/obligation of the church that people worship each week; that the Sacraments can only be done by a priest; that an individual is obligated to go to confession to a priest; that a person needs to be buried through the church. The belief is that being faithful to God through the Roman Church guarantees eternal life.

This understanding has also allowed the Catholic Church in history to excommunicate certain people; this basically means that an individual is separated from (kicked out of) the church; it means these people were condemned to hell. This, as you might imagine, gave the church lots of extra power over dissidents and those who questioned the church. Fortunately most Catholics no longer follow this strict interpretation.

In contrast 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; they 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.

As a result the Protestant movement emphasized the “Priesthood of all Believers” rather than the power of the clergy and church hierarchy. The focus is on people having a personal faith relationship with Jesus; praying directly to him without saints and 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; on people being trained and equipped to witness to—to provide care and love to others. The focus is on each individual living their faith in Jesus each day in all they do.

It is important to understand that these two distinctive understandings of the church has resulted in various understandings and outgrowths that are prevalent today. Some people still believe that they have to make it to church once in awhile; have to periodically take the Sacrament of Holy Communion; have to go through rituals like Confirmation in order to be saved.

On the other hand there are those who feel that since a personal faith in Jesus is what is important; 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.

Therefore what is the purpose of the church? Do we really need this building 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, *“Every day 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.”*

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 approaching.”*

The church, my friends, is not a building; it is not a denomination. Our mission at Messiah is not to make Lutherans; it is to make Christians using the best of our Biblical heritage. Yet what makes our church unique are the people. As our community is growing in faith together; as each person 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’s what it means to be part of a community.

Therefore rather than doing church by ourselves; rather than having a hand-picked group 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 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; to get lazy in our Bible study and prayer life; to not grow in the stewardship of giving; to not being involved in service, mission, care for those in need.

To just meditate and worship by oneself does not usually 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; someone who can train and equip us to use our gifts and talents.

Together in the community of a church we learn and are challenged to grow in our stewardship of giving. In the community of the church there are places to serve; children to teach; people to care about; people to reach out to. It is true 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. Believe me we don’t need churches like that.

Yet a church where Jesus is the center of everything; where Christ’s love and community are present is a beautiful thing. A church where it is not about them; not about certain individuals; where it is totally about Christ and his mission is an amazing community to be part of. May the Holy Spirit help you to know the awesome wonder and gift that Christ’s church is meant to be.