

## Christians Without Churches

Over the past few years a trend has increased among people, especially Americans: the idea that people can be good Christians without being part of a church. Many people will recognize that Jesus is the Messiah and Lord, but yet want nothing to do with any church. This attitude fits with the independent streak that marks most Americans. Many also feel that churches are just trying to get money out of people, and they do not see the value or relevance in being part of a church.

It is too often true that churches are not living up to the call of Jesus Christ. Some churches do not teach the Bible at all, and other churches favor their traditions over what the Bible teaches. Too many other churches teach the truths of the Bible and yet do not show the love and community that God desires. Do these difficulties, however, mean that we can or should be Christians without being part of a church?

We must first understand that there can be no such thing as a “churchless Christian.” In Ephesians 4:4-5, we read that there is “one body”, as assuredly as there is “one faith” and “one Lord.” In Ephesians 5:29-30 (and Colossians 1:18), Paul identifies that “one body” as the church; this is the body for which He gave His life (Ephesians 5:25-27). Anyone who is not a part of this “universal church” is separated from Christ, and will not be saved! A Christian, then, that is entirely “churchless” is no Christian, and has no part in the resurrection of life!

Is it possible for a Christian to be part of the “universal” church without being identified with a local church? The Scriptures give us no reason to believe that such is possible. God desires for His people to act in certain ways, and many of these actions require a person to be part of a local church of fellow believers.

God desires that His people die to self and live for others (Galatians 2:20; Philippians 2:1-4). Christians are to think more highly of others and the needs of others than of themselves and their own needs. God intended for Christians to be first concerned with the needs of their fellow Christians (Galatians 6:10, Matthew 25:31-46). How can this be done if a Christian is not part of a local church?

God also desires that His people work together, both to strengthen each other and to further His purposes (Hebrews 10:24-25; Galatians 6:2; Acts 2:42-47). Encouragement and accountability are important aspects of the Christian faith. Christians are commanded to consider how to provoke other Christians to love and do good works and to bear each others’ burdens. They are to be open and honest with one another so that they can be the best servants of God they can be. This can only happen when Christians come together and get to know each other, and the local church has been designed for this purpose.

Human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), and we can see evidence of God’s divine nature in ourselves as made in His image (Romans 1:18-20). God is not one person; He is three Persons in relational unity (John 1:1; 17:20-23). Is it

any surprise, therefore, that people are made to seek God and to seek connection and relationship with one another (Matthew 19:4-6; Acts 17:26-28; Ephesians 2:11-18)? God intends for Christians to work together and to become one as He is One (John 17:20-23); a Christian without a church would thus be as the Spirit without the Father or Christ without His Body! God cannot deny Himself; we cannot therefore imagine that the God who is One in relational unity wants anything less for the people who are to be called by the name of His Son.

The witness of the Scriptures is clear: God expects Christians to work together in a local church. Love for one another, encouragement to continue in the faith, and accountability are all learned in the environment of the local church. We cannot grow to be the type of Christians that please God if we attempt to do so on our own!

Yes, it is unfortunately true that too often local churches are not representing God's intentions very well. Too many churches encourage too much passive behavior and do not challenge their members to represent the community that God expects the local church to be. Just because many churches fail to live up to God's desires, however, does not mean that we are "off the hook" of participating within the local church. After all, how often do we as individuals fail to live up to the standards we have made for ourselves? As we would wish for others to be merciful to us when we fall short, should we not extend that mercy to our fellow people of God (Luke 6:36-40)? God established local churches in His wisdom for our benefit. If God desired to have "maverick Christians," He could easily have done so. He recognizes, however, that we are too weak to defeat Satan by ourselves. Christians need opportunities to assemble with one another, to show love to one another, building one another up, and encouraging and exhorting each other to continue to serve God according to His will.

If you believe in God and Jesus Christ, do not deprive yourself of the love and encouragement you need and that others need from you: join us!

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