

Who Needs the Church?

A Message Offered by
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Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:19-25 NRSV

Not too long ago, being called “religious,” was something of a compliment. But “religion” has been taking it on the chin lately. Do you know someone who says, “I’m spiritual, but not religious?” They sometimes say it as if being “religious” is something bad. I can see why. *Ultra-religious* Christians, Moslems, and Jews are seen as closed-minded, intolerant, militant, and judgmental. It’s gotten so bad that even some people who call Jesus their Lord and Savior reject the word “religion” and all the baggage that comes with it.

There’s a video going around the internet, called, “Why I Hate Religion, but Love Jesus.” 17 million people have viewed it; maybe you’re one of them. I want to share it with you this morning. I don’t agree with everything the street poet in the video says, but that’s ok, we can still learn from it. It reveals what many people, both inside and outside the church, are thinking. The video also makes some strong charges that we just can’t leave unaddressed.

[This is the You Tube link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IAhDGYlpqY>]

Let me boil down his arguments. First, religion is bad and we’d be better off without it. Second, if salvation is about having a relationship with

Jesus, who needs the church? Third, the Church hasn't lived up to its promise or its potential.

What would you say to these charges?

First, that religion is bad. I'm not here to defend religion, *per se*, but to say that we'd be better off without religion is like saying because some governments are bad, we'd be better off with no government at all. Not true. What we all want is good government, or at least better government. The English word "religion" likely comes from the Latin words for "rule" and "to bind." Religions are simply collections of practices or beliefs ("rules") that bind people together in their search for God. Religion as such is neither good nor bad. We may decide personally that particular religions are good or bad, right or wrong, depending upon how true they appear to be or how beneficial or harmful they are to human society, but religion itself is neutral.

And Jesus certainly didn't come to *abolish* religion; he was deeply religious. He followed all the practices of contemporary Judaism; he was a good Jew, otherwise no one would have listened to him and he would not have been recognized by anyone as the promised messiah. Jesus didn't want people to abandon religion, he wanted to purify false forms of one particular religion. So in one sense Jesus was *immersed* in religion. In another sense, though, Jesus was totally *above* religion. Ultimately all religions are designed to lead people to closer connections to God. As the Son of God, Jesus didn't need that. But he knew that we do. We need the tools of religion, such as covenants and traditions, to keep us on the narrow way that leads to himself. That's why he gave us Baptism and the Lord's Supper and so many teachings recorded in the Bible. He came, he explained, "not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." [Matthew 5:17]

Christianity is, in fact, a religion. It's a good one, based on truth. At its best, it leads people closer to God.

The second claim that critics make is that being part of a church isn't necessary; all people need is Jesus. But how are they going to hear about Jesus if there's no Church? Other religions and a million self-help gurus talk about connecting us with god or a higher power, but only the Church offers Jesus Christ. Only the Church tells the story of a God who loves us so much that that God came, in person, not just to *show* us the way to eternal life, but to *make* that way with his body and blood.

Many *organizations* help the poor. Many *groups* teach good values. Many *people* tell of God's grace. Only the Church teaches why we help the poor—they are our brothers and sisters in Christ; why we value integrity, generosity, and perseverance—because that's how Jesus lived; why God's grace is so amazing--because Jesus paid for it himself.

People need the Church because people need Christ.

The second reason people need the Church is because people need more than company; they need community. If I were to compare life to a T.V. show I'd say it's a lot more like "Survivor" than "Little House on the Prairie." Sometimes it's too hard to handle on our own. But in the Church we don't have to handle everything on our own. At its best, the Church is a community of caring and encouragement like no other on earth. I've seen Church members walk with each other through divorce, bankruptcy, addiction, and the deaths of parents, spouses, and children. I've witnessed acts of generosity when members took into their homes entire families when they were on the brink of eviction. I've heard of members giving their used cars to other members in need. A free gift; no strings attached. I've seen Stephen Ministers at work—members listening to and caring for each other--in profound and healing ways. I've been with Deacons as we celebrated the Lord's Supper with a man with end-stage bone cancer, a man who just a few weeks later was celebrating with his Savior in Heaven. None of this would have happened if the people involved had not been active members of a thriving Church community like our Second Family.

Just like the cross has both vertical and horizontal dimensions, there are two trajectories to the Christian journey. One is upward, toward God. The other is outward, toward others. Jesus stands right at the intersection of the two paths: fully human and fully divine. He taught that you can't love God and hate your neighbor. [1 John 4:20] "Me and Jesus, just the two of us," is not Biblical. And it's not practical, life is just too hard. Life breaks everyone. The blessed ones have Christian friends to help them put the pieces back together again.

The third charge that critics make is that the Church hasn't lived up to its promise or its potential. They say that the Church has spent too much time on the wrong side of issues that are important to them, like slavery, women's rights, anti-Semitism, economic justice, and the environment. Last

year, when the PC (USA) was debating whether people who are gay or lesbian should be allowed under any circumstances to serve as Church leaders I invited the confirmation class to witness our Presbytery's discussion of the issue. They were shocked and somewhat embarrassed; they couldn't believe that the same Church that kept telling them how God loved everyone "just the way they are," could exclude some people from leadership.

Critics also point out that the Church has been hopelessly plagued with scandal. From the first Church treasurer, Judas, betraying Jesus--to pastors running off with organists--to TV evangelists lining their own pockets with the contributions of widows—the Church has been its own worst enemy. Critics say that the Church has often acted more like a country-club than a force for transformation of society. They say that we are more concerned with what we'll wear to worship, than with neighbors who have no warm clothes at all. They say that we would rather be comfortable than controversial; that we have been self-absorbed, blind to our own errors, and slow to reform. Even casual observers note that, from the Crusades about a thousand years ago (when the Church sponsored the killing of thousands upon thousands of Jews and Muslims) to the Holocaust (when the Church stood by, almost silently, as Hitler slaughtered millions), the Church has had blood on its hands.

I don't know what to say to these charges other than, "Guilty as charged." Over the centuries the Church has been the source of much pain; we have much to repent of. We have let down God and God's people on too many occasions to count.

But I refuse to give up on the Church. And I hope you do, too. There's too much at stake.

In the first century, people's objections to the Church were different than these, but just as important. Right after the first Christian Pentecost people were excited about worship and sharing and being a new family of faith. Gathering together was the high point of their week. But sixty or seventy years later, by the time the letter to the Hebrews was written, people were sleeping in on Sunday morning, preferring a bagel and the sports section to worship, Sunday school, and attending the annual congregational meeting.

The author tells them, “Don’t give up on the Church! We can come up with new ways to care for each other; we’ll find new ways to reach out and really help people. Don’t drop out of the fellowship now. The best is yet to be!” He tells the Hebrew Christians, and I think he says to us today, “let’s consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.” Let’s figure out how to bring out the best in each other and be the Church fit to be Christ’s bride.

No other institution, group, or movement holds more promise for young people, old people and everyone in between. Where else are young people challenged to become all that God wants them to be? What other group will help you discover and use your God-given gifts to change lives, no matter what your age is? Who else will tell you that using your gift for music or dance or drama is not just entertainment, but worship of the God who made us? Who else but the Church is devoted to helping all people become more generous, reverent, compassionate, inviting, spiritual, loving, just, and moral—more like Jesus?

We can’t let the flaws of the Church be an excuse to stop investing in it. It’s our *only* chance at Christ and our *best* chance at true community. “We don’t give up the institution of family because of its imperfections—why give up on the church?” (Philip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*)

Let’s make it better. Instead of judging the Church at its worst, let’s measure it by its potential, which is yet to be fully realized, I think, in this or any other congregation. And together we are working to help make that potential a reality. In just the past five years we have invested over \$500,000 through our mission partners, much of it right here in Carlisle. We have sent at least fifty people to build homes in Honduras. We have shared the gospel with 500 kids in Vacation Bible School. We have provided support and caring to more than 75 grieving families. Our young people have given thousands of hours of service to Project SHARE. That’s something to celebrate. And the best is yet to be.

This congregation has so much to offer our members, our community, and, in some small way, our world. Help us to be the Church at its best. Help us to become the congregation in our community that changes what people think about the Church. You can do this by becoming you at your best. “Stir up one another to love and good works. Don’t neglect to meet together. Encourage one another.” Together we will be the Church that

people need so much--a place to find and experience Christ--a place to find and experience true community, with God at the center. Amen.

Dear Friend,

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Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.

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