

# Jesus, Yes -- The Church, No?

The proprietor of the store brightened up as he heard of my work with the Bible Institute. As we talked, I learned that he had become a Christian years before. "I serve the Lord," he said, "but I don't belong to any local church. I have my own ministry and I spend a day every week working for the Lord."

In a world like ours it is always special to know somebody who loves the Lord. But I also felt an unease as I thought over our conversation. While I won't sit in God's place and pronounce final judgment on my friend, I worry about what his independence is costing him and others. So I wrote him this letter:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

It was nice to walk into a store and find a fellow-believer, especially one who has a serious ministry. You choose to go it alone. I don't know your reasons and I am not your judge; God is. But as I thought about you during my meditation time this morning, these thoughts came to me. You seemed to respect me. I see you as a valuable person. If anything in this letter applies, just consider that God used me to minister to you.

Paul calls the church the body of Christ. Christians are its members. Each one has a different gift or ability that the body needs. Somewhere there may be a local body of Christians that is handicapped because they don't have what you could be doing for them, and you miss the blessing of what they could do for you.

The Bible is full of "one another" commands: love one another, serve one another, confess your sins to one another, bear one another's burdens, teach one another, encourage one another, honor one another, etc. It is hard to do a lot of this outside of a group. I am my brother's keeper. I am sure you minister to others. But is it possible that doing my own ministry is more comfortable, that I can minister on my own terms and be protected from the unpredictable needs of others in a group? Did Jesus protect himself?

In our human nature we are a fallen race. The heart of our sin problem is an independent spirit, an unwillingness to humble ourselves and make ourselves accountable to others. The opposite of this is the lowly servant spirit of Jesus. Part of our Christian growth is willingness to be mutually accountable. Churches self-destruct because leaders are unwilling to be accountable to each other and to members, and members to each other and to leaders. The old nature is still too much in control.

You have obviously submitted yourself to Jesus in some ways. But could he be calling you, as he does all of us, to keep growing in submission?

If I walk by myself, I miss the growth I could have gained by correction from others and from their examples. And I have failed to submit to God's word when it says,

Let us 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

Christians need each other. Through the church family God provides the "stirring up" and the encouragement we need.

I may avoid the church because I have had a bad experience with hypocritical Christians and church leaders. Sadly, a lot of carnal and selfish things are done in the name of religion. But it is unjust to tar all Christians with the same brush. No church is perfect, but you can find one which is real and sincere. If I store up bitterness I poison myself. Jesus says I cannot be forgiven or live close to God when I won't forgive other people.

I may stay to myself because church membership might bring up unresolved spiritual issues in my life. I may be sensitive about my marital history or some wrong that still needs to be made right. Maybe I just can't stand for people to know what I used to be. It is hard to face and deal with such issues, but there is such freedom, relief and new joy when things are taken care of and put to rest. I may have even blown things out of all proportion in my mind. Churches may have laid burdens on me that are not supported in scripture. In any case, all of us in the church depend on God's merciful forgiveness. We have all been redeemed from our past.

Like you, I have my own ministry. Personally and financially I do some things the church is not involved in. Christ would not ask you to give that up. But I believe Christ intended his work to be done first and mainly through the local church. I have no doubt that Christ wants us to make ourselves accountable and available in a local congregation. ---B. Shelburne

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