

"Can I Be a Christian Without Going to Church?"

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September 7, 2025

"Going to church doesn't make you a Christian anymore than walking into your garage makes you a car." It has been over 100 years ago since the Evangelist Billy Sundy first used that analogy. But I am sure it has been used in thousands of sermons since that time, including in a few of mine. Keith Green, the 70's musician, tried to update it a bit when he said, "Going to church doesn't make you a Christian, anymore than walking into McDonald's makes you a hamburger." Both of those analogies highlight a very important truth. And both of those analogies obscure a truth that is also very important. As a result, I fear there is a bit of confusion, especially among American Christians in the 21st century.

Over the next two weeks we will take a break from our journey through the book of Ecclesiastes and address what I think is a very important question. Can someone be a Christian without going to church? There are various dimensions and implications to this question that are important to explore. Let's pause and pray the Lord would enable us to hear, believe and obey the truth today.

Let's start with the important truth Billy Sundy and Keith Green were making. Going to church does not make someone a Christian. Being a church member is not what enables someone to experience God's salvation. Now, if you have been around Chisholm Baptist Church for a while you probably know that is the case, but I know some who have attended this church for a long time and still don't grasp this truth.

So, everyone listen closely. This is maybe the most important thing you will hear come out of my mouth today. A person becomes a Christian and experiences God's salvation by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. The verses in the Bible we often quote are **Ephesians 2:8,9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**

A person becomes a Christian when, enabled by God's Spirit, he/she chooses to stop relying on himself or anyone or anything else, and instead places his/her faith or trust in Jesus Christ. This

involves believing that Jesus is the eternal Son of God and believing that He is able to provide eternal salvation for us because of His life, death, and resurrection. This is the faith necessary for one to become a Christian and experience God's salvation.

Now, I hope you noticed that I didn't say anything about going to church, being a member of a church or giving money to a church. Our salvation does not depend on anything we do, but on what the Lord Jesus has done for us.

Now, it's true that not everyone agrees with what I just said. Cyprian, a third century church leader, said "No one can have God as Father who does not have the church as mother." In other words, he meant that it was only through the church that one can be saved. The thought is that grace is experienced through what are called sacraments, especially baptism and communion. So, you have to go to church in order to receive and partake in the things that enables you to become a Christians. That does make sense if the sacraments are the means through which grace is received.

We are convinced, however, and believe the Bible clearly teaches that God's saving grace is mediated or given not through the sacraments, but through the gospel. As the great news (that is what gospel means) as the great news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is proclaimed and people hear what that means, they respond, again as God enables, by believing the gospel. Or the Apostle Paul puts it this way in **Romans 10:9 If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** At that point someone experiences God's salvation and becomes a Christian.

Now, being at church is a great place to hear the gospel, but you can be sitting on a park bench and have someone walk up to you and tell you about Jesus. You can be camping in the Sahara Desert listening to a podcast explaining how Jesus died for your sins. Or you can be in prison in China reading a smuggled copy of the Bible and learn about God's plan of redemption. You don't need

to go to church to hear the gospel, put your faith in Jesus Christ, experience God's salvation or become a Christian.

I want to back up and say the confusion folks have about the relationship between going to church and becoming a Christian is often not focused on receiving grace through sacraments. Rather many see "going to church" or other church involvement as part of a list of "good things" someone would do in order to reserve a place in heaven. Things like giving money to the Salvation Army, mowing your neighbor's lawn, or taking in stray cats may also be on that list.

But I hope you realize this understanding also contradicts what the Bible teaches. In the NLT **Ephesians 2:9** reads, **Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.** Church attendance or church involvement do not earn us any points with God and really have nothing to do with becoming a Christian or receiving God's salvation. That is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. And if knowing that going to church doesn't make you a Christian, anymore than walking into McDonald's makes you a hamburger, helps you understand and remember that I guess it is a good thing.

And friends, if you are someone trusting in anyone or anything other than the Lord Jesus for your salvation it is time for you to turn to Jesus Christ and embrace Him as your Savior and Lord. If you are not sure what that means, please make sure you talk to me or one of our pastors, even before you leave this morning. Remember, going to church doesn't make you a Christian, any more than walking into McDonald's makes you a hamburger.

However, as I said at the beginning, this analogy can also be confusing. How? By giving the impression there is no connection between being a Christian and going to church. It seems fairly common for people to think that church attendance or involvement is optional for Christians. Some Christians go to church and some don't, just like some Christians are Packer fans and some Christians are Vikings fans. Whatever you choose, it is no big deal. But that view doesn't reflect what the Bible teaches at all.

Rather, the assumption, in the New Testament, the part of the Bible written after Jesus was on earth, is that every Christian will be part of a church and will meet together with other believers regularly. Now, I want to be clear, a church is not a building, but a group of people. The Greek word translated "church in our Bibles is "ekklesia." The literal meaning is "those called out." And in context it is people called out from the general population and assembling together as God's people. An "assembly of God" is a good description of a church.

Now, it can be a little confusing because the New Testament also refers to the body or bride of Christ as "the Church." This included all believers in Jesus, all Christians from every place and time. It is usually referred to as the universal church, and every Christian is automatically part of that church. It is an important concept, but not what we are talking about today.

Our topic, and what "church" usually means in the New Testament, is a group of Christians who assemble or gather for worship, instruction and fellowship. They are a community of believers who follow Jesus together. They encourage each other and hold one another accountable. And they gather at a particular time and place.

So, if I say someone goes to church or is involved in a church, I mean that person meets with a particular group of Christians on a regular basis. And the point today is every Christian should be doing that.

How do I know that? Because the Bible says so. God tells us in His Word that every Christian should be involved in a church. Now that is a fact of which plenty of people seem unaware.

A few weeks ago, I ran into someone who used to be part of this congregation, and I asked him, where are you going to church these days. He said, "I'm not, but Pastor Dan I still read my Bible and pray every day." I responded, "Well, that is good." But I thought, "So you are reading your Bible, but you are not doing what it says." Wait, Pastor Dan, where does it say Christians have to be involved in a church? Good question. Here is the answer.

We are told to do so in **Hebrews 10:25** **Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the**

habit of doing, but encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. In other words, meet together with other believers in Jesus on a regular basis. That is something this verse says we should do.

Yet, there is much more. The entire New Testament is written to Christians who were part of churches. Most of the New Testament letters, Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, etc., were written to churches, or specifically to the followers of Jesus who made up those churches. The New Testament letters to individual Christians, like Timothy and Titus, focus on their involvement in churches. One Bible scholar said, “The idea someone could be a Christian and not be connected to a local church is completely foreign to the New Testament.”

Even more significant, however, is that a primary focus of the New Testament are instructions about how we as believers in Jesus are to relate to our fellow Christians. The Greek word “*allelon*,” translated in English as “one another,” is found about 100 times in the New Testament. 59 of those occurrences are specific commands teaching us how and how not to relate to one another.

These actions and attitudes form a framework for God honoring relationships within the church. They include the commands, love one another (John 13:34); serve one another (Galatians 5:13); forgive one another (Ephesians 4:23); encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11); bear with one another (Colossians 3:13); and confess your sins to one another (James 5:16).

“But Pastor Dan, don’t these verses simply describe how we are to relate to all people?” Not really. Yes, we are to treat everyone in a loving way and are to even love our enemies. Yes, how we treat fellow believers is clearly a Biblical focus. **John 13:35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.**

A key aspect of our mission is not how we treat all the people out there, but the watching world sees us treat each other. **Galatians 6:10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.** That last phrase clearly

refers to a community of believers, a church, which is indeed a spiritual family.

These “one another commands” are not intended to apply to casual relationships, such as someone you run into at Walmart a couple of times a year or to one of your 973 Facebook friends. Yes, we should love all these folks, but those verses are clearly intended to guide us in relationships with people with whom we are in regular contact, for a community of believers, for a church.

These are also not instructions for a single-family unit, dad, mom, kids, and grandmother all living in the same house. Oh, the Bible tells us to treat family members in a very loving way, but that is not the focus of the “one another commands.” They are instructions for believers in Jesus who are part of a church.

Now, I should be clear, a house church, where you have more than one family meeting together for worship, fellowship and instruction is certainly a real church, where the “one another commands” apply. Almost all the churches in the New Testament were “house churches.” At another time we can maybe discuss the pros and cons of house churches, and of bigger and smaller churches. But, however many believers in Jesus gather on a regular basis, the “one another commands” are intended for them.

Okay, where is this all going? Here is my point. Even though someone can certainly become a believer in Jesus and experience God’s salvation without any connection to a church, it is very important for Christians to be part of a church, a local gathering of believers. It is important not only because the Bible says we should do this, but because living the Christian life, living a life that pleases God, is dependent on us treating other believers, “one another,” the right way. So, you might be reading the Bible and praying with your spouse every day, but if you just sit at home and are not connected with other Christians, you are not really following Jesus.

When I was growing up on the farm I would sometimes go out in a hayfield with a baseball and bat. I would toss the ball in the air, hit it and pretend I was playing baseball. You cannot really play baseball by yourself. You need to be with other people. A bat and ball and one person is not

really baseball. Following Jesus is really a team sport, not an individual event.

Following Jesus means loving, serving, forgiving, encouraging other believers. If you are not doing so, there is a big hole in your Christian life. I think John Stott, the great British Preacher, put it well when he said, “You can *become* a Christian without the church, but you cannot *be* a Christian without the church.”

Or I would say, you can *become* a Christian without the church, but you cannot really *grow* as a Christian without the church, at least your growth will be very stunted. In theological terms, justification happens to an individual, when he/she trusts in Jesus. It is not dependent on any church. Sanctification, growing to be more like Jesus, involves other people, other believers in Jesus, a church. We need these folks to help us grow.

Yes, we need their encouragement, that is important, but they also are to be the objects of our love, service, forgiveness, encouragement, etc. I think of the fruit of the spirit the Apostle Paul lists in **Galatians 5:22b love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness gentleness and self-control.**

How many of those can you cultivate sitting alone in your cabin in the woods or in your downtown apartment? Not many of them. You cannot learn forbearance unless there is someone you don't really want to forbear. You cannot learn gentleness unless there is someone with whom you don't want to be gentle.

For a long time, I have heard and taught that the key to the growth in our Christian lives is a daily quiet time, time alone with God, reading the Bible and praying. That is indeed very important, but also important if we want to grow in our love for God and for others, is regular involvement in a church. That is why I believe every single Christian should be, needs to be part of a church.

Okay, there are more thoughts on this topic that I plan to share next week, and I will try to answer some of the questions I suspect you might have. But I want to make sure you don't misunderstand my purpose. For the most part I have been preaching to the choir today. I don't mean to

those of you who are part of the Chisholm Baptist Church choir under the direction of Mrs. Julie Sandstede. I am referring to the fact that I am speaking about the importance of coming to church to people who are sitting in a church on a beautiful Sunday morning in September.

Yet some of you are a bit sporadic in your church attendance and involvement. And some of you are listening online to the livestream or recording. That maybe your regular habit, and you maybe are more of an observer, than a participant at Chisholm Baptist Church. Of course, you can essentially do that even if you are sitting in this room almost every Sunday morning. But my goal today is not to make you, or anyone feel guilty. Yes, the Bible does say in Hebrews 10:25 that we should not neglect meeting together with other Christians. I believe it is wrong, a sin to do that, to not be part of a church. We cannot just ignore that. Yet, I don't want to pick on folks who are not part of a church.

If you neglected to take time to read your Bible and pray this past week, it is very likely that no one else knows about your failure in that important part of the Christian life. If you had lustful, envious or hateful thoughts this past week, it is likely that no one else, besides you, knows that you had them. If you are spending an hour each night looking at pornography, you are probably making an effort to make sure no one else knows about your sin. If you lost your temper, uttered a few profanities, shared some gossip, or got drunk last week, people close to you probably know about your sin, but it is certainly not public knowledge.

However, if you have been a regular attender at Chisholm Baptist Church but have not been here for the past six months, some people will notice, like me. That doesn't mean this is a worse sin than any of those other things, just more noticeable. We need to remember, that the Bible is always a much better mirror than a window. There are a lot of different reasons why someone may not be coming to church. And unless we have had good heart to heart conversations with that individual, it is usually best not to judge or condemn.

Besides, we don't really want people to be part of our church or attend our worship services because they feel guilty. We want people to join us

because they love Jesus and love other believers in Jesus. Now, as we have said, being a part of a church is what helps people grow in their love for the Lord and for other Christians. But we always prefer that love, not guilt, be our motivation.

Okay, next week we will explore some of the reasons Christians don't go to church, and how we can encourage others, especially our friends and family members to be part of a church.

Today, as we close, I want you to look around this room. These are the people who are part of this church with you. If you are part of another congregation, but are visiting with us this morning, just imagine the folks in your church. As believers in Jesus, being part of this church with these people is not just a duty and certainly not a punishment. It is one of the most important gifts that the Lord has given. These are people traveling with you as you follow Jesus. They are there to encourage you and to help you get up when you stumble. This is your spiritual family. It is a very good family. Be grateful and encouraged today.