

You Don't Have to Go to Church to Be a Christian

Half-truth #10

Pastor Dan Erickson

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“Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than walking into your garage makes you a car.” This is a quote from Billy Sunday, the well-known evangelist of the early 1900’s. And it is one I have used many times over the years. The statement is, of course, true. An atheist can walk into a church building or attend 100 church services and still be an atheist. Yet, even though the statement is true, it also can cause confusion. It seems a lot of people do not see any real connection between being Christian and going to church. Church is often viewed as an option. There are Christians that go to church and Christians who don’t go to church, almost like there are Christians who watch baseball games, and Christians who do not watch baseball games. Church is merely a matter of choice, right? Folks, I would just say that type of thinking would have seemed really strange to Jesus and His apostles. Let’s pause and pray that this morning the Lord would use His words to shape our minds, hearts, and actions in a way that is pleasing to Him.

Some people need to be warned that going to church does not make a person a Christian. Unfortunately, some folks assume their church attendance or church involvement does just that. However, the Bible makes it clear that God’s salvation is received by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Performing religious rituals or duties, including attending church, does not save anyone. ***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 may boast.*** Or another version says, “not a result of the good things you have done,” and I include church attendance or involvement as one of those good things someone might do, but this verse clearly says that is not how one procures eternal salvation.

Folks, I suppose I quote those 2 verses from Ephesians 2 in my sermons more than any other text. I do that because there is still a lot of misunderstanding about how it is not what we do, but rather what Christ has done for us that is the basis of our salvation. Over the years I have talked to many people who thought that because they were a “good person” they would probably end up in heaven. For a lot of them, going to church was something they thought made them a good person. To use the apostle Paul’s term, these folks rely on a righteousness of their own, rather than a righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. (***Phil 3:9***) As a pastor and as a church we are firmly committed to that core truth spelled out in the reformation and joyfully proclaimed by Christians over the centuries: salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. And if it helps someone to understand that truth by telling him/her that going to church does not make you a Christian any more than stepping into your garage makes you a car, I will gladly use that analogy.

However, I am aware that the analogy doesn’t apply to as many as it did a few years ago. Why? Because fewer people are going to church. In just the last few years, the percentage of people who are regular church attenders has apparently dropped from 40% of the American population to maybe 35%. That figure is lower for the Iron Range. Since a higher portion of regular church attenders are evangelicals than in previous decades, I suspect most of them do not think walking into a church building makes them a Christian. Yes, there are still other reasons folks attend church besides a love for the Lord. People may have even come to CBC to meet single gals or make new contacts for their multi-level marketing business. And there are plenty of individuals that still believe that performing

religious rituals, including going to church, is what earns them a thumbs up from the Lord. But in general, fewer people are making the mistake of thinking church attendance is the key to being a Christian or what guarantees one will experience God's salvation.

However, more and more people seem to be swerving into the ditch on the other side of the road, making the mistake of thinking that being a Christian and attending church really have little to do with each other. The thought is often something like this: "Hey, I believe in Jesus and I am saved. I pray every day and read my bible sometimes. I listen to Christian music on the radio. No, I do not go to church, but I feel spiritually healthy. I just do not think it is a big deal to God that I am not part of a church." Well, folks, I hope to persuade you that this type of thinking is wrong, and Christians who are not part of a church are not really spiritually healthy, and that yes, this is all kind of a big deal to God.

Now, a couple of notes at this point. #1 I realize it may seem as if I am "preaching to the choir," if you have taken the time to come here this Sunday morning, in the middle of August, you likely fit the profile for "regular church attender." I do not need to tell many of you that you should go to church, because that is what you do. However, you folks in this room are not the only ones that will hear this sermon. People will listen on the internet, local cable tv, or maybe the radio, and some of them are not part of any church. They are some of the folks to whom I am preaching. And, this is important, I want you to pay close attention to what I say this morning so you can talk to other people about this. You know a lot of the folks out there who claim to be Christians but are not part of any church. Some of them are your friends and your family members, maybe your children. In many cases, you have a better opportunity than I do to explain why it is important they be a part of a church. So pay attention, maybe even take some note this morning.

#2 As I preach this sermon, I am not yelling at anyone. I am not mad at anyone. I realize that some of you, because of health issues or whatever, have very good reasons why you do not attend church on Sundays. That is why we are not really talking about being a part of a church. Even if you are not able to be here on Sunday mornings, there are still ways to be part of CBC or whatever congregation you choose to belong. Some folks, because of age and physical condition find it difficult to be here on Sunday, but they spend time praying for this church and the pastors, they continue to give financially, and through phone calls and other means they stay connected with people in the church and they watch the worship service on YouTube or cable tv. Someone told me a couple of weeks ago that the live stream makes it too easy to stay home and watch in his PJs. Maybe so, but that is a topic for another time. For today, those of you regularly watching worship services at home are considered part of a church, this church.

Now, for those of who are not part of a church at all, I know you too have your reasons for making that choice. I would ask that you would simply listen to what I have to say with an open mind and heart, and prayerfully consider what I say. If in the end, you decide, "Pastor Dan, I just think you are wrong. I believe God is fine with me not being a part of a church," that is ok. We can still be friends. Ultimately, you are accountable to the Lord, not me.

Ok, so why should a believer in Jesus Christ be part of a church? #1 Because the Bible says we should be. That means God says we should be. I am convinced the Bible is written Word of God. If you are not sure about that, we need to have a chat. The first verse that comes to mind concerning Christians going to church is **Hebrews 10:24,25** *And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.* This text

is pretty clear about the importance of meeting together with other believers in Jesus. However, there are a couple of other phrases in these verses that indicate Christians are to be part of a church; “stir up one another,” “encourage one another.” These are two of about 60 different commands found in the New Testament that instruct us how we are to treat each other, treat fellow believers in Jesus. Let me read a few verses from **Romans 10:10-16** *Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.*

Friends, you cannot do those things sitting in your cabin out in the woods in Linden Grove, or sitting alone in your beautiful home in the middle of Hibbing. To obey the commands, the Lord gives us what we need to be interacting with other people. We need to be with other believers in Jesus Christ. We need to be part of a church. These instructions throughout the New Testament reflect the assumption that any and every Christian will be part of a church. Now, some folks say, “Well Pastor Dan, I am part of a church. I am part of the invisible, universal church, made up of all the true believers in Jesus, from every time and place. That’s all that counts.” Well, that is great. I am part of that church too. But when we read those “one another” commands, it is very clear that the New Testament is talking about a visible church, made up of people you actually see and know and with whom you meet together. In fact, I do not think there is one Christian in the whole New Testament not connected to a local church. The lone ranger Christians, the ones out there, supposedly following Jesus all by themselves, do

not exist in the first century church. As the apostle Paul and of course, even the lone ranger had Tonto.

One song, that kind of reflects our confused thinking is “The Jericho Road.” Now, I kind of like the song, and maybe you do too, but it has some bad theology. “On the Jericho road there is room for just two, no more no less, just Jesus and you.” Friends, the Bible is pretty clear that we follow Jesus together. For the past 28 years I have been traveling the Jericho road, not by myself, but with the people of CBC. When someone falls down we are there to help him up. When someone strays off the path, we are there to guide her back on track. Yes, following Jesus does have individual dimensions. That is illustrated in **Galatians 6:2**, the apostle says, ***Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*** Yet, then in verse 6:5 he says, for each one will have to bear his own load. We might ask, “well which is it Paul? Bear one another’s or bear your own?” he would say, “well it is both. We need to care for one another, but that is no excuse for avoiding personal responsibility. In fact, you are to strive to not be a burden to anyone else. That is what love compels us to do. You are not really being a loving person if your reckless choices, laziness, or other’s sins result in other people having to take care of you. Yet, the bottom line is that we follow Jesus together, as a family, as a church. Or as the apostle Paul says as a body. **1 Corinthians 12:12, 13a** *for just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.* Folks, it is pretty clear. The bible says every believer in Jesus should be a part of a church.

#2 Reason why a believer in Jesus Christ should be part of a church is because it helps provide assurance of salvation. John Stott, the great British bible teacher, once said, “One can become a Christian without church, but you cannot be a Christian without church.” Now, neither John

Stott nor I am denying that salvation is by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Everyone truly trusting in Jesus will be saved, even if they have never set foot in church. However, when someone professes to believe in Jesus, but has no connection to a church, there is a question mark about whether that profession is genuine. Being part of a church is so central to following Jesus that it seems strange to call someone not connected with a church, a Christian. Now, I am sure some people who say they are believers in Jesus but are not involved with a church, are truly saved. They will be in heaven. God alone, not me, not you, is the judge. He knows whose faith is real and whose is not. The point is that it only makes sense that someone who has truly been born again and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, would at least have a desire to be part of a church. If that is not there, it only makes sense to wonder if there is a deeper spiritual problem.

Augustin once said, “he who will not have the church as his mother, cannot have God as his Father.” Martin Luther, who articulated the doctrine of justification by faith more clearly than anyone, said, “apart from the church salvation is impossible.” I would not go that far. I would say, if the church is not your mother, God might not be your Father. If you are truly a Christian, it just doesn’t make sense that you are not part of a church or do not even have a desire to be part of church. That just seems crazy. Again, God is your judge not me. But if you are choosing to not be connected to a church, I want to urge you to make sure you really are a Christian. But if you are not connected to a church, there is a problem in your soul. It would be foolish to not try to fix that problem.

But Pastor Dan, you do not understand. I am not part of a church because... Well, let me address some of those reasons people choose to avoid being connected to a church.

#1 “The church hurt me,” or “the church hurt someone very close to me.” When people say

that, they can mean a wide variety of things. For some “being hurt,” means being slighted in some way, or maybe being the object of a joke. One guy quit coming to church because someone commented about how many cookies he ate during the fellowship time. However, “being hurt” can mean something far more substantial. Tragically, some individuals have been sexually abused in a church building, by a pastor or another church member. 2 years ago, the Houston chronicle reported there had been over 700 victims of sexual abuse in Southern Baptist Convention churches over the previous 20 years. Now, some object that states show public school teachers are much more likely to be guilty of abuse than pastors, but that misses the point. Even one case of sexual abuse in the church is too many. So what should you do if you have been hurt by church, or most likely, by someone in the church? Well, do not blame the church for what one or maybe a few individuals do. A church is made up of people who are saints/sinners. It is expected that people in the church will occasionally say something stupid or do something mean. At times, it is a good idea to leave a particular congregation and go to another. Yet, since the church is the body of Jesus, to reject it, is in a sense rejecting the Lord Jesus. And friends, remember, no matter how much people may hurt you, Jesus will never hurt you. To truly experience the healing and wholeness Jesus offers, you need to be part of a church. So even if a church was the problem, a church is the only answer.

#2 “I do not want to be part of a church, because it is a corrupt institution.” Yes, all churches are imperfect, made up of imperfect people, but most are not “corrupt.” Friend, if you are troubled by the record of the Christian church throughout history, I would love to sit down and chat with you. The truth is more complicated than is often presented in a college history class. For example, some churches were indeed complicated in supporting slavery in the U.S., but

the abolitionist movement, those who actively opposed slavery, was made up of pastors and churches. Do not reject the church because of inaccurate accusations made by opponents of Christianity.

#3 “I do not want to be part of a church, because they just want my money.” Not true. You can attend this church every Sunday, can be an official member of the congregation, without giving one penny. The pastors and deacons of CBC spend more time trying figure out who to give money to, rather than how we can get money from you. And frankly, if you are not part of church because you are worried about what it is going to cost you, you clearly have a spiritual issue to which you need to attend.

#4 “I don’t want to part of a church, because I do not like to be around crowds of people. That makes me very uncomfortable.” Now, I am not talking about anxiety about COVID, which may or may not be legitimate. This is just a general social anxiety. Some folks feel this way sporadically, for others it is a fairly constant condition. In recent years, I have realized this is a huge issue, which impacts a lot of people. I would simply say, if this is something keeping away from church, it is harming your soul. And you need to do whatever you can to overcome that anxiety. There may be an easy answer, but do not give up. And I, or any of the pastors, deacons, or deaconesses would be glad to talk to you, glad to pray with you, glad to do whatever we can to help you overcome this spiritual-crippling anxiety.

Friends, being part of church should not be something you are forced to endure. My prayer is that you would find the church to a source of truth, hope, peace, joy and love. By God’s grace may we be people who make CBC that type of church.