

## Why Bother with Church?

*Acts 2:43-47*

July 4, 2004



You are important to God and to us.  
Feel free to share your thoughts, your  
comments and your questions at:

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About 11 weeks ago, I fell off a roof in VA. So that evening, I spent some time in the emergency room, was pumped full of morphine, and had had the necessary tests. I saw the surgeon who told me that he had scheduled my operation for 1 p.m. the next afternoon. Finally, at about eight o'clock, I was taken up to a hospital room. There I met my roommate, Carl. Carl and I were talking, getting acquainted and I told Carl I was a minister. In response Carl said, "Well, let me tell you, Alan, I am a deeply spiritual person, but I don't believe in organized religion." Believe it or not, but . . . at that point in the day, I was not prepared to give Carl a sermon telling him why he *should* be going to church. I do have to admit that Carl's point of view is shared by a huge number of people across the United States, including many who would call themselves Christian.

Thirty years ago, forty years ago, people could argue that God didn't exist, or that God was dead. Not anymore. Rarely do we hear those discussions. No, today it has become very fashionable to talk about spirituality. Even Madonna, the sex symbol of the eighties has embraced Jewish mysticism. Spirituality is in. But organized religion is not. Why not?

Perhaps it is the scandals in the church? We hear the stories of children abused by clergy . . . ministers who deserted their family for the church secretary, or the organist, or someone they met in a chat room on the internet. Regretfully we know of too many churches where the leaders have abused their positions of responsibility and trust.

Or it might be all the fighting and the arguing and the bickering that goes on in too many churches. We have so many denominations and different groups and some seem to be able to get along with each other, but many don't. Why not? Who knows? So how do we know who is right? Doesn't it just make sense to ignore church altogether?

Or is it our rugged American individualism. Like small children, I want to do it by myself. Why should I have anyone else telling me what to do.

And then again, some just flat out say, "Church is boring!" I hate to admit it, but it is true that church is not always the most interesting place to be on a Sunday morning. Sometimes the preacher isn't on top of his game, or the organ is too loud, or the choir is off-key. Or those children in the seat in front of you are just so busy, it's really difficult to get anything out of the service.

You don't have to raise your hands but . . . is there anyone here this morning who would be rather be doing something else? Perhaps sitting at your cabin in the mountains . . . or out playing golf . . . or out on the bay cruising in your boat . . . or maybe even sitting at home on the back deck, reading the morning paper and drinking a cup of coffee? I suspect that is true for at least some of us.

So . . . why bother with church? What's the point? I know some people who drive thirty minutes or even more week after week just to be here. Why?

Again this morning I am continuing with the series, *Questions the Unchurched Are Asking*. As I said on previous weeks, I am doing this series for two reasons. One, I believe that Jesus has called us to be the salt and light to a lost and dying world. But if we are going to do what Jesus called us to do, we need to be listening to the questions of the unchurched. That's one reason. But the second reason is that I believe that we cannot easily divide the world into the pagans and the saints. Their questions are not just their questions, but those are our questions as well.

So why bother with church? Before we answer that question, maybe we need to ask what is church anyway? And before we answer that question there is something else that needs to be said.

I want to say right up front, that sometimes individual churches, and sometimes the leaders of some churches have done some very stupid, very criminal, very evil things. For that there is no

excuse. For that the only possible response is confession, repentance and humble acknowledgement that someone blew it. When people are willing to admit failure there is the possibility of restitution, and restoration of the brokenness. God has a marvelous way of bringing good from a humble and repentant heart. There is no place in the church for arrogance, secrecy or cover-up. None.

So what is the church? And before we answer that question more completely, let me say what the church is not. Our English word church is commonly used to refer to the building where we assemble for worship. But that is one of those strange uses of the English word that has nothing to do with what God intended. When the N.T. speaks of the church, the Greek word that is most commonly used is the word *ἐκκλησία*. That word is used about 76 times in the N.T. Now, you don't need to remember that word. What I would like you to remember is that not once, in any of those 76 occurrences does *ἐκκλησία* ever refer to a building.

A while back we were studying a series up in the youth room that had the very provocative title, *You Can't Make Me Go to Church*. The primary point of the author (and I believe the N.T. totally supports this) . . . you can't make me go to church, because together, we **are** the church.

But . . . what is the church? There are a number of ways we could answer that question. We could look at the many verses which use the word *ἐκκλησία*. Let's just look at one. The very first occurrence comes from Matthew 16:18

*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*

That verse in itself has generated many sermons and great discussion through the years. Because of time, let me just note this morning, that Jesus identifies the church as *my* church. If we really want to be the church, we must recognize that it is the church of Jesus Christ. It does not belong to the pastor, to the deacons, or to any individual. It is the church of Jesus Christ.

We could also look at the many other words and phrases that the N.T. uses such as: the people of God, the body of Christ, the sheep and the shepherd, the bride of Christ, a holy priesthood, a new creation. Each describes for us a part of what the church is intended to be.

But there is still one more way to consider what God intended the church to be. That is to look at some of the *one another* passages of the N.T. I picked twenty-one passages. I like these *one another* passages. They speak to the quality of relationships, the quality of connectedness, the quality of community that God desires for each of us. I easily could have picked many more, but listen as I read:

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| Matt 21:25   | Be at peace with one another.                                 |
| Rom 12:10    | Outdo one another in showing honor.                           |
| Rom 12:16    | Live in harmony with one another.                             |
| Rom 15:7     | Welcome one another.  |
| Rom 15:14    | Instruct one another.   |
| I Cor 11:33  | Wait for one another.   |
| I Cor 12:25  | Have the same care for one another.                           |
| II Cor 13:11 | Agree with one another.                                       |
| Gal 5:13     | Through love become slaves to one another.                    |
| Eph 4:25     | We are members of one another.                                |
| Eph 4:32     | Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another. |
| Eph 5:21     | Be subject to one another.                                    |
| Col 3:13     | Bear with one another.  |
| I Thes. 4:18 | Encourage one another.  |

I Thes. 5:15	Always seek to do good to one another.
Heb. 10:24	Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds
James 5:16	Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another.
I Pet 4:9	Be hospitable to one another.
I Pet 4:10	Serve one another.
I Jn 3:16	We ought to lay down our lives for one another.
Jn. 13:34	Love one another. (plus some 14 other times as well)

That gives some idea of what the church is (or at least what God intends the church to be) so now we return to the question, why bother?

I think it has been twenty (maybe even thirty years ago) that Barbara Sreisand was singing, "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world." Many of us enjoyed the song. It had a catchy tune. But guess what? If we take that song literally, we are all very lucky people. Why? People who need people? – we **all** need people! That's just a part of our emotional and spiritual DNA. Researchers have been telling us that for years. Study after study has shown the beneficial effects of networks and support groups. When people are connected they stay happy and healthy. People **do** need people. That's how God created us to live. God created us to live in community.

That's why families are so important. That's why the church family is so important. And yes, a part of "going to church" is participating in worship. Worship is the reminder that we are not just here for ourselves. Worship reminds us of our connection to God and our connection to God's people.

But the church – the church as God intended the church to be – is also the place where I am nurtured in the faith. The church is the place where I am encouraged to discover and to use my God-given gifts for ministry and service. The church is where I am encouraged, challenged, comforted and corrected. The church is where I learn how to be what God intends me to be.

The first is part of an email posted yesterday on the cob-list to which I subscribe. It is from Jeanne Smith, who teaches at McPherson College.

When I was a young girl, I, also, experienced much prejudice from classmates in public school because of my low socio-economic status. I came from a family of nine children, and when I was eleven, we experienced a devastating fire that destroyed our home. All of this put my family in dire financial straits for many years. In spite of the rejection I felt in school on an almost daily basis, the Gettysburg (PA) Church of the Brethren and the people in it convinced me that God loved me no matter what, and their continual affirmation of my selfhood made a tremendous difference in my life. To this day, I credit them and my Aunt Helen for literally salvaging me and giving me hope. Had they not been there, I shudder to think of where I would be today. The hurt from my classmates cut so deeply that it took many years before I could talk about it, even with my husband, who, bless his heart, understood and loved me more.

The African proverb claims that "it takes a village to raise a child," and it does, but I believe that it takes a church to raise a child, as well. Nobody can do it like the church can do it because the church has the love of God on its side, as long as we frail humans impart that love and do not sidestep God's plan. Negative language that denigrates one's personhood leaves scars that last a lifetime, and it takes an overwhelming love from others to convince those persons that they are worthy human beings.

I can honestly say that I will never forsake the Church of the Brethren because of the overwhelming love I felt in its embrace during the years when I needed it most. It and the people in it, as well as the Brethren college that I attended, gave me hope and love unconditionally, and I will be forever grateful, even until I die. The message of God's Love is life-saving stuff, indeed.

*Jeanne Smith email posted on coblist 071004*

By the way, I began the message this morning by talking about Carl. I arrived on Friday evening. Carl left on Sunday. In that time, Carl's girlfriend called a few times and was in to visit several times. Beyond that, I was not aware of any other phone calls or visitors he had. I soon lost track of the number of phone calls, and visitors that I had. It was humbling, the outpouring of support from so many different people.

God is so good. God wants to give us so much. Will we receive what God wants to give? Will we be the church?