

Why I Left the Organized Church

A Personal Testimony

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I have been a Christian now for almost 23 years. I have been to many different denominations ranging from Baptist to Assembly of God. I have been to churches with a broad range of theological beliefs. I have been an Arminianist, a Calvinist, a dispensationalist, a fundamentalist, and a pre- and post-tribulationist (if you don't know what these terms mean, don't worry – you're not missing anything). I have studied systematic theology and have been a literalist for most of my Christian life. I have been a member of various churches, taken membership classes, pledged agreement to doctrinal statements, and given public testimony of such.

However, through a series of very difficult circumstances in my life, God began to shake the very core of my beliefs. My belief system over the years was based on fallible men and systems, and changed as frequently as I changed churches. I had book knowledge of God, but my understanding of His character was theologically, not experientially based. Of course, this is not to say that the study of the Scriptures is not important. However, when intellectualism takes the place of spirituality, then study has become an idol. Denominationalism had clouded my vision and given me a skewed perspective of God's love and the purpose of His judgments.

What God has done in my life is to take a very prideful, arrogant, self-righteous man and strip him of self-achievement and self-exaltation. I began to see all my theology crumble before my eyes. I saw that much of the knowledge I had accumulated was simply the "traditions of men" which took me away from the central truth of "Christ in me, the hope of glory." Through the brokenness of the Cross, I no longer wanted to impress men with my so-called "knowledge of the Scriptures."

At the same time, God was revealing to me the glorious revelation of Christ being "*all in all.*" I saw that I was a very religious man – a Christian, yes – but a religious one. My focus was on ministry, or activities, or preaching, or singing. I had left the simplicity of Christ as my first love. Christ was not everything to me. Ministry was more important; going to church was more important; my reputation was more important; and as important as studying the Scriptures are, studying had become more important than Christ Himself.

Almost instantly, God had set me free from denominationalism. I began to see denominations as hurtful divisions in the body of Christ. The Apostle Paul spoke of these divisions when he

asked, “*Is Christ divided?*” (I Corinthians 1:13). I began to realize that becoming a member of a denomination was helping to contribute to the division in the body of Christ. Denominations, by their very nature, exclude others. To join a church, one must pledge an allegiance to a set of doctrines and creeds that might be very much different than the church down the street.

So which church is right? By being an active member of the Baptist or Methodist church, I saw that I was condoning and encouraging an exclusive spirit. Should I be baptized in the name of Christ? OR the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit? Do I need to speak in tongues or not? Is water baptism required for salvation? Should I or shouldn't I tithe? Is Christ coming back before or after the tribulation? Can I lose my salvation or am I secure forever?

While I have personal beliefs on each of the above questions, I saw that to make these into a doctrinal statement and make agreement to them a prerequisite for “joining the church” was wrong. First of all, the whole idea of church membership is unbiblical. When we become Christians, we instantly become members of the body of Christ (the *ecclesia*). These modern membership requirements are nothing more than adding to what Christ has already done for us. Because we are “*in Christ*,” we are already members of the *ecclesia*.

I also began to see that Christ has become second place in most churches. Christ has lost the preeminence. What has replaced Him? Activities, for one; ministries for another. We are so busy “for” Christ that we have forgotten that to “be with” Christ is the better thing.

Remember the story of Mary and Martha? Martha was so busy serving Christ that she forgot that Mary, who was sitting at the feet of Jesus, had the better thing. Jesus never condemned Martha for being a server. Service is important – but only when that service flows from our intimacy with Christ. Anything less is idolatry. We have made our ministries and our activities into little idols. If you doubt what I am saying, simply read the newspaper advertisements for our churches or look at the church bulletin. Most churches try to draw people by boasting of all the activities and ministries that are made available – ministries for the children, ministries for the young adults, and ministries for the married. There are activities going on all the time. Are we so bored with real intimacy with each other that we have to look for alternatives to fill our time?

I often wonder, though, how many of these ministries Jesus has really blessed? I knew a pastor who had recognized this problem and called on the congregation to put a halt to all ministries and activities and pray about what the Lord would have them to do. Unfortunately, most of the church as well as the elders and deacons did not see this as necessary. You see, this particular church had made ministry an idol. They could not let go of their busy-ness.

Perhaps the biggest problem with the organized system is their emphasis on the Old Covenant. The thing that really opened up my eyes to this issue was the way the church is emphasizing the Old Testament practice of tithing. Most churches teach that it is biblical that a person give at least ten percent to the church, and anything above this amount is considered an “offering.” However, tithing is totally foreign to the New Testament *ecclesia*, and to insist otherwise is to take the law and mix it with grace. This legalistic spirit also manifests itself in most sermons today. Instead of putting an emphasis on the life of Christ working in and through us, more emphasis

is placed on the keeping of commandments and “doing,” and as a result, the poor sheep are working and working to stay right with God, but in reality, the exact opposite is happening. The saints are feeling more and more guilty because they are not living up to the expectations and requirements of their church; and this is exactly why Paul wrote to the Galatians. They had begun in the Spirit but were being perfected in the flesh, and Paul warns that they were in danger of nullifying the work of Christ (Galatians 3:3; 5:2; Romans 4:14). It is no wonder that our churches are so weak and impotent – they have replaced the Cross with the “golden calf” of works.

Another major problem I see in the organized church is the pre-eminence of the pastorate. Predominantly, denominations are centrally focused around one man – the pastor. Some churches have more than one man in charge called a “plurality of elders.” While this is more scriptural, total control usually ends up in the hands of one or two men. This was not the case with the early ecclesia. Emphasis was placed on each individual member contributing to the building up of the body of Christ. Church meetings involved all the members, not just one or two (I Corinthians 14:26; Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 4:16). Elders and deacons were overseers and servants. They did not lord over the flock of God, and they did not have titles or offices as we do today. They were gifted men who functioned in the gift of being an elder.

Today we have professionally paid clergy, and so as a result, it is usually one man’s responsibility to ensure the flock is fed and built up, and why not – isn’t that what he’s paid to do? The direction and vision of the local church is usually the pastor’s specific vision. Oftentimes, this quenches the Spirit of God working in individual believers. If there is a conflict on the direction the local church should take, the pastor’s direction usually wins out.

One local pastor I know is very proud of the fact that he is a pastor. Frequently, I’d hear him say, “My church this, and my church that” – and therein lies the problem. There is an ownership issue here. Ownership of the local assembly, which should belong to Christ Himself, has been usurped and taken from Him by men. I do not mean to imply that these men are less than sincere or do not love the Lord. It is easy for all of us to claim the right of something that does not belong to us.

Today’s modern church has become very much like a business. It has a tax-exempt status. It has a board of directors, leadership council, or some other governing body to rule its affairs. It conducts business meetings with voting procedures. It involves itself in building funds with various committees designed to make decisions for the congregation. It has constitutions, by-laws, and a doctrinal statement very much like big corporations today. It raises money – and lots of it. Pastors and church employees earn salaries much like a corporation. Much of the money collected from the offerings go to pay salaries, mortgages (or rent), and other business-

type expenses (janitorial, lawn maintenance, secretarial, etc.). This business-like mentality was far removed from the spirit of the early Church.

The early Church did not maintain buildings, or pay salaries to their leaders. Their money went to minister to the needs of each other and to feeding the poor. Can you imagine what we could do as a Church if we took all the money that goes to pay salaries and maintain buildings and gave it to the poor? This country would no longer need government welfare, because the Church would become the welfare system. What an impact the Church would have on our society!

Finally, our doctrinal statements have excluded many Christians from fellowship simply because they do not agree with every fine point of such statements. “Orthodoxy” is determined by “the few” and expected to be followed by the majority.

For example, because my belief on the final destination of man is different than the majority of most churches, many have cut me off from fellowship. I have been labeled a heretic by some and am avoided by many. Never mind the fact that I believe that salvation is by grace through faith alone in the blood of Jesus. Never mind the fact that I believe that Jesus is the only name by which men can be saved. Never mind the fact that I believe that Christ rose on the third day and will come again. Never mind the fact that I preach the Lordship of Jesus Christ and glory only in His Cross.

Because I do not agree with the modern church that most of God’s creation will burn in hell forever, I have been labeled a heretic unworthy of fellowship. This should not be! The basis of our fellowship is not in some set of creeds that vary from church to church. The basis of our fellowship is Christ and Him alone!

“Any man that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God, and no man can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit” (I John 4:2-3; I Corinthians 12:3).

This, and this alone, is our basis of fellowship.

In conclusion, my intent in writing this short article is to answer some of my friends and family who are concerned because I am not “going to church.”

I will not question any person’s choice of where they worship with the saints. That is between them and the Lord. While I strongly believe that denominations divide the Body and are not God’s best, the Lord surely uses them in the lives of His people. If you feel that you are called to attend a Baptist, a Methodist, or a Presbyterian church, do what you believe God is leading you to do. But for me, I cannot participate in a system that I feel has left the spirit of the New Testament ecclesia.

This does not mean that I will never step foot inside a church building again, and it certainly doesn’t mean that I will reject those who choose to fellowship in these denominations. It simply means that I will not become a member or give my energies to further any denominational system, or propagate the ministry of one man. God uses us wherever we are, and it is true that He has used the denominational system to accomplish His great purpose, but just because

God uses something in our lives, that doesn't mean that He wishes us to stay there. There comes a time when we should move from "milk" to "strong meat."

We all should be growing and progressing in our walk with the Lord. Sometimes that means taking a stance and risk being labeled "different." I was in the denominational system for over 20 years before God called me out. I know many believers who have felt the same urging by the Spirit. They, too, have suffered the same label as I have. One day, however, God will call ALL of us out of man-made religion (denominationalism) and into the perfect unity of His Spirit. Until that day, may all of us learn to love one another and maintain the bond of peace.

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