



Why Go to Church?

SESSION 2

| *An honest look at the reasons Christians have for still going to church.*

Introduction

As an institution the church can as easily embolden as infuriate us, make us proud one minute and defensive the next. As a community it can invigorate us with glorious music and stirring liturgy just as it can drive us just this side of crazy with interminable board meetings, inevitable budget shortfalls, and entangling bureaucracies.

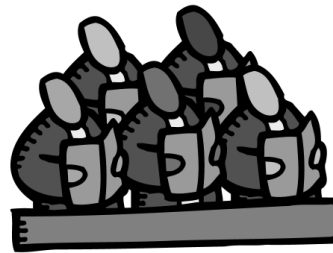
The church is many things, but perfect isn't one of them. What it is, though, is a community of sinners—ourselves imperfect—saved by grace; a community that wants more than anything to live in accordance with God's will for us and every so often comes close to getting it right.

We need each other for the times we do get it right, but also for the times we don't, because on the one hand it is *in* community that God's will is more clearly discerned so that we might live as better Christians, and on the other hand it is *from* community that we derive guidance, stamina, and forgiveness as we make our fitful strides toward a more faith-filled life.

So what makes a church a church? How does our participation in the life of the church shape its identity? And equally, how does its participation in our lives shape who *we* are? There are, I believe, at least five components worth looking at in this regard: history, institution, scripture, community, and liturgy.

The History

The church has long been blamed for every evil under the sun—from the bubonic plague to the stock market crash of 1929. But while its hands have not been thor-



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oughly clean nor its record unsoiled over these many years, a balanced look at our history paints a more complex and sympathetic picture.

For all of the terrible excesses committed in the name of Christ—witch trials, forced baptisms of aboriginals, degradation of the Jews, the selling of indulgences—the church of history is also to be commended for having acted forcefully (if not unanimously) in the forefront of the abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement, and the movement to grant women the right to vote. In addition, churches played a pivotal role in the Underground Railroad, the drafting of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the founding of historically black colleges. They also helped to establish and fund Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers (UFW), Clergy and Laity Concerned (CALC) about the war in Vietnam, the nuclear disarmament movement, and the religious campaign against the death penalty.

As missionaries to the poor, churches have long cared for the homeless and hungry, the disenfranchised and dispossessed, the orphan and widow, sometimes advocating on behalf of national efforts to eradicate poverty, but always working to see to it that emergency meals, housing, and clothing were provided to those who

needed it. To paraphrase Dom Helder Camara, the late Archbishop of Brazil, the historical role of the church has been to feed the poor *and* inquire forcefully as to the roots of their poverty. Or, to put a new spin on an old story, the church has been the Good Samaritan who cared for the man who had been beaten on the side of the road, but she then went to the authorities, protesting and demanding that the roads be made safer for the citizenry (Luke 10:25-37).

Therefore, the church has historically worked in shaping society's stronger values rather than reflecting its weaker ones; it has been in the church's willingness to take up the unpopular cause, advocate on behalf of the most unpopular of citizens, and lead by example that it has most faithfully reflected Jesus' mandate to tend to "the least of those" in our midst.

The Institution

Many of today's mainline churches face the daunting obstacles of declining attendance, depleted assets, and waning national influence. As one writer put it, "statistics confirm something common sense has already told us: most people stay home on Sunday mornings."¹ On top of this, it is an increasingly aging population that attends, a pattern that does not augur well for the future.

Nonetheless, those who do claim church affiliation even if they don't attend (which is like declaring a party loyalty without voting) can be rightly proud of the presence many denominations have in our culture today. The Quakers, for instance, through their American Friends Service Committee, send regular delegations to Israel and Palestine in an effort to work on behalf of justice and reconciliation between the two states.

Nor are the Quakers the only religious activists. Thirty-eight conferences of the United Church of Christ deliver financial, technical, and legal assistance to communities nationwide that have been affected by natural or technological disasters, including earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, toxic waste dumps, and mining hazards. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America builds health care facilities in Rwanda, and through its "Justice for Women" program, offers resources to its local churches to be part of a broader effort to eliminate sexism not only in the church but in society as a whole. The American Baptist Church, through its peace fellowship, sponsors annual global peace conferences, holds

vigils to end the war in Iraq, and provides resources and training for congregations to learn how to practice peaceful, transformative conflict resolution.

In point of fact, there is virtually no justice issue—from immigration to racism, from health care reform to child abuse, from poverty to the fight for a living wage—in which churches are *not* involved. Through advocacy, fund raising, work teams, research, letter writing, and civil disobedience, denominations are providing ways for the time, treasure, and talents of their constituencies to be faithful to the vision of the prophet Micah when he compelled us to "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8).

Beyond such efforts, the denominations meet other needs of individual churches that those churches could never meet on their own. They supply educational resources in the form of books, pamphlets, training sessions, videos, and curricular materials. They offer clergy and laity study retreats and workshops on topics as wide ranging as how to adapt to the changing face of your neighborhood to how to make your sanctuary more energy efficient. They offer grants and loans for church renovation and growth. And they help subsidize seminaries, nursing homes, assisted living facilities, colleges, universities, and overseas missionaries.

The Scriptures

Our relationship to Scripture, like our relationship to religion, is not always a comfortable one. We are often wrestling with the meaning of tales first told thousands of years ago around councils, committees, or campfires by people with their own agendas to advance. The stories have been embellished by the teller, buffed and clipped, edited to suit the bias of this or that community, often without regard for consistency (did Noah take two of every animal onto the ark, as written in Genesis 6:19, or seven of every animal, as written by 7:2?). They give us abundant detail on how to manage a herd dispute between nomadic tribes or the proper way to clean up after the slaughter of a sacrificial goat, but are maddeningly silent on the question of whether the use of stem cells is a morally justifiable way to save lives or the use of nuclear weapons is a morally justifiable way to take them.

All this is to say they must be approached with great care and respect, trusting that the text is willing to give



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up its secrets to the person who is willing to discern them. There is an element of the artistic to them. When we look at a work of the artist Jackson Pollock, such as his cacophonous *Lavender Mist*, we can either reduce it to a riot of squiggles and smears “that any six-year-old could do,” or we can appreciate it as a product of genius, absorb ourselves in it, discover the undercurrent of order beneath the surface chaos, note the eagerness with which our eyes move from place to place across the huge canvas, and therein feel something of the artist’s congenital and ultimately fatal restlessness. In other words, *we can ask the painting to do the heavy lifting for us or we can engage it, question it, mine it, study it, and uncover its treasures.*

Scripture is indispensable because it is the written testimony to the birth of our faith. It is our foundational story, our link to the beginning. Through its poetry, its legends, its myths, its teachings, and its histories, authors speak to us of a God among us, and it is our task as a community to listen to how the lessons learned thousands of years ago in a part of the world many of us will never even set foot in must still be learned today.

And so we will ask ourselves, what *does* the Bible say about stem cell research or nuclear weapons? The faithful will disagree on this question, as we always have, and as we will on innumerable other questions of behavior and belief, from capital punishment to infant baptism to the divinity of Mary. Still, it’s better to have honest disagreement in search of a difficult truth than cheap rhetorical sleights of hand in search of an easy one. We owe the text at least this much. We owe it the opportunity to teach us difficult truths that are more often than not embedded in the mystery of these ancient words. At times they are hard to unearth, but they are nonetheless worth the effort.

Community

We don’t take on those hard questions alone, we take them on with others and we do so because the religious

life, like life itself, is not one lived in total isolation. Even the hermit monks and ancient mystics were members of brotherhoods who saw their solitude as both feeding on and contributing to the greater good of a wider community.

It is into the religious fellowship that we are born, baptized, and bat mitzvahed. As young children we squirm our way through services, draw crayon pictures of the Garden of Eden, and tell our parents that all we’ve learned in Sunday school is about how God is bigger than big. Unbeknownst to us, it is our first taste of that community. Later we may go off to church camp, where, in the words of the Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs, “We get Jesus, mosquito bites, and, if we’re lucky, our first kiss.”² Counselors sneak religion to us through the back door, with late night conversations about things like sexual ethics and human values, because they know that at this age religion and cool don’t mix, and cool is very, very important.

Later still, some of us are unsettled by questions that seem greater than our religion’s ability to answer them. Somebody young dies, a parent leaves home, or a terrible earthquake kills thousands of innocent people in a faraway land. Or perhaps nothing of any great import happens, but religion has come to feel as bland and tepid to us as our college civics class—inoffensive, but tedious and hardly worth our time. So we drift away from that community, perhaps sniff around to see if there’s more excitement to be found elsewhere, in other modes of seeking, or perhaps not.

Then somewhere along the line, for some of us, circumstances conspire to return us to religion, and whether it is to the religion of our childhood or another we are still welcomed by the community and grateful to be a part of it. At times contentious, at times petty, always a learning process, the community is also a devoted, active expression of the faith we want so much to find again in our lives. Common creed brings us to identify with one another, which brings us to appreciate and understand one another, which in turn brings us to care for one another. In this way, we are family—people who often but not always like each other but who always aspire to love each other, if for no other reason than because this love is at the very heart of that creed we commonly claim as our own.

It is family because these are the people with whom we admit our fears, our misgivings, and our misdeeds, and who can hear that admission without need for query or explanation. It is here that we allow our doubts to surface because we know that they will be met with both wisdom and generosity by people for whom doubt is also no stranger, that our words are not foreign to the sensibility of the other. These are the people who know when we are ill and pray for our recovery, know when life has been good to us and celebrate our triumphs, know when we have suffered loss and weep with us the anguished tears of bitter grief. They are our fellowship to whom we are attached by shared belief, which is no small attachment.

Liturgy

Sitting in a church doesn't make us a Christian any more than sitting in a garage makes us a car, but it is in liturgy that our religion brings that fellowship together and coheres for us. Worship is our watering hole, our town square. It is the time and place in which we gather from distant walks to be of one voice. To paraphrase St. Paul, here we are neither male nor female nor slave nor free, nor Republican nor Democrat, nor college professor nor street sweeper, nor able-bodied nor wheelchair-bound, nor old nor young, nor black, nor white, nor yellow, nor red, nor brown. Here in this space, in this hour, God's devotion to us and ours to God supersedes all differences of birth, chance, choice or affiliation.

Perhaps that space is in a modest clapboard church of the western Great Plains or one of the majestically spired cathedrals of Dallas, Texas, that people come to gather in this way. Or maybe it's in the squat little immigrants' synagogue of New York City's lower east side, with its peeling paint and pitted façade, the one that now provides a counterpoint to the chic cafés and high-priced boutiques that surround it. Or if not there, perhaps it's the call to prayer heard above the clatter of the El from one of the onion-domed mosques in south Chicago. Whatever the house of prayer, whether we are called to it by the rabbi's shofar, the priest's pealing bells, the imam's adhan, or the high C of jazz vespers, we gratefully heed it. By week's end we are ready to be with one another again, to feel the creak of the pew, sing the hymns of our youth, and, if they must, let subdued emo-

tions find their voice and be totally unashamed. When we are here we are free to use language we rarely use in public the other days of the week. It is here that we feel as though we have slipped into the waiting arms of God, and here we remove ourselves from the world so that we might be better prepared to return to it. This is why we worship; because in the moment it is a good experience and beyond the moment it is a sustaining one. Our weekly second chance. Or, in the inspiring words of Alfred North Whitehead, "The worship of God is not a rule of safety—it is an adventure of the spirit, and flight after the unattainable."³

Conclusion

The church is not an entity outside of our own experiences. It is a community that is the sum total of all of our experiences. Identifying its faults and recognizing its limitations is a form of confession because ultimately we are responsible for these shortcomings. And it is in making this confession that we challenge ourselves, corporately, to make the church better.

The seeds are there, in its history, its outreach, its texts, its liturgies, and most importantly, its people. We have been handed these seeds, these kernels, these little nuggets of hope that can transform a good institution into a great one. They are ours to plant, and water, and feed, and nurture. No one will do it for us.

What is the church? Well, that is up to us to answer, not by our words so much as by our deeds.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Rebecca Barnes, Churchcentral.com at <http://rebecca.barnes1.blogspot.com/2006/05/how-to-address-church-attendance.html>.
2. Brevard Childs, in an unpublished sermon heard by the author at Yale Divinity School in April 1978.
3. Erik Kolbell, *The God of Second Chances* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 104.