



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 27: Why do I need the Church?



The Heresy of the Unchurched Believer

Over 95% of Americans state that they believe in god, but only about one quarter regularly attend religious services. Many people describe themselves as "spiritual, but not religious." They wonder: "If I am a good person, why do I need church?" Many view spirituality as a personal matter and are satisfied with their current situation, and fail to see the need or value of organized religion. They believe that God is real, but also perceive that many preachers who claim His name do not represent Him, and observe that some religious behaviors are misdirected. In a world with many confusing and often contradictory religious claims, it is easier to write off organized religion than to make the personal effort necessary to engage in a systematic search for truth. Organized religions often pose significant demands on their adherents, requiring the sacrifice of time and means while prohibiting certain behaviors.

Writing off organized religion because one does not want to put in the hard work of a diligent search for truth or make personal sacrifices does not get one any closer to God, nor does it shed any light on preparing one for the eternities after our brief mortal sojourn. C.S. Lewis recounted the story of an old air force officer who said:

"I've no use for all that stuff. But, mind you, I'm a religious man too. I know there's a God. I've felt Him: out alone in the desert at night: the tremendous mystery. And that's just why I don't believe all your neat little dogmas and formulas about Him. To anyone who's met the real thing they all seem so petty ... and unreal!" [\[1\]](#)

Lewis observed:

"What happened to that man in the desert may have been real, and was certainly exciting, but nothing comes of it. It leads nowhere. There is nothing to do about it. In fact, that is just why a vague religion -- all about feeling God in nature, and so on -- is so attractive. It is all thrills and no work; like watching the waves from the beach. But you will not get to Newfoundland by studying the Atlantic that way, and you will not get eternal life by simply feeling the presence of God in flowers or music. Neither will you get anywhere by looking at maps without going to sea. Nor will you be very safe if you go to sea without a map." [\[2\]](#)

The fact that a map is needed does not mean that any map will do. A map is useful only to the extent that it accurately depicts

real geographic features and indicates the course to follow. That some individuals may dash their ship against the rocks or may become lost at sea does not mean that a map is not necessary or helpful, only that theirs is not accurate. To return to God, we must have not just any map, but the correct spiritual roadmap. Nor will one reach the desired destination merely by possessing a map without carefully studying it and following its directions.

Christian scriptures repeatedly teach that active involvement in Christ's church is essential for salvation. Evangelical author Dr. Ronald Sider wrote:

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"The very purpose of Christ's coming to earth, the New Testament declares, was to create a holy community ([Titus 2:14](#)) ... God's grand strategy of redemption does not focus on redeeming isolated individuals; it centers on the creation of a new people, a new community, a new social order that begins to live now the way the Creator intended. That is clear all through the Scriptures, from the calling of Israel out of Egypt to the final book of the Bible ... Jesus was not a lone ranger who made private house calls on isolated hermits or autonomous individuals."[\[3\]](#) "Jesus did not go around the country whispering to isolated hermits, 'Your sins are forgiven.' Jesus gathered together a circle of disciples. He formed a new community of forgiven sinners ... who began to live according to Jesus' kingdom values and challenge the status quo where it was wrong."[\[4\]](#)

Those who neglect opportunities to attend church fail to grasp a central purpose of Christ's mission. Evangelist Peter Gilquist noted:

"We now have 'churchless born-againism' -- a new type of apostasy that has never appeared before in history. This movement confesses a personal -- really, a private -- relationship with Christ and denies the Lordship of Christ as being in the church. Christ, they say, rules only in one's heart, and thus they end up despising God's ordained government."[\[5\]](#)

The "unchurched Christian" is an oxymoron: one cannot be a disciple of Christ without regular participation in His Church.

Christ Commands Church Attendance

Gospel ordinances are required for salvation. Christ taught, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."[\[6\]](#) Baptism is recognized only when it is performed by authorized ministers of God's church. Christ further declared: "although a man should be baptized an hundred times [by unauthorized ministers] it availeth him nothing, for you cannot enter in at the strait gate by the law of Moses, neither by your dead works."[\[7\]](#) After baptism, we are commanded to attend church and take the sacrament regularly: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day."[\[8\]](#) Weekly church attendance is essential for us to maintain the companionship of the Holy Spirit. Christ taught his disciples in the Americas: "And this shall ye always do to those who repent and are baptized in my name; and ye shall do it in remembrance of my blood, which I have shed for you, that ye may witness unto the Father that ye do always remember me. And if ye do always remember me ye shall have my Spirit to be with you."[\[9\]](#)

The Savior commanded his disciples to meet together often.[\[10\]](#) He taught that certain benefits are available only when believers meet together: "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."[\[11\]](#) Although independent study is important, this promise does not apply to believers meeting alone. The gathering of saints creates spiritual synergy which is greater than the sum of its parts. Church members are commanded to carry one another's burdens,[\[12\]](#) and church participation provides opportunities for service which are essential to our own salvation.

Church Attendance Follows Repentance

The building up of the Church is the natural outcome when the repentance process is at work in the heart of individuals. Christ commanded modern missionaries: "Let them build up churches, inasmuch as the inhabitants of the earth will repent"[\[13\]](#) ... "Inasmuch as ye shall find them that will receive you ye shall build up my church in every region."[\[14\]](#) Christ taught that those who accept His servants accept Him: "If they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also."[\[15\]](#) Continued obedience to divine commandments is necessary for us to "retain a remission of [our] sins."[\[16\]](#) Without regular church attendance, any prior repentance is incomplete, and Christ's atonement ceases to be active in our lives.

Gateway to Eternal Life

The Lord gives us commandments "For the purpose of building up my church and kingdom on the earth, and to prepare my people for the time when I shall dwell with them, which is nigh at hand."[\[17\]](#) His Church represents a refuge from the storms of mortality,[\[18\]](#) and the gateway to eternal life. He promises faithful, participating members of His church: "whosoever belongeth to my church need not fear, for such shall inherit the kingdom of heaven."[\[19\]](#)

Ongoing Revelation of God's Will

Christ taught that His church would be built upon the rock of revelation.[\[20\]](#) Ongoing revelation of His will is central to His divine model.[\[21\]](#) Acceptance and obedience to current revelation is essential to the salvation of each member. Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in the early second century, understood this principle and wanted to obtain the most current scripture possible. He stated that when "any one who had attended on the elders came, I asked minutely after their sayings, what Andrew or Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the Lord's disciples; [and] which things Aristion and the presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. For I imagined that what was to be got from books was not so profitable to me as what came from the living and abiding voice."[\[22\]](#) Christ taught: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."[\[23\]](#) Individuals cannot have "every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" -- let alone live by them -- without access to the teachings of current prophets as well as ancient scripture.

The Apostle Paul asked: "What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision?" In other words, what is the advantage of being a member of God's covenant people and obeying His ordinances? He answered: "Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God."[\[24\]](#) Because the people of God's church have the living word through contemporary prophets, they can understand the will of God without confusion or error.

Organizational Value of the Church

In spite of their imperfections, organizations are far more efficient at accomplishing tasks requiring collaborative effort than individuals working in isolation. Almost all of the basic appliances, conveniences, and technologies of daily life -- computers, airplanes, cars, and even toasters and toilets -- are possible only through the efforts of organizations, which organize the efforts of individual employees towards common goals and provide resources and a framework that would not be available to those working in isolation. How practical, or even possible, would it be to expect the average individual to build a complete car from raw materials? Similarly, the Church of Jesus Christ is able to accomplish tasks that would not be possible to believers working in isolation. The world missionary program, the care for the poor, and other essential tasks are accomplished by believers working together with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Christ has declared that the work of His church "must needs be done in mine own way."[\[25\]](#)

The Kingdom of God on Earth

Christ referred to His Church as the Kingdom of God on earth ([D&C 65:5](#), [D&C 97:14](#)). The Church is referred to in scripture as "the body of Christ"[\[26\]](#) and as the "bride of Christ."[\[27\]](#) Christ is king, and His people are those who do His will. Mother Teresa stated: "The saints are all the people who live according to the law God has given us." Those who neglect opportunities to attend church fail to grasp a central purpose of Christ's mission.

Earthly Church is a Pattern of the Heavenly

The earthly church is a pattern of the heavenly,[\[28\]](#) and the names of the faithful members of Christ's Church are recorded in the book of the sanctified.[\[29\]](#) Both wheat and tares are gathered together in the earthly church. Until the second coming of Christ, "there will be foolish virgins among the wise; and at that hour cometh an entire separation of the righteous and the wicked."[\[30\]](#) The Lord declared: "wo unto them who are cut off from my church, for the same are overcome of the world."[\[31\]](#) The earthly Church has power to seal on both earth and heaven.[\[32\]](#) The Lord declared: "everything that is in the world, whether it be ordained of men, by thrones, or principalities ... that are not by me or by my word ... shall be thrown down, and shall not remain after men are dead, neither in nor after the resurrection."[\[33\]](#) Faithful saints -- sanctified members of Christ's church -- shall judge the world,[\[34\]](#) and will dwell eternally with God and inherit all things.

[\[1\]](#) Lewis, C.S., Mere Christianity, Chapter 23: Making and Begetting.

[\[2\]](#) Lewis, C.S., Mere Christianity, Chapter 23: Making and Begetting.

[\[3\]](#) Sider, Ronald. The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience, p. 95, 97.

[\[4\]](#) op. cit., p. 62.

[\[5\]](#) As cited in Sider, Ronald, The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience, p. 92.

[\[6\]](#)[John 3:5](#)

[\[7\]](#)[D&C 22:2](#)

[\[8\]](#)[John 6:53-54](#)

[\[9\]](#)[3 Nephi 18:11](#)

[\[10\]](#)[3 Nephi 18:22](#)

[\[11\]](#)[Matthew 17:20](#)

[\[12\]](#)[Galatians 6:1-2](#)

[\[13\]](#)[D&C 58:48](#)

[\[14\]](#)[D&C 42:8](#)

[\[15\]](#)[John 15:20](#)

[\[16\]](#)[Mosiah 4:12](#)

[\[17\]](#)[D&C 104:59](#)

[\[18\]](#)[D&C 115:6](#)

[\[19\]](#)[D&C 10:55](#)

[\[20\]](#)[Matthew 16:17-18](#)

[\[21\]](#)[Moroni 7:29-32](#)

[\[22\]](#) Papias Of Hieropolis. "Fragments of Papias From The Exposition Of The Oracles Of The Lord." Chapter 1 verses 5-6, in "The Early Church Fathers and Other Works." Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1867.

[\[23\]](#)[Matthew 4:4](#)

[\[24\]](#)[Romans 3:1-2](#)

[\[25\]](#)[D&C 104:16](#)

[\[26\]](#)[Romans 12:5](#); [1 Corinthians 12:12, 27](#)

[\[27\]](#)[D&C 109:74](#)

[\[28\]](#)[D&C 76:50-70](#)

[\[29\]](#)[D&C 88:2](#)

[\[30\]](#)[D&C 63:54](#)

[\[31\]](#)[D&C 50:8](#)

[\[32\]](#)[D&C 128:8-10](#)

[\[33\]](#)[D&C 132:13](#)

[\[34\]](#)[1 Corinthians 6:2](#)