



**"I Don't Have to Go to Church to Be a Christian!"**

*We've all heard it: "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian." Many of us have even said it before. Perhaps we even believed it when we said it! But is it true?*

Let's ask this question: does a baseball player have to go to Camden Yards to be a Baltimore Oriole? You might think, "What a dumb question! How could a player who never shows up at the stadium be on the team?" If that's what you do think, I'm inclined to agree with you.

But wait! Not so fast. What gives you or me the right to decide what it takes to be an Oriole? It's not our team, is it? What if (humor me here!) Peter Angelos were to choose to make somebody a member of the team, pay him a salary, and call him an Oriole, even though the guy never got near the stadium? If Peter considered the man an Oriole, he would be a Oriole. Peter owns the team. He is the only man in Baltimore who has the right to say what an Oriole is. What Mr. Angelos says is what goes.

So what would Peter Angelos say about whether a player has to go to Oriole Park to be an Oriole? Well, I haven't asked him, so I can only guess. But I expect he'd agree with us that the whole idea of an Oriole who can't ever quite get downtown to the Yards is a truly ridiculous notion.

Well, then, who has the right to say what a Christian is? The Lord Jesus Christ. If he thinks I'm a Christian, I am; if he doesn't, I'm not. I can call myself a Christian as loudly as I like, and think whatever I please about going to church and being a Christian, but in the end it won't matter a lick. What Jesus calls me is what I am, period.

So how can we know what the Lord Jesus thinks about about being a Christian, about going to church, and about how or whether those two things are connected? The answer is almost offensively simple. The Bible is the Word of the Lord Jesus. What it teaches is what Jesus thinks, no matter who else thinks what else about the subject.

So do you have to go to church to be a Christian? Do you really want to know the answer to that question? Let's take a moment to look at what the Bible teaches.

### **There is no such thing as do-it-yourself Christianity.**

The word "Christian" only appears three times in the Bible. It means, simply, a follower of Christ. Well, if a Christian is a follower of Christ, then only a New Testament Christian (that is, a person who is committed to believing and living in accordance with what the New Testament teaches) can really be counted as a Christian at all. How can a man who's not at least sincerely trying to obey Jesus' Word be thought of as his follower?

Well, what would Jesus himself say on the subject? Thankfully, we don't have to wonder about it. Jesus asked, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46) In another place he said,

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.*

*On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

*"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." (Matthew 7:21-27)*

Only a faith that earnestly, consistently seeks to follow Jesus' commands is true, saving faith. In other words, only believers who take his commands seriously are true believers; the rest are make-believers. And his commands are found only in the teachings of the New Testament. I'll say it again: no matter what any of us thinks, the only Christianity that Jesus would consider to be real Christianity is New Testament Christianity.

### **New Testament Christians were committed church members.**

In the New Testament, new believers were immediately added to churches; in fact, the only public way to become a Christian was to be baptized into a church. *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. . . . And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41, 47)*

We all know that there are lots of people around today who call themselves Christians without being part of any church. The pollsters have a term for such people: "unchurched Christians." The problem is, you can't find an unchurched Christian anywhere in the New Testament! New Testament Christians were church members. If you read the Bible, you find that it always depicts believers — even backslidden ones — as active participants in a church. By New Testament standards, the term "unchurched Christian" is nonsense talk. And remember: it's the New Testament that tells us what real Christianity is — not anyone's personal ideas, and not the current opinion polls.

### **Do you have to go to church to be a Christian?**

Well, what do you think? Does a man have to go home to be a husband? Does a bird have to get in the water to be a duck? Does a pro baseball player have to go to Camden Yards to be an Oriole?

Be careful with these questions, now. Going to the stadium does not make a baseball player an Oriole; but real Orioles do go to the stadium. Getting in water does not make a bird a duck; but real ducks do get in the water. Going home does not make a man a husband; but real husbands do go home. Going to church can't make a man a Christian; but real Christians do go to church. That's just Bible truth. And it's just common sense.

### **So what is a real Christian?**

Let's say it again: going to church will never make you a Christian. You can only become a follower of Jesus by turning from your sin and entrusting yourself to him for forgiveness and a brand new life: *Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3)* A real Christian, quite simply, is someone who has turned, been converted, from a follower of himself to a follower of Jesus Christ. Have you been converted? Have you turned? If you have, Jesus says you're a Christian. Now he expects you to prove it by living a clearly changed — or turned — life. You'll struggle long with some things that need to change about your life: all Christians do. But the first, easiest, most basic, most obvious evidence of your conversion will be obeying the Lord by being baptized into a church — and then going on Sundays to worship your Lord with other believers.

### **Real churchmanship is very good for Christians.**

So why do Christians go to church? Obviously, because Jesus has made it that way. But why did he? Simply because church is good for us. It makes our lives better.

Churchmanship is being involved in and committed to one church over an extended period of time. Being a faithful church member is not something you learn all at once. In fact, there are some things that some of us will never do in church. God simply hasn't gifted us that way. And nobody needs to do or be what God hasn't called him to. Every Christian has a different part to play in his church. And every one has some part to play.

There are many blessings that Christians enjoy as a result of our involvement in church. We find friends. We find encouragement. We find challenges (because people can be challenging at times). We find people to help us live for God. We find people we can help along in their lives. When it all comes down, we find in church a community of brothers and sisters who can help each other be godly in the midst of the ungodly society into which we were born.

Yet real churchmanship recognizes that a church only has potential to be a godly community. If it is going to really be godly, then its members must be careful to choose faithfully to make it so. That individual sense of responsibility to the whole church and for the whole church is where we discover the real meat and marrow of what Jesus had in mind when he founded that first church so long ago.

### **Real churchmanship makes Jesus look like the treasure he is.**

This is far and away the most important reason for church involvement.

We "do church" because it's not supposed to be possible. How could sinners like us ever work and worship together with other sinners, and do it with such intimacy and intensity that we come to actually love one another almost as much as we love Jesus? For that matter, how could we really love Jesus that much? When that miracle happens, the world can see that Jesus is Lord, and that we are his disciples. . . that he is the greatest treasure of all, and the greatest treasure to us. . . that he is our holy Head, and we are his healthy Body. Where it doesn't happen, all we have left is a few dry words,

and the dead husks of an empty religion.

Those who settle for a merely human church experience, or who give up on church entirely, are selling themselves and their Lord short. Churchmanship is for our joy in his glory, and his glory in our joy.

### So why won't some folks go to church?

Some people have never really been able to see any point to church because they've never really been converted. How could church be interesting to someone who has never truly come to know God in Jesus Christ? If going to church is nothing but a bore and a bother to you, it might be because you're still unconverted. In other words, maybe you're not yet really a Christian. If not, turn from your sin and entrust yourself to the Savior right now. When you have, church will suddenly just make sense.

If you have been converted, you will want to go to church. You may struggle in learning churchmanship, but that's okay. Most Christians do. Every now and then, we'll even find a true believer who has never been committed to church life simply because he has never understood how necessary it is to authentic New Testament Christianity. But when we show him what the Bible teaches, he'll be in church soon enough. Real Christians aren't perfect, but they are converted. The reality of their conversion will prove itself as they press on through failures, shortcomings, and difficulties to enjoy the blessings that await them in real churchmanship.

You may have slipped out of the habit of going to church, without even noticing it. That's not okay (in fact it's sin); but the truth is that many Christians run into that snag a time or two. True believers — if they really are true — will eventually return to their repentance and come back to church. Until they do, they'll suffer from guilt (the Bible calls that conviction) and from God's fatherly discipline in their lives (chastening, to use the biblical word). But sooner or later, they'll be back in church. God will see to it.

Perhaps you don't come to church because you're just not physically able. God knows that, and knows that you'd be in your place among his people on his day, if you could. If you really can't be in church to be taught and encouraged and admonished with other believers, God will give you the grace you need to keep growing in Christ. Take the thief on the cross. He was physically incapable of proving how real his faith was — by churchgoing or any other normal means. But Jesus saw genuine faith in the man's heart, and heard it on his lips. So he promised to meet him in Paradise around sunset that day.

Many people have jobs that require them to work on Sundays. Sometimes that is unavoidable. God himself occasionally allows believers to face that circumstance, to teach us to be steady, strong, and thankful. But Sunday is still the Lord's Day. Real Christians who really understand the issues will strive — even sacrifice — to get out of job situations which require them to work every Sunday. In the meantime, they'll seek out other times and ways to worship with God's people.

Some people (usually men) refuse to come to church because they can't stand hearing a mere man tell them what to believe and how to live. I stayed out of church for two years for precisely that reason. Because I really had been converted to Christ several years earlier, my Heavenly Father disciplined me for my pridefulness. He had to hurt me to do it, but he got me back in church. When he did, I found that my pastor's problems and imperfections only helped show the glory of the God he preached. And I found my own need to grow in Christ was plainly, painfully, profitably highlighted by the fact that my pastor was still growing, too. Christians need imperfect pastors precisely because they're imperfect. So go to church. If the man behind the pulpit is saying what the Bible says, Jesus will expect you to believe and obey. (*Hebrews 13:7, 17*)

You may be staying away from church because you're mad at someone there. But beware of that: it's a warning sign that there are serious spiritual problems in your life. Jesus said his followers really have no choice about whether they'll reconcile with another believer with whom they've had a falling-out. If you've offended someone in the church, it's your responsibility to go to him and try to be reconciled (*Matthew 5:24-25*). If you're the one who's been offended, it's still your responsibility to go, and try to iron things out (*Matthew 18:15*). Jesus gets us going and coming, to force us to deal with problems we're having with people at church. To run from problems at church is the exact opposite of what real Christians normally do. If that's what you're doing by staying away from church, take heed. Jesus' words still ring hauntingly in the hearts of those who claim to know him: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?"

And then, there are always those who claim that they don't go to church because there are too many hypocrites there. Of course there are. And there are also some real believers there. The fact that there are fake Christians only proves that real Christians have something precious: people only counterfeit something that's worth having. Stop making excuses and get in church. If you're hiding behind a hypocrite, just remember that you can only hide behind something that's bigger than you.

**"This guy isn't very loving."**

I understand why you would say that. After all, our society has hoodwinked us into thinking that hard words must necessarily be unloving words. But I do love people — especially people who are not in church very often. The Lord Jesus thinks I do, anyway: *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. (1 John 5:2)* God says you can know that I love people — especially other Christians — when you see that loving him and doing what he says are all-important to me. You see, I've been down the "unchurched Christian" road myself. It's a dark, dangerous dead end. Please don't go that way.

**Real Christians go to church.**

And when they get there, they don't just sit. Rather, they busy themselves learning and sharing and worshipping and praying: *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42)* In other words, they're not just in attendance at church. They're giving attention to church. They're being taught by the pastor's sermon. They're sharing their hearts with each other in Sunday School. They're celebrating God's grace in the singing and the Lord's Supper. And they're praying earnestly with and for each other.

Watch some real Christians sometime. You'll see that they're growing more like Jesus — in church. They're learning God's truth — in church. They're enjoying other believers — in church. They're pursuing the pleasures of knowing and serving God — in church. They're finding joy in God's glory — in church. Christians just do that. Do you?

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Scripture quotations are taken from the *English Standard Version* of the Bible.

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