
“Why I Bother With Church”

Hebrews 10:19-25

New Beginnings – 101 – *“My Church”*

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Northway Christian Church – Dallas, Texas

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“Kellee Horn was raised in the Roman Catholic Church but she never imagined that she’d ever become a none. No, not ‘nun’ - ‘n-u-n.’ But ‘none’ – ‘n-o-n-e,’ as in ‘none of the above’” (Lattin). You see, Kellee is just one of a growing number of people in the United States today who when asked, choose to identify themselves as being *“spiritual but not religious.”* In fact, in a recent USA Today/Gallup Poll, exactly 1/3 of those surveyed chose to describe themselves as being *“spiritual but not religious.”*

“Spiritual” means that these people have acknowledged their deep yearning for transcendence; their longing for that something more; their search for that something *“other.”* This is the awareness that there is more to our reality as human beings than just what we can see, touch, taste, hear and smell. *“But not religious”* means that these very same people with all of their spiritual longings are going to avoid organized religion like the plague. They are desperately *“looking for spiritual nourishment,”* they’re just not looking for it here (Blankenhorn). And the question is *“why?”* Why are these people who say that they are so interested in spirituality so suspicious and even skeptical of the church?

Well, I remember an advertisement that used to appear in lots of magazines for a leadership seminar (Schuller). At the top of that ad, in big, bold letters were printed just five words: *“Boring, Money-Hungry, Unfriendly, Inadequate, and Irrelevant.”* And then in much smaller print, that ad continued with the question, *“Would you believe that these words are used to describe your church?”* Well, they are.

According to all the surveys taken among the people who aren’t here this morning, church is the problem. They fail to see how what we say has much to do with where they live. They say that our emphasis is on money and not people. They don’t experience us as being very open and welcoming to them. They find our facilities to be big and imposing, cold and institutional. And they aren’t convinced that we really care very much about their deepest needs. They just don’t *“get”* church.

Growing up as a Christian, I was told right from the beginning of my spiritual life that if *“God was my Father then the church was going to have to be my mother”* (St. Cyprian). And I bought this idea. To my way of thinking God

and church, spirituality and religion just went together like salt and pepper, bread and butter. They were a twin set, a matched pair. But this isn't obvious anymore.

Increasing numbers of people are waking up spiritually without the benefit of contact with any kind of organized religion. They're reading books, talking to friends, listening to music, and taking classes at colleges and universities. They're pursuing their spiritual interests in largely private and informal sorts of ways. And they often see the church as something that gets in the way of their spiritual journey rather than as something that actually helps to support and encourage it. And if we're honest with ourselves then we'll have to admit that there's some truth in this criticism.

In his spiritual autobiography, the great Methodist missionary to India E. Stanley Jones said that the first time he went forward at church seeking the Kingdom of God, a relationship with Jesus Christ and the assurance of life both abundant and eternal, that what he was offered instead was church membership. And the Southern Baptist author and preacher Calvin Miller says that too often he's seen people come to church because they're spiritually starving and all they're given is a chance to chair a committee or to play second base on the church league softball team.

In her helpful little book Finding a Spiritual Community, Peg Thompson named as one of her primary guiding principles for spiritual seekers that whatever community they choose, it "*should allow them to open spiritually*" (23). And that's the issue in a nutshell if you ask me. All those "*spiritual but not religious*" people fear that the church is going to shut down the spiritual impulse that they feel deep inside themselves rather than nurture it.

Now, this has not been my experience, and because you're here this morning, I'm assuming that it's not been yours either. Instead of hindering my spiritual growth I've actually found the church to be my best partner in the process: pushing me when I've needed pushing; protecting me when I've needed protecting; correcting me when I've needed correcting; and comforting me when I've needed comforting. Instead of becoming a substitute for spirituality, I've found the church to be the best way for me to explore and express my spirituality. For me it's "*spiritual and religious*" not "*spiritual but not religious.*" But I also know that for many people this just isn't obvious. And what this means is that increasingly we are going to have to start making a case for the church.

Those of us who are here need to start thinking carefully about how that happened and why we stay, so that when we find ourselves in conversation with someone who is "*spiritual but not religious*" we can tell them why we personally choose to be "*spiritual and religious.*" The old arguments of habit and duty are not going to motivate anyone to come around to see what we might have to offer them spiritually as a church. One of the great challenges that we will increasingly face as a community of faith is the spiritual justification of our continuing existence. Why should someone bother with the church? And as I have been thinking about this question in recent weeks, I've come up with five big reasons why I choose to bother with the church.

- ***First of all, I bother with the church because it's Christ's idea.*** It was on the road to Caesarea Philippi that Jesus said *"I will build my church"* (Matthew 16:18). Dom Helder Camara, the late Roman Catholic Archbishop of Recife, Brazil, used to say that the church is a Divine institution placed in the hands of frail men and women. Because we experience the human frailty of the church all too frequently and painfully, we sometimes forget the church's Divine origin. And so the very first reason why I bother with the church is because I bother with Christ, and Christ bothers with the church. In fact, Jesus Christ specifically promises to show up in His church.
- ***And this is the second reason why I bother with the church: It's where I consistently find Christ.*** As you know, the Bible bears eloquent witness to God's extensive presence in creation: the way that we can find Him always and everywhere (Psalm 139). But the Bible also bears important witness to God's intensive presence in Jesus Christ: the way that He promises to especially show up at specific times and in specific places. And the most important of these promises is the one that Christ made about being in the midst of the two or three gathered in His name (Matthew 18:20). I bother with the church because it is here that Jesus Christ meets me, and that encounter always comes around sooner or later to the same three things: His death, burial and resurrection.
- ***And so I bother with the church because it keeps the Gospel of Jesus Christ central.*** This church breaks bread and blesses a cup every Sunday because Christ's body was broken and his blood was shed on Calvary's cross. This Church baptizes by immersion because Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and then raised on the third day. And this church assembles on Sunday mornings because every Sunday morning is a little commemoration of Easter. In the things that this church characteristically does, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is kept preeminent, and in that Gospel there is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16).
- ***And so I bother with the church because it keeps me firmly rooted and grounded in that experience of my salvation in Jesus Christ by faith.*** The only time the New Testament ever comes close to telling Christians to go to church is in that text from Hebrews chapter 10 that we heard read as our Scripture lesson this morning. The book of Hebrews was written to a group of struggling Christians who were on the verge of giving up their commitment to Jesus Christ. And the author of Hebrews understood that if he could just keep those wavering Christians together that the odds of them remaining faithful increased substantially. And so he compared them to a band of straggling pilgrims trudging through a barren wasteland. *"Stay together,"* he exhorted them, *"support each other. Lift those with drooping hands, strengthen those with weak knees, clear the path ahead so that no one stumbles, pick up and carry the lame, see to it that you all arrive home together"* (paraphrase of Hebrews 12:13-15). Someone has seen this same pattern in nature. They

say that geese fly in the “V” formation because as each bird flaps its wings it creates an updraft for the bird right behind it. The trip is made easier by flying in this formation together, each bird taking advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front of it (Thompson 1). It’s a parable of community. My journey of faith is helped along because I’m on it with you. There are times you carry me, just as there are times when I carry you. And together we are asked by God to help Him carry the world.

- ***And this is the fifth reason why I bother with the church: It’s forever forcing me to get outside of myself and into the world.*** In our Scripture lesson this morning we were told that one of the things that happens in the community of the faithful is that we “*stir-up*” or “*prod*” one another “*to love and good works*” (10:24). And this is my experience as a “*spiritual and religious*” person. I’m never allowed to settle for warm feelings of inner contentment for very long. I’m always being pushed to go deeper by responding to the cries of human hurt and hope in the world around me. The church never lets me forget that there’s more to spirituality than just me - my needs; my experiences; my insights; my feelings.

So there you have it. In a day when it’s becoming increasingly popular to declare yourself to be “*spiritual but not religious,*” I’m going to buck the trend by declaring myself to be “*spiritual and religious,*” and by urging you to do the same thing. One of my most respected teachers along the way once put it like this: “*Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian. But Christian commitment is close to meaningless if you do not go.... Your regular participation in the life of the church is the best indication that you have grasped the heart of the Christian message*” (Hubbard 144). So, I’ll see you in church.

Sources

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