



Why Should I Go to Church?

by Tara Mulder

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Introduction

I sat tense and uncomfortable in my mother-in-law's kitchen, enduring yet another lecture on church. A tiny woman, but imposing nonetheless, Clarice was relentless on this particular subject, especially since we'd moved back home. An innocent comment from my daughter about the Easter bunny landed me in the hot seat today. I tried to tune out her tirade on God and family values, but then she leaned across the kitchen table and squeezed my hand firmly.

"Felicia, you and Thomas haven't been to church since that child's christening more than six years ago. You are ignoring this important part of your life, and ignoring your duty to teach your daughter the faith of her family. Why don't you go to church?"

I was prepared to give the standard excuses once again—too busy, need more family time, etc., but as I met her intent gaze, I thought, why not be honest this time? I squared my shoulders, looked her right in the eye, and said, "Mama, why *should* I go to church?"

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"Why should I go to church?" is a question more and more people are asking. Long gone is the blind acceptance that Sunday morning means dressing your best and going to the neighborhood Christian church just because that's what is expected. People are making other choices now, more personal choices based on the kind of life they want to live. People are still very spiritual, but they're feeling like there's more than one way to peel the spiritual onion, so to speak. Each person is defining what faith is, the sacred, the relevant, and what makes a contribution to the world, according to his or her own values.

For some, those choices involve anything *but* church, anything but that religion called Christianity. The very word "religion," or the sight of a church steeple conjures up memories of "money-hungry hypocrites." And like going to a restaurant with bad food or service, they intend never to return, while telling 11 of their friends never to go either.

How about you? What images come to mind when you think of “church”? Have you given up on church, or are you ready to try it again? Maybe you’re new to the idea of church altogether. You might be asking, “What’s all the fuss about a building people only use once a week?” Are you even wondering who or what God is?

When you hear people sing, “God Bless America” or “God Save the Queen,” do you wonder what they mean? In any case, I’m glad you’re reading this. I appreciate the opportunity to explore these questions with you.

This booklet is not something you have to read from cover to cover. Take a look at what’s inside and read what appeals to you. You will find stories of people asking questions and finding answers. You’ll find straightforward descriptions of God, what Christians believe, and the church experience. I hope you’ll find something that speaks to you.

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Felicia

Felicia was angry at the church for making her feel guilty about money and for not providing her real assistance when she needed it most. Let’s go back to that tense moment in her mother-in-law’s kitchen.

“Mama, why *should* I go to church?” The words seemed to hang in the air.

Mama’s eyes widened with surprise, and then darkened with sadness. “Doesn’t your faith mean anything to you anymore?” she pleaded.

“Faith isn’t the question here. I know what I believe. I feel close to God, I pray. The real question is does church mean anything to my life?” Before she had a chance to protest, I continued, “Remember how Thomas and I were struggling with money when we first got married?”

Clarice nodded. The understanding in her eyes helped me go on.

“We wanted to wait until we were financially stable to have a baby, but I got pregnant before we expected. Being hundreds of miles away from you and other family made it even more difficult. And we so much wanted to be successful. I was stressed out, and we fought all the time. So I went to the pastor for some guidance and all he said was, ‘Keep praying. God always has a plan.’ What a crock! I wanted real advice, real help, and he just brushed me off!

“And then there was the pressure to give money! Thomas and I felt so guilty—guilty and selfish if we didn’t give at church, and guilty about our budget when we did. After a while we didn’t feel guilty anymore. We were just angry, especially when our finances didn’t improve, and I had to go back to work full time, only six weeks after

the baby was born. That broke my heart, and the church couldn't have cared less. So we stopped going. And we didn't seem to be any worse off."

I bent my head and rubbed my temples, hoping to prevent the tension headache I could feel coming on. Clarice slid into the chair next to me and put her arm around my shoulders. "Oh, honey, I *do* remember the struggles you and Thomas had, but I didn't realize that's how you felt about church. And here I've been making it worse all these years, trying to get you to go back."

I turned to her, so relieved she understood, and she took my hands in hers. "Felicia, forgive this old woman for misjudging you. And I'm sorry the church let you down."

"Thanks," I smiled.

"That money thing in church is a real sore spot for a lot of people," she continued, "but for me it's a thank-you for all God has given me. He doesn't need it, but I see how the money is used to help others. It's too bad it comes off the wrong way sometimes."

"Sometimes!" My objections surfaced once again. "Nice words, Mama, but I'm not so sure. The church was all about what we had to do, what we had to give. What about their responsibility to help others? I asked for help and got nothing."

"I'm sorry, honey. I'm not sure why that happened at that church. I wish I'd known what you were going through. Maybe I could've been more help."

I felt reassured, but not convinced. "But, Mama, why do *you* go to church?"

She smiled and gave my shoulders a squeeze. "I've found real help and real hope at church, something that gives me joy like nothing else. And I won't be quiet about it. But I will not pester you on this subject anymore. You and Thomas will know when and if you're ready to give church a second chance."

That was almost a year ago, and the brief conversation went a long way. Thomas and I were better off financially and decided to look for a religious school for our daughter, to provide the same kind of upbringing we had.

Whatever my feelings about the church were now, I did have a good childhood and a good education in a Christian school, and I figured our daughter deserved the same. We read brochures, talked to friends, even visited a few. Finally, we selected one with a good reputation that was close to where I worked. Tiffany loves it, and as she makes friends with classmates, Thomas and I are making new friends with other parents. Some of them also attend the church affiliated with the school ... and seem happy about it!

I asked one friend if they talked about money all the time. "No," she chuckled, "but I know what you mean. We do talk about money sometimes. It's a part of life, so it's part of church. But that's not what it's all about. I go because I want to be there, and know that all of me is valued, not just my money." She hesitated, sensing I still wasn't convinced. "You know, when I give a portion of my money to the church, it's from my heart. And if I don't give anything once in a while, neither God nor people in the church will kick me out!" I had to laugh at that.

"The church actually helps me out a little too," she continued, "and as a single mom, I need all the help I can get. Did you know next Friday there will be free baby-sitting at church from 5 to 9 p.m.? Yes, really," she said, when I looked amazed. "Now you have no excuse not to go to a movie with me!"

If we keep hearing good things like this about the church, we might actually give it a try sometime. Even if it *does* make my mother-in-law happy!

Amanda

Amanda didn't want anything to do with the church or Jesus because of a very real mistrust of pastors. Discover the reason for her mistrust, and what this pastor had to say.

When traveling by plane, many people like to bury their nose in a book or attempt to get some sleep. I enjoy talking to people, when they're willing, and look forward to learning about someone new each time I fly. I should tell you ... I'm a pastor and often wear that funny black shirt with the white square on the collar when I travel. This makes some people more comfortable, and others ... not so much.

For one particular young woman on a recent flight home, I suspected my clerical collar was a source of discomfort. Or maybe she was simply not in the mood to talk. She stowed her carry-on and took the aisle seat next to my window seat with hardly a glance in my direction. My initial attempts at conversation were met with stiff, monosyllabic answers. I gathered she was flying on business and Seattle was home for her too, but I learned nothing else before she slipped the headphones onto her ears and closed her eyes.

So I pulled out my spy novel and resigned myself to a few hours reading. I did say a quick prayer, however, that if there were something God wanted me to say to her, He would give me the words.

Quite a few pages and plot points later, we were roused from our singular pursuits by the beverage cart. After the flight attendant efficiently filled our orders, the woman commented on the novel I was reading. "I didn't think ministers read books like that ... at least not in public."

I chuckled. "I do like a good mystery, and this author is pretty clean. But I also think if I wouldn't read a book in public, I probably shouldn't be reading it at all."

Her eyes narrowed. "Lots of people do things in secret they would never do in public. Even ministers." She gave me a sharp glance and turned away.

"Yes, these collars don't make anyone immune to temptations or failures," I said slowly. "I take it you've known a minister or two?"

"Sure, I have. Not in church, you know. Our family never went to church. But we had a next-door neighbor for a while that was a minister." She tossed out the word "minister" with a decided sneer.

"Whoa, what'd this guy do?"

She paused, measuring me with her eyes. "He beat his wife."

My turn to pause. "That must have been awful," I sighed.

"Awful? Awful?" She whipped her body towards me with anger and pain filling her eyes. "Our houses were close enough that we could hear it," she hissed. Tears threatened to spill down her cheeks. "The yelling, the crying, the crash of dishes and furniture. And Susan begging. 'Please don't, honey. I'm so sorry, honey.' It made me physically sick." Gathering herself with a deep breath, she continued while I sat shell-shocked. "He was all sunshine and smiles outside the house. Everyone loved Pastor Joe. But we knew different. Sometimes their kids, Kevin and Robbie, would run over to our house when it was happening. They wouldn't talk about it.

“My parents tried to help. Mom would invite Susan for coffee, talk to her about her options. She even took her to the hospital once when she needed stitches. But Susan refused to think about leaving. My dad called the cops, but she would never press charges. ‘If you could only see him at church,’ she would say. ‘He’s such a good pastor. You’d never believe he could hurt anyone. I know if I just try harder, I can keep him from losing his temper.’ God, she was so pathetic!”

“It’s hard to understand. I’ve talked to abused women before and heard similar statements,” I commiserated. “It sounds like your parents did more than most people in that situation.”

A ghost of a smile appeared. The first one since she boarded the plane. “My parents are awesome. They taught my sister and me good values. They have honor, integrity and, most of all, kindness—which is a lot more than I can say for Pastor Joe!” Again, the sneer. “They taught us that there’s some kind of God-creator—*whatever*, but that we can’t put labels on it like Christian or Muslim. It just is. Dad used to say that Christianity is like *The Emperor’s New Clothes*—there’s nothing there, but they’re all afraid to say they don’t see it. I don’t know about that, but I do think kindness matters most. I don’t need to believe in anything extraordinary to understand that.”

“What happened with that family?” I asked.

“They moved. They’re out in the country somewhere—no one to call the cops, I suppose. He even remained pastor at the same church. You know, that’s what gets me the most.

My parents made sure my sister and I knew right from wrong, and to have the courage to do something about it. How could that church do nothing?” Her tears turned bitter once more. “They saw the evidence all over her face! He must have been a good preacher because he sure was a good liar. Were they all deluding themselves? And if they could delude themselves about what was right in front of them, couldn’t they also be deluding themselves about the whole *Jesus* thing?”

“I can see why you would think that,” I affirmed. “Have you met any other pastors or priests?”

“No. Just the sight of that collar makes me queasy.” She looked suspiciously at mine. “I always wonder what *their* secret is.”

“Ask me what mine is,” I challenged.

“What?” She scowled. “Are you kidding? This isn’t a joke.”

“I’m completely serious. What’s your name?” I gently pressed.

“Amanda,” she offered reluctantly.

“Amanda, I’m Ken. Ask me what my secret is.”

Still looking at me like I was a lunatic, she ventured, “Okay, Ken. What’s your secret?”

“I’m glad you asked. I’m not perfect. I would sooner cut off my own hand than hurt my wife, but I’m not perfect. I’m always doing what I wish I wouldn’t and not doing what I know I should. Do you ever feel like that?”

“Yeah.” She looked downcast. “Then I just have to try harder.”

I heard a longing for perfection in her voice. “Well, my secret is that I know I can never try hard enough. I will never be honorable enough or kind enough, no matter how hard I try.” Amanda’s eyes were as round as saucers. “My secret gets even worse, but God loves me anyway.”

Still suspicious, she retorted, “How do you know that?”

I smiled, so happy to tell her what I think God wanted her to hear that day. “Pastor Joe may have fooled others, but he didn’t fool God. I can’t fool God either. No one can. He made us, knows everything about us, inside and out. Men beating their wives, people lying, stealing, all that selfishness ... He knows, and it grieves Him. It really hurts Him, and separates us from Him. So God did something about it. He sent His only Son to take upon Himself everything that’s wrong. This gives us a way back to Him, a new life, a completely free gift. I believe that Jesus is my Savior, perfect in love when I could never be. The Creator-being your parents talked about—I have a personal relationship with Him.”

“Because you’re a pastor?”

“Not at all. What God did is for everyone. Part of the reason I wear this collar is to tell as many people as I can about God’s love. It’s a secret worth telling.”

“You make it sound so easy. How can I believe you?”

“Don’t take my word for it. Take God’s word.” I reached down into my bag, grabbed a paperback Bible, and placed one of my cards where the Gospel of John begins. “The truth is here. I’d bet my life on it.”

Amanda was skeptical, but she took it. “I guess there’s no risk in reading a little.”

“None at all. Keep it. You may even find where God tells husbands how to love their wives. Pastor Joe certainly had no excuse from God to treat his wife the way he did.”

“Really?”

“Really. Thanks for listening to me.”

“I suppose some of you guys in the funny collars aren’t all bad. Thanks.”

Later as we prepared to exit, Amanda put the Bible into her bag. As we said warm goodbyes, I said a prayer in my heart for Amanda, knowing God would be with her.

I didn’t expect to see her again, but a couple of months later Amanda e-mailed me with some questions about the Bible. I was thrilled!

“Fire Away!” I wrote, and fire Amanda did. We kept up a lively discussion by e-mail for some weeks. I was very glad she wasn’t afraid to challenge and question. She seemed frustrated at times, but she never gave up. Then I took a chance and invited her to a class at my church for people inquiring about the faith. I wanted her to see she wasn’t alone.

Amanda liked the class and seemed eager to learn more about this God who loved her before she even knew Him. She even gave a worship service a chance. It’s always fun for me to see the church through a newcomer’s eyes. I spend so much time here it feels like a second home, and I take things for granted. I watched Amanda’s wonder over

the stained glass windows and other parts of the sanctuary. I also saw her natural consternation over following what was happening; fortunately, the woman next to her offered to help.

And she made friends. Some members were able to help Amanda understand certain things even better than I! That kind of fellowship and nurturing is an important part of church. It's why we don't give up meeting together.

And eventually she came to me holding up a familiar and well used paperback Bible, saying, "Pastor Ken, this is the truth. Jesus is the Savior. He's *my* Savior!" Her face beamed; I couldn't say a word. Tears formed in my eyes, and I held her hand.

She was nervous about her parents' reaction, remembering her father's ridicule of Christianity and her mother's insistence on just being a loving person. Would they be angry or try to talk Amanda out of her newfound faith? Would they come to her baptism?

Her parent's were a little skeptical, but they did indeed come. It was a great celebration—a powerful reminder for everyone gathered that day about the new life, the rebirth, we have with Jesus. I was deeply moved when she came forward to take Holy Communion. After all, along with God's Word, Baptism and Holy Communion are ways God reveals Himself to us. I could see that Amanda had a personal relationship with Jesus that was growing stronger every day.

That was three years ago. I see Amanda most Sundays at church, and she's thinking about teaching a Bible class. "Because I have a secret worth telling!" she declares.

Lawrence

Lawrence is a college student content to keep his faith to himself. Going to church was totally unnecessary ... until he met Trish.

"Ah, come on, girl. I want you to come see me play." I gave her look and a smile that usually had girls eating out of the palm of my hand. Well, at least it always won my grandma over. "These are the play-offs," I urged. Trish, however, was not as easy as grandma.

"Lawrence, you know I love to watch you play basketball!" She leaned closer to me on the bleachers. "I came to your practice tonight, didn't I? I've just got church that night."

"Got church?" I grimaced. "What does that mean? I got milk, I got game; I even got 'saved' when I was a kid—but what do you mean 'got church'? And on a Wednesday night?"

Big mistake. Trish raised her eyebrows and cocked her head in that way I was getting to know all too well. We were about to have a scene right here in the gym; and I was glad not too many guys were out of the locker room yet.

"You stop right there!" she said. "I don't explain myself to you. If I want to go to church, I go to church. If I want to go to a basketball game, I go. If you want to be with me, you better just leave that attitude at home. Church and my faith are very important to me."

"Baby, I'm sorry. I know they're important to you, Trish, but I want to be important, too. This is a big game," I said, hoping I still had a chance. "If we lose, the season's over."

"And if you win, I'll be at the championship game. But this Wednesday I'm going to church." She wouldn't budge. "Wouldn't hurt you to come with me sometime," she challenged.

“Hey, I got Jesus. I just don’t need to go sing and all that stuff with old people, acting like the rest of the world doesn’t matter. They don’t know me; they don’t know what I have to deal with.” I shoved the gym door open, waiting for another argument, as we walked out toward the parking lot.

“You’re right,” she said simply.

“I’m right? Then why do you go?” There was a lot more to this girl than others I’d been with before.

“Lawrence, why do you come to my dorm to see me?”

I swallowed hard. My cheeks turned hot. Where was this conversation going? “You know, girl ... I like you. I want to be around you.”

“I go to church because I love Jesus, and He loves me. I want to be there, with others who believe. They don’t always know me, relate to me or, I to them. But we’re getting to know each other, and we pray for each other. I want to learn about everything Jesus has done for me. This helps me be strong in my faith and all my decisions.”

“Well, you certainly are strong in your decisions!” I grumbled.

“I couldn’t be strong alone. My relationship with Jesus makes all the difference.” She stopped walking and took my hand. “Describing what church can be is hard to explain, but I would like it if you’d come with me sometime.”

I helped her into her car and leaned in, hoping for kiss. “I like you, Trish, I really do. I just don’t know about the whole church thing.”

“And you never will unless you go,” she shot back with a reply that hit me like a splash of cold water. There definitely was more to this girl than I expected. She’s got me thinking about church! Could there be more to church than I thought?

The Author’s Search

Okay, why do I go to church? Or do I? How do I answer the question of why *should* I go to church?

I grew up in a Christian home, but have not always been super keen on the whole church thing. I wasn’t always sure what was in it for me. There even came a time when I asked myself why I believed what I did. I didn’t want to be so naïve as to think that just because this was the only faith I knew, that it was the best way, the only way. If I had been born into a Buddhist family, wouldn’t I be just as sure that was the right spiritual path? How much of my faith was simply a reflection of what was important to my parents?

So I took a good look at what others believed, and didn’t believe. Reading, visiting places of worship, talking to people, I learned a great deal and made interesting friends. There were actually two questions at work for me here: why should I go to church? and why do I believe what I believe? How could I answer the first question without answering the second?

A college professor once told me that out of frustration comes growth. And frustrated I became. I examined beliefs on the origin of the universe, free will, life after death, and restoration of wrongs. Comparing and contrasting different faiths can leave one feeling completely adrift, as if all faiths are only myths that help people sleep at night, and the universe really is random.

Then I examined the teachers and founders of faiths. My mental tour of world religions gave me a fresh perspective and allowed me to discover something remarkable. Jesus is truly unique among religious figures. He's not just a nice guy, wise teacher, or prophet. He's not just an enlightened one. Actually, when you read His words as recorded in the Bible, He's either exactly what He said He was, or He's nuts. Reading His words in the Bible, I found neither a liar nor a lunatic. And reading the promises regarding Him in the Hebrew Bible written centuries earlier, I was overwhelmed at how beautifully the pieces fit together.

This Jesus sacrificed Himself *for* me, rather than demanding sacrifice *of* me. This Jesus has all power and knowledge, and yet loves me as a friend. This Jesus is not remote, but intimately connected with me. He completes me, showing me where I came from, giving me a purpose for my life, and showing me where I am going. He transforms me, giving me strength when I am weak and life united with Him when this earthly life is ended.

My certainty that this is the truth is not about evidence, although there is that. It's not about feelings, although I have those. It's not about simply helping me sleep at night, although I do have a confidence and hope that is beyond understanding. My relationship with Jesus, and it is that—an interactive relationship—is more than the sum of its parts. He has claimed me as His own. I know I couldn't believe in Him on my own; rather, I believe He came to me first. All I had to do was recognize Him, simply take His already outstretched hand.

Some of my friends call me a "Jesus freak." They say all roads lead to God; I say the road of Jesus leads to all people. There are fewer and fewer Christians in Western society all the time. I do feel in the 21st century that I am taking the road less traveled, but just like Robert Frost, I have to say that it has made all the difference. It has certainly made a difference in how I view and choose to be involved in the Christian church.

And involved I choose to be. Why? Because I can! When I go to church to worship, I can lay down my fears and failures and Jesus washes them away. I can be transformed, made new by His Spirit. I can join in singing and praying with others who, because of Jesus, are like my family. I walk out of church smiling and humming, ready to face another week ... because with Jesus, I can.

Meet Jesus—Meet Church

There's so much to tell you... where to begin? Steeples and preachers? Christmas and Easter? The church is first and foremost the people who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior—every single one of them, all over the globe. Second, the church is the gathering and the sending of those people. They gather in common faith to worship and grow spiritually mature. Those people then go out into the world to share the love of Jesus in relevant ways.

To further define church, I'd like to share with you the words of another believer in Jesus Christ, addressing the same topic, Eldon Weisheit. The section that follows are his insights from more than 30 years ago. These are insights, which, in light of what God reveals of Himself in the Bible, still ring true.

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The New Testament (the part of the Bible that starts with the birth of Jesus around 3-4 B.C.) often calls the church the body of Christ. You can read about how that works in Romans chapter 12, verses 3 to 8:

“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”

What are the implications of saying that the church is the body of Christ? To answer that question, we have to go over a few of the things we know about Christ. That way we can be sure we’re both starting from the same place. And after all, it’s His body we’re talking about.

The first chapter of the Gospel of John says Christ existed even before the beginning of the world. That means He’s God. But Christ also became a human being. The Christmas story tells how that happened (that’s in the first couple chapters of Luke’s Gospel). Jesus was still God, you see, but now He was also something else, a human being who could share in the lives of other human beings, experience what they experience.

Because Jesus was now a human, He could be tempted to sin in the same way you and I are tempted (Hebrews 4:15). But because He also was God, He could resist the temptations successfully where we usually give in to them. Because He was human, He could suffer physically and emotionally and finally die, but because He was God, His suffering and death were accepted by His Father as a substitute for the punishment we, ourselves, deserved. And because Jesus died in our place and came alive again means people who believe in Him are going to be raised from the dead and are going to live forever with Him in heaven.

You see, believing in Jesus Christ is more than simply saying some facts about Him are true. It means we accept as true our involvement in those facts. Now, with that in mind, we can go on to what we started talking about, how the church can be called the body of Christ.

When Jesus was living on earth, God was physically present with His people. They could see Him and touch Him. He spoke their language so they could learn from Him. He healed the sick and fed the hungry. He said, “I forgive you your sins.” He loved them.

But after Jesus died, rose again, and went back to His Father in heaven, most people assumed those things would never happen again.

It was nice to have God around for a while, present in the flesh, but now that Jesus was gone, well, it would be back to normal for everyone. They were on their own again. But Jesus lived, died, and rose again for all people of all times and in all places, not just for a few hundred lucky ones in that corner of the world who got to see and hear Him. His life wasn’t limited to the 30 or so years He spent on this earth. When God gives me the gift of faith in Jesus, I become His child, and Jesus comes to live in me! What are the implications of that? Well, in addition to the fact that I will now live forever in God’s loving presence, it means that the hands that healed the sick or fed the hungry, the tongue that spoke words of comfort to people who were grieving, the feet that went out of their way to be there when somebody needed a clear expression of God’s love—that body of Christ is still around. And not just in a mysterious spiritual sense.

You see, we who believe in Christ *are* His body. Christ still loves all people through us; He still shares the Good News of God’s love and what He has done to save us; He still heals; He still feeds; He still forgives. Christ is

present in your home as you read this booklet, and He's present in mine as I write it. He's in the hospitals where Christians minister to the sick. He's in the inner city, among the poverty-stricken, the homeless, the battlefields, the courtrooms, the classrooms—wherever His people try to help others.

When You Are With Christ, You Are Not Alone

Some religions put a premium on being alone with their God. Their high example of the religious person is the one who isolates him or herself from others and concentrates only on divine things in private. But, Christianity calls us to life in a community. Jesus says, *"Where two or three come together in My Name, there am I with them"* (Matthew 18:20).

That doesn't mean you're always in a crowd. Some experiences are very private, just you and God. That can happen when you pray, for example. But being together with other members of the body of Christ can actually be a learning experience, a chance to better understand the great gifts Jesus gives you as an individual. He forgives you, and that's very personal. But He gives you so much forgiveness that now you can share it with others. Besides, you gain a greater understanding of your own forgiveness when you see that others have a need to be forgiven too.

He also gives you love, a personal love direct from God to you. And one of the ways to love Him back is to love all the others whom He loves. So if you want to help Him, help another person.

If you want to visit Him, go see someone who is sick or in the hospital. Remember, Jesus came to save you, but He also came to save everyone like you. And that's a pretty large crowd.

Nourishing the Parts of the Body

Being a part of the body of Christ means you receive what Christ has to give. One thing He gives a lot of is words—instructions, advice, some warnings, promises—lots of words. In fact, John often calls Christ the Word because God speaks to us through Him. Do you want to know what God's thinking and what He has to say? Listen to Him in the Bible. I know, you can read the Bible by yourself. But the words in that book will lead you to Christ, and Christ leads you to people. Once again, you're not really alone.

The Bible can be more easily understood if you hear it and talk over its message with other Christians. People learn from each other, as they share their own understanding of God's love. Finally, when you hear what Christ asks you to do, you know you can't do it by yourself. But when you hear Him talking to an entire body with many hands, many legs and hearts, you know you and other people together can get the job done.

Differences That Don't Matter

You can't know all the others who are in the body of Christ with you right now. Of those you do know, you may not appreciate or even like some of them. That's why Jesus is the head, and we are the body.

But if the differences concern you, you might like to read Chapter 12 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul begins by reminding us about our human bodies. He says your body has many different parts. Some parts have the same job: your left ear has the same job as the right. But some parts of your body serve in ways greatly different than others. Your nose can't do the job of the stomach. Nor can the stomach do the nose's job. The human body needs all the parts and all the parts have to work together for the body to be healthy. None of the

parts could exist alone. Each one needs the others. And although each part is different from all other parts, the body still works. And that's the important thing.

One of the many advantages of seeing the church as the body of Christ is that Christians can be very different from each other and still be important parts of a single body. Groups of Christians can have different organizational structures. Some can worship in cathedrals, others in homes. They can use many different kinds of music, or none at all. They can be formal or informal, intellectual or "down home." Yet each group can be considered a part of the body of Christ as long as its members share a common faith in Him as Savior.

Differences That Matter

Maybe this is the place to talk a little bit about what the church is not. The church is not limited to any one organization or institution. It's your personal and active faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, not your membership in any group, that makes you part of the body of Christ. Although that faith unites you with other Christians who believe as you do, the body of Christ is always bigger than any single human institution.

Salvation, your relationship with God, is totally a gift from Him. Even your faith in Jesus Christ is a gift from God. So if any person says you must belong to a certain group in order to be saved, that person or group is changing a gift into something people have to earn. God has not given an exclusive franchise on salvation to any organization. So don't believe any group that claims it alone can offer salvation or attaches any requirements for you to be saved.

The church is also not a building or a particular form of worship service. We often call the place where we worship "church" and say we are "having church" when we worship. Using the word church in those ways is okay as long as everyone understands that the building isn't really church unless the people in it live together as the body of Christ. And the worship service is church only because the people who participate in it have gathered in His Name to receive from God the gifts they need to share in the life of service to which Christ called them. So no one group should feel it has to despise or look down on another group within the body of Christ because that group is different in some detail. So long as Christ is the head of that group, it is equal in importance to all other parts of the body. And individual Christians also have no right to look down on the institution of the church, either. The organized church is necessary.

If each Christian had to work separately, none of us would be able to do all the things that Christ has told His followers to do. We wouldn't have the resources as individuals to heal the sick, feed the hungry, comfort the bereaved and, in general, care for people in need. But together we can do all those things and a whole lot more.

The church is the place where imperfect people meet the perfect Savior.

There He gives us His perfection by forgiving us and sends us back into the world to bring more imperfect people back to the church to receive the same gift. (Previous section excerpted from *Do I Really Need a Church?* © 1980, Int'l Lutheran Laymen's League).

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I wonder what questions you might be asking now. Whether you agree, disagree, or aren't sure, I hope you'll want to give church a try. I can't promise what will happen, but I pray you, too, will meet Jesus there.

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