

Christian Without Religion?

Many viewers will know Jesus' words in Matthew 7:20, "...by their fruits you will know them." But what exactly did Jesus mean? And what kind of fruit will be seen in the life of a Christian? While some people make the mistake of denying baptism as essential for salvation, other people swing to the other extreme thinking all one needs to be saved is to be baptized and after that he can just "do his own thing" until death or the Lord's return.

Someone has said, "If Christianity was a crime and you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Now THAT is a thought provoking question!

Chuck Swindoll, in his book, *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*, tells about a church years ago in the Soviet Union that was forced to meet secretly because house church services were illegal. They gathered for worship on the Lord's Day as inconspicuous as possible. They came at different times, casually walking into the house until they had all arrived. Then they would close the doors, pull the curtains, & quietly worship the Lord.

But one Lord's Day, during their worship service, two soldiers broke into the room, and lined the Christians up against the wall at gunpoint. One shouted, "If you wish to renounce your faith in Jesus Christ, leave now!" Two or three quickly left, then another, and then two more. Again the soldier spoke, "This is your last chance. Either leave now and renounce your faith in Christ, or stay and suffer the consequences." Another left, and then another, bowing in shame as they left. A number stood their ground, children standing beside their parents, trembling, some even crying as their parents stood with their hands in the air, unsure if they would be gunned down or imprisoned.

After all who chose to flee had left, the other soldier closed the doors, looked back at those standing against the wall and said, "...We, too, are Christians." The two soldiers explained that some time earlier they had been sent to another house church to arrest Christians. In the process, they heard the gospel & came to Jesus. "But," they explained, "we have learned that unless people are willing to die for their faith, they cannot be fully trusted."

What would you do in such circumstances? Some professing Christians would rarely, if ever, be at risk under such conditions because they never assemble with the church and don't think there is a need to do so. Can one be a Christian without being religious? Put another way, does a Christian have to attend weekly church services to demonstrate faithfulness to Jesus? We will Let the Bible Speak on this question, after our song...

Religious trends fascinate me, but countless souls often weigh in the balance. Fads come and go, but some movements, though unbiblical, take hold. Many professing Christians rejoice over salvation yet yearn to shed the shackles of duty associated with regular church attendance. They prefer to emphasize Jesus as Savior over Jesus as Lord. Don't get it twisted. Scripture cannot be broken. Unless illness or injury leaves Christians homebound, the Holy Spirit teaches we are to assemble with a local congregation every Lord's day for true worship (Acts 20:7).

Sadly, a June 26, 2023 article on [gallup.com](https://www.gallup.com) by Jeffrey M. Jones reads,

In the four years before the pandemic, 2016 through 2019, an average of 34% of US adults said they had attended church, synagogue, mosque or temple in the past seven days. From 2020 to the

present, the average has been 30%...[R]ecent church attendance levels are about 10 percentage points lower than what Gallup measured in 2012 and most prior years.

https://news.gallup.com/poll/507692/church-attendance-lower-pre-pandemic.aspx?fbclid=IwAR3KUvqT1ENGj0vgSemDstnYJuZG9MerTQrq9JNPbRrf_yh67PEZh0nkerY

Consider, though, what Scripture teaches in Hebrews 10:23-25, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another...”

The takeaway: we demonstrate our steadfast faith (“hold fast the confession of our hope”), concern for the local flock (“let us consider one another”), and appreciation for Jesus’ sacrifice (1 Corinthians 11:23-29), by assembling weekly with a local congregation to “worship in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

If you have teen-age kids, you notice they expect you to pay rent and get the groceries, but aren't always enthusiastic about pulling their weight at home. Some so-called Christians, like teenagers, want all the Kingdom perks without all the Kingdom duties. Fritz Ridenour tapped into this sentiment in his 1967 book, *How To Be A Christian Without Being Religious*.

On page one he points to “religious freedom” as a cloak for superficial Christianity without the guilt. Ridenour writes, “Do you sometimes feel you have been trapped into playing a game called ‘church’? This book shows why ‘religion’ has failed and points to the way to be a Christian without being ‘religious.’” The back cover reads: “If you need freedom from religious rules and rituals, this book is for you. The Christian life is a rich relationship with God, not a religious treadmill...”

Religious freedom?! This term has morphed--flip-flopped, really. Multitudes fled--and continue to flee--persecution. To these devout believers, religious freedom means being free to carry out the commandments of God, including freedom to assemble to worship God in peace according to the dictates of one's conscience.

Ridenour, though, redefines religious freedom as freedom FROM religion. Although careful not to verbalize it, Ridenour implies one can be a Christian without church attendance if he has a personal relationship.

Personal relationship? Hmm. See, that term is the password many use to cancel out new covenant obligations. God doesn't accept special passwords.

Let me get back on track. Ridenour's book is a commentary based on the Living Bible paraphrase of the book of Romans. Some will be taken back to learn from Ridenour that Paul's first century epistle to the CHURCH at Rome is summed up, “How To Be A Christian Without Being Religious.” By its 2002 revised edition, five million copies were in circulation. The message: “You can enjoy the benefits of the blood of Christ, no strings attached. It cost the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit EVERYthing, but requires so little of you.” In May, 2014, Kelly Bean boldly wrote, *How to Be a Christian without Going to Church*.

When that book came out in 2014, three-fourths of Americans considered themselves Christians (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/159548/identify-christian.aspx>), but over half of Americans said “worshiping alone or with family is as good as going to church” (<http://www.lifewayresearch.com/2014/10/28/americans-believe-in-heaven-hell-and-a-little-bit-of-heresy/>).

These numbers reflect watered-down convictions of people who either don't know what the Bible says about the critical place of the church or don't care. Imagine a book by the title, “How to be a fisherman without going near water” or “How to be an auto mechanic without spending time in a garage.”

What if everyone accepted this idea of being a Christian without going to church? If no church, then what? How would this affect our communities? Would this be a positive or even neutral development?

“How to be a Christian without going to church” shows contempt for Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18, “I will build My church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.”

If one person could be a Christian without going to church, everyone could, and the visible bride of Christ would vanish (Ephesians 5); saints would no longer assemble (Hebrews 10:25); the “whole body” would no longer be “joined and knit together” nor would they be equipped “for the work of the ministry.” Instead, unchurched “Christians” would be “tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:11-16).

In the spiritual dystopia Ridenour imagines, Elders (pastors) would fade away for there would be no flocks to guide.

Jesus' letter to the seven Churches (Revelation 2 & 3) would look like a peculiar relic. There would be no Lord's Supper to memorialize Christ as He commanded (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Communion, after all, means sharing or joint participation.

1 Corinthians 10:17, “For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.”

If ever anyone had the right to skip “church” it was Jesus—the Son of God, the Word throughout eternity, and “God manifest in the flesh.” Everywhere he went he was doing good: praying, preaching, performing miracles, etc. His relationship with the Father surpassed all others and He was ushering in a new era. Why would Jesus need to attend “church” services?

Of course, Christ did not establish His church until Pentecost in Act 2 after His death. Yet over and over again we find Jesus in the synagogue – the Jewish equivalent of church. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia article on the “synagogue” by Paul Levertoff reads:

Synagogue... "gathering" (Acts 13:43), "gathering-place" (Luke 7:5), was the name applied to the Jewish place of worship in later Judaism in and outside of Palestine... The oldest Christian meetings and meeting-places were modeled on the pattern of the synagogues...

That the synagogue was, in the time of our Lord, one of the most important religious institutions of the Jews is clear from the fact that it was thought to have been instituted by Moses... [Jewish scholars reference]

Exodus 18:20, "And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do."

"...That such meetings were not uncommon is made probable by Ezekiel 14:1; 20:1...In Palestine the synagogues were scattered all over the country, all the larger towns having one or more (e.g. Nazareth)

Matthew 13:54; Capernaum, Matthew 12:9). In Jerusalem, in spite of the fact that the Temple was there, there were many synagogues... [Synagogue services included:]

- (1) the recitation of the shema`, ...Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21;. Numbers 15:37-41...
- (2) Prayers.
- (3) Reading of the Law and the Prophets.
- (4) The Sermon.
- (5) The Benediction."

By His presence at the synagogue, gatherings, or Old Testament version of church, Jesus upheld the importance of the assembly.

How does Jesus' example at the synagogue and the teaching of the New Testament square with the sentiment that one can be a Christian without being religious? It does not! Those who desire to imitate the church of the New Testament delight in assembling with the saints.

Traveling the Highway to Heaven requires active participation in the church Christ built; in fact, entire New Testament chapters (like 1 Corinthians 14) revolve around the central role of the church in the Christian's life.

The word of God teaches (1 Corinthians 12) that a Christians who desires to isolate himself from the church makes as much sense as separating hands, feet, eyes, and ears from the rest of one's physical body.

Moreover, the Holy Spirit teaches in Hebrews 10:23-25 that assembling with the local congregation on the Lord's Day is a sign of faithfulness to Christ.

Don't misunderstand. While neglecting the assembly is one way to exit off the highway to heaven, the devil tempts others to go to the opposite extreme. Some Christians attend every service thinking that is all that is required; they leave their Christianity in the building when they walk out the church doors.

Understand, Christianity is a 24/7 enterprise. Faithful church attendance gives no Christian the right to cheat on his spouse, speak evil of his brother, lie to his teacher, be hateful to his neighbor, or dishonor his parents. The Jews tried this under the old law and God expressed anger over it.

Amos 5:21-22, "I hate, I despise your feast days, And I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them..."

If we hope to stay on the Highway to Heaven we need to honor God in the worship assembly on the Lord's Day and honor him everywhere we go.

So why are so many disillusioned with the church; why don't people want to go to church?

A Gallup Poll (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/27124/just-why-americans-attend-church.aspx>) found the following to be the most common reasons people don't go to church:

#1) "I don't agree with their teachings." This is a lame excuse IF the teaching is biblical. Many resist what the Bible says about sexual boundaries or even the reality of sin and need for repentance at all. (One disinterested in hearing what God has to say, exposes any claim to a 'personal relationship' with Jesus.) Some tire of doctrinal teaching although the Spirit teaches in 2 John 9, "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God..."

We noticed earlier an aversion to rules from anyone, even God. The apostle Paul, however, teaches in 2 Timothy 2:5, "And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules." The point taken from the athletic arena is that the Lord expects us to live by the rules in the spiritual realm.

At the same time, the many churches whose teaching conflict with Scripture give their members good reason not to attend services. This problem, however, is not a good reason to give up church attendance altogether. Instead, one must actively seek the truth and assemble with the faithful church when he recognizes it.

#2) "I don't think it is necessary," is the second most common reason people do not attend church regularly. Ironically, many have learned this erroneous idea from what they have heard at church or from church-going people who are unaware of the clear Scriptures we have noticed.

#3 and #4) "I don't have time" and "I am lazy." Both of these groups have an issue with priorities. If this identifies your struggle, remember Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness...."

#5) Money! Many skip church because their experience makes it seem like it is all about money and keeping up with the building programs of other churches in town. I am surprised at how much some people put up with: special fundraisers, building drives, new programs—we need more, more, more. Collections are NOT ONLY taken at every service, but sometimes two and three collections at one service. These revolting high pressure tactics give Christianity a black eye.

Many preachers pound tithing in their preaching when technically tithing was an Old Testament, not New Testament command.

God expects Christians to be generous (and 10% is obviously a good guideline!), but the Spirit teaches giving is a personal matter between the individual and God. Furthermore, we should give out of personal desire, not because of unrelenting pressure. 2 Corinthians 9:7, "So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver." Who wouldn't run the other way from religious extortion?

In fact, an imbalanced emphasis on money is a clear sign a church is in error. 2 Peter 2:3, "And through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you..." Understand, not all churches place undue emphasis on money. Visit one of our congregations. We take up one collection

on the Lord's Day; that's it! No one is ever pressured to give more because you are not required to say how much you make or how much you give.

Although not specifically mentioned in this poll, some say they don't go to church because of hypocrites. Unfortunately, there are hypocrites even in the Lord's church; there were even in the first century. See Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. Interestingly, no Christian is reported leaving the church because of their hypocrisy. They let the Lord handle it; and He did! The Lord will take care of the hypocrites, the phonies, the fakes (Matthew 13:30).

The church is not a place full of sinless people; everyone at every church has sinned. Some sin by hypocrisy, but you have sinned, too.

We are never closer to God than when we assemble with the saints to "worship God in spirit and in truth."

Come experience the blessings found in such an assembly. We learn in Revelation 2:1 that Jesus "walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands." We learn in Revelation 1:20 that the seven golden lampstands are the seven churches Jesus addresses in the next two chapters. Jesus is walking in His churches on Sunday.

We hope you will join him and join us! Stay with us after our song for a final word...

We are glad you joined us this morning. Please watch the program every Lord's Day and then join us for worship at a congregation listed shortly. Reach out for a copy of #1432, "Christian Without Religion?" We also offer a free six lesson Bible study course. We say with the apostle Paul in Romans 16:16, "the churches of Christ salute you." Until next week, goodbye and may God bless you!

Are you searching for the truth of God's word and have a sincere desire to learn about the Bible? Do you want to know what the Bible says about salvation and about Christ and His church? If you are looking for Bible Founded discussion on these topics and many others, then please accept this invitation to explore "Let the Bible Speak" and then contact us for additional studies.

We are members of the church of Christ as found in the New Testament. We are not members of a denomination or earthly religious organization. We are a brotherhood of believers, joined by a common bond, Jesus Christ. We try to live and worship following the patterns found in the New Testament.

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