

The Assembly

Acts 11: 19-26

Question: Can you be a Christian and not attend church services? Is a church service a part of my walk with the Lord?

Your life and my life, any journey of faith, moves in tension between exile and homecoming, dispersion and gathering, letting go and gaining back, wilderness and reunion. Living in this tension is necessary – both the solitude and the assembly are essential to a vital life journey, to growing spiritually.

Stephen was one of the first group of deacon chosen to serve in the Jerusalem church. He was killed, stoned to death, with the approval of Saul of Tarsus. Saul proceeded to persecute Jesus' followers throughout the area until he was converted to following Jesus through a vision on the road to Damascus. He became the apostle Paul. The death of Stephen and subsequent persecution of Jesus' followers sent many of those followers into exile. As they settled into new places, they began to talk to Jews and to non-Jews about Jesus. Soon those barriers between Jews and non-Jews were being crossed.

When word came to the Jerusalem Church of the influx of non-Jewish believers, they sent Barnabas to investigate. Barnabas was well respected and he was a *really good guy*.

[Barnabas] threw himself in with them, got behind them, urging them to stay with it the rest of their lives.

The community grew large and strong in the Master.

then Barnabas went on to Tarsus to look for Saul.

He found him and brought him back to Antioch.

They were there a whole year, meeting with the church and teaching a lot of people.

It was in Antioch that the disciples were for the first time called Christians.

(from Acts 11, The Message)

The believers who were scattered in exile, came together, crossed barriers, and formed community. The powers of the church, suspicious of such *border crossings*, sent Barnabas to check out this new community. He was a great choice for this work and recognized the Spirit's presence in Antioch. He stayed and joined that community for a period of time. Then, he went and found Saul, now Paul, who was trying to make sense of his own conversion experience, and brought him to Antioch. Paul then joined that community for a while. The assembly of believers in Antioch were the ones who were first called Christians. It was not necessarily a term of endearment, but the name stuck. The Christian Church was born.

The Greek word for church (*ekklesia*) originally just meant a gathering or assembly. It was often used for a civic assembly. Church, however, has come to mean a gathering of Christians. The identity of gathered believers remained even when the believers were apart. They were still *ekklesia* -- still church.

Church is always church, whether gathered or apart. There is a sense of communion, of community. But there is a particular and powerful sense of the existence and purpose of church when we gather, especially when we gather for worship. That worship does not have to be a specific form of corporate worship. For the early church, services of worship were definitely not the same as we tend to do worship. The earliest services were very informal and often secretive. They said prayers, maybe sang songs, and listened to readings from the letters of Paul or one of

the early gospels. An interpretation of that reading was shared and the group often would share a meal.

Worship changed almost overnight in the fourth century when Constantine designated Christianity as the official state church of Rome. Almost instantly, the Church had big buildings and lots of people. They had to fill up that space and time. They also had to impress people with how important the Church was! But we realize today that a church service is not any more worship than a small group gathering -- except for the size. It's not the presence of an organ or choir, guitars or drums, familiar music, or other trappings that makes our gathering worship. And we still share the common meal of the Lord's Supper, though it now tends to be stylized and symbolic. We still read letters of Paul or Gospels. We still interpret what we read. We still sing and pray, all trappings of the ancient Synagogue service that our ancestors in faith inherited.

It is not so much the particular things we do that make our assembly holy, that make it Church. It is the fact that we gather. When we worship, we become attuned to living within the Spirit. We are intentional about being part of one another. In this attitude, our gathering becomes worship. Our assembling clarifies our identity as church.

Can you be a Christian and not attend church services? This is today's *Ask Jack* question. The answer is "yes." You can be a Christian, though maybe not a very good one. "Is a church service part of my walk with the Lord?" "Yes," it is for me. Is it for you? How will you answer that? Your answer matters more to you than my answer matters to you. If coming to a church service is not part of your spiritual journey, your walk with the Lord, if your answer is *no*, then why are you here? If as a group our answer generally is no, then why are we here? Why go to all the trouble of having a worship service? Why not just stay home, read an inspirational book and listen to contemporary Christian music on CD?

If your answer is *yes*, then how is being at a church service part of your walk with the Lord? How is it part of your spiritual journey? How does that work for you?

Now, let's take one step back. What are you looking for when you come to worship? Honestly, what are you hoping to find in a place like this? Finally, what suggestions do you have for those of us who plan church services and gathering times to make this gathering more like what you're hoping to find?

One more question -- what can you do to have a church service be a richer part of your life journey, your walk with the Lord? This is a personal question and I'd like you to think about your answer for awhile.

What has been a significant spiritual experience for you? Did it happen in solitude or in a gathering? Was an assembly part of that experience? My experience came during Sunday morning worship. It was personal, but happened in the context of corporate worship. It took the form of a sudden clear awareness of my connectedness with all people, all life, and all things. Instantly, I knew that we are part of each other.

We come together in assembly and cross barriers: social, economic, racial, philosophical, political, and national. In togetherness, we learn to establish clear personal boundaries. We celebrate diversity, what makes us different and unique, without cutting us off from each other. We recognize how we are different without letting those boundaries become barriers. This process is that vital part in our lives' journeys that a church service can play.

Yes, you can follow Jesus without going to church, but why would you? You'd be missing a vital part of that journey and experience. Why would you want to do that? Singer and songwriter Ken Medema expresses the value of a church service with these words:

If this is not a place where tears are understood,

where can I go to cry?
If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing,
where can I go to fly?
I don't need another place for trying to impress you
with just how good and virtuous I am.
I don't need another place for always being on top of things,
ev'rybody knows that it's a sham.
I don't need another place for always wearing smiles,
even when it's not the way I feel.
I don't need another place to mouth the same old platitudes,
'Cause you and I both know that it's not real.
If this is not a place where my questions can be asked
where can I go to seek?
If this is not a place where my heart cries can be heard
where can I go to speak?
If this is not a place where tears are understood,
where can I go to cry?
If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing,
where can I go to fly?
(If This Is Not a Place by Ken Medema)

You are in the assembly of such a place. Come with your questions. Come with your heart cries. Come and walk, come a stumble, come and fly! I invite you to become part of Crossroads. If this is already your church home, invite you to deepen your journey with us. Come and make this your place to fly.