

*Church!*

*who needs it?*

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## An impossible job!

It's very difficult for a Christian Minister to write about why real Christians need to be part of the Church without being accused of self-interest: *'of course you're paid to say that!'* I'm writing this today because I am a Christian Minister who has led local churches for a long time, but the things I'm saying, I say because I am a Christian. A Minister who doesn't remain first and foremost a Christian loses sight of 'what it's all about', and is in danger of getting bogged down in the routines of the work.

So what I say, I believe - I'm not just writing to follow some 'official line', I'm not writing to 'get more people in' so that I or my Church will look more successful. I'm trying to share with you what I believe are vital truths for anybody who gladly bears the name of 'Christian'. I hope you enjoy reading this, and I'd love to hear from you if you'd like to discuss anything you read here.

## It's all about Jesus

Lots of people say they are Christians, but it's not at all clear what they mean by the word: it may simply mean they live in what they see as a Christian culture. In fact, a Christian is somebody who follows the example and teaching of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who calls Himself *'The way, the truth, and the life'* (John 14). Many say they are Christians (*followers of Christ*), yet act as if they can ignore the Church which Jesus founded, treating it as an optional extra.

To His followers, Jesus left four commandments: two simple, and two more difficult. The difficult ones are *'you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength'* and *'you shall love your neighbour as (you love) yourself'*. (Matt 22, v36-40) Why difficult? Because no matter how hard we try, there's always more we could be doing to love God or our neighbour!

So common sense says let's start with the simple commandments first! What are they? *'Do this in remembrance of me'* (Luke 22, v19) - the sharing of bread and wine in Holy Communion, and *'go through all the world making disciples, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'* (Matthew 28).

So, sharing the bread and wine of Holy Communion when we meet for worship, and telling others about Jesus in order to bring them to share our faith, are things Christians are told to do, neither of which make sense without the Church! Of course they're simple (*because you are either doing them or you aren't*), but they aren't necessarily easy!

Was Jesus wasting His time in founding His Church, establishing how it should be sustained and led, giving it a task to do? Jesus entrusted to His Church the task He Himself began - preaching the Good News, healing the sick, casting out demons, proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God. How can we call Him Lord, then say He was wrong about the continuing task, and His need of the Church to complete it?

#### *The earliest Christians.....*

For the first 300 years or so, Christian worship on Sunday (a normal working day) meant services being held around dawn, before daily work began. There were few 'church buildings' - worship was usually held in out- of-the-way places to avoid attracting attention. You could be arrested for being a Christian, and, if you did not deny your faith, you would be killed.

What would be our obvious answer today - *don't go to worship, just 'be a Christian privately in your heart'* - would have been astonishing to them, because worship was so central and important to their faith in Jesus that they were prepared to take enormous risks to meet and share Communion.

*Do we dare to say they were wrong, and that we are better Christians than they were?*

## **Confusion, confusion?**

Jesus founded the Church as a family of faith, brought together by their experience of the reality of God, united by their acceptance of Jesus as Lord of their lives, and by their longing to know Him better and to see His kingdom grow in the world.

Of course over the years, as the Church grew it developed structures to hold it together, so that, although there were thousands of Christians meeting in

hundreds of places, they could remain one Family. Today there are billions of Christians, spread across hundreds of countries round the world: despite differences of culture we are still one Family, united by our baptism, serving Jesus Christ as friend, Lord and Saviour.

Problems come when people mistake the familiar structures (*which are only human*) for the reality, which is of God. For example, most languages use the same word to identify both the meeting place, and the Family of Faith which meets in it: we call both of these 'Church'. This gives people the mistaken idea that the Church is a building to go to (*or pay for!*) - the truth is that the building is only '*a Church*' by association with what goes on in it. If the Family of Faith stops meeting there the building itself may remain standing, but it stops being called 'a Church'!

Other confusion surrounds whether the Church belongs more to the clergy than to the rest of the Family (*'when did you go into the Church, Vicar?'*), or whether the Church is 'them' or 'us' (*in Christianity there is no 'they' who ought to do x or y - the work of the Church is the responsibility of each and all of us*)! There is no mysterious 'they' who will keep your local Church open and welcoming for the rest!

It's no wonder people sometimes find the Church confusing, but there again there aren't many organisations in the world 1950 years old and still going strong! But we're sorry if we've taken our place in people's lives so much for granted that we've often failed to explain properly what we are doing and why.

Many people's idea of the Church is comfortably abstract (*a nice warm vague ideal, or an atmospheric place to go for Midnight Mass every year!*), but, at the end of the day, Church life stands or falls by our local experience of it.

In that way the Church is like many Trade Unions, where you can only become part of the whole organisation by belonging to a local branch of it. Countless numbers of people claim they are 'Church of England', but are amazed to find that the C of E only counts them in if and when they join in the life of a local congregation. Until then their membership is a theoretical state of mind!

## Worship

In English we often call worship '*a service*' - a service is something we offer to someone else - in this case, to God. To people outside Christianity, worship is one of the oddest things we do: *why does God need all these people to tell Him how wonderful He is?* To those who leave Church, worship is the focus of their dissatisfaction: *I didn't get anything out of it.* To many who attend regularly,

worship is just something natural which Christians do, even if they aren't very good at explaining 'why'.

Worship comes from an old English word meaning *to give to God what He deserves* - His "worth". Christians are people who have entered into a new set of relationships - with God as loving heavenly Father, with Jesus as Lord and Saviour (*someone who rescues us*), friend and brother, with the Holy Spirit as the fire of God's love burning in our lives. When we enter into a relationship with God, we enter into a relationship with the rest of His Family as well - the Church!

*How can we love God, whom we have not seen, if we do not love our neighbour, whom we have seen? 1<sup>st</sup> Letter of John, chapter 4, verse 20*

What does a good Father deserve from His children? Love? Conversation? Appreciation? Help? Friendship? A sense of support for the family? Shared interests and values? YES! And none of these things happen without time spent together for what we now call "bonding". If these are the marks of any human family, and they are the marks of the Christian Family as well!

What happens at a worship service? Worship usually involves prayer, praise, bible readings, singing, teaching (a talk called a sermon), and expressions of faith and commitment. These elements are organised in a pattern like this:

### An Act of Worship

#### Gathering

- We get ready to worship, and are introduced to the theme of the service.

#### Scripture

- We listen to Bible readings and think about them.

#### Response

- We respond to the message in faith and prayer.

#### Dedication

- We go out, ready and willing to do something about what we've just heard!

Real Christians actually don't go to worship primarily to get something (we're a Church, not a shop!). Christians are people who love God and their new spiritual Family enough to want to spend time with Him - to just "hang out" with God and the rest of His Family!

If you really love someone, you don't resent the time you spend with them - you snatch precious moments of contact, and look forward eagerly to the next

time you know you'll meet. If you start resenting the time you spend with someone, are you sure you *really* love them?

### A Eucharist, or Holy Communion Service

#### Gathering

- We get ready to worship, and are introduced to the theme of the service.

#### Scripture

- We listen to Bible readings and think about them.

#### Response

- We respond to the message in faith and prayer.
- We bless and share the Bread and Wine, as Jesus told us we should.

#### Dedication

- We go out, ready and willing to do something about what we've heard!

## So why do we need the Church?

In the Baptism Service we say that candidates *need the help and encouragement of the Christian community, so that they may learn to know God in public worship and private prayer, follow Jesus Christ in the life of faith, and serve their neighbour after the example of Christ.*

Christians who no longer need any of these things (or Holy Communion) have reached spiritual perfection - good luck to them! But the rest of us find we all need these things throughout our Christian lives.

An old Scottish Church minister went to visit a couple who had stopped attending worship. He didn't say anything about this, but as they sat in front of the parlour fire he picked up a pair of tongs and lifted a burning coal out of the fire and put it on the hearth. Together, in silence, all three of them watched the single coal go out. Next Sunday they were back in their places.

Sadly most Christians who abandon worship barely notice their own spiritual fire going out!

*Let us not give up meeting together.....but let us encourage one another.*  
Letter to Hebrews ch 10, v25

## And why does the Church need us?

Even at the simplest and most obvious level, the local Church ceases to exist if people don't belong to it. There is no mysterious 'them' who will keep the building standing, open, warm and clean, and pay for it all, so that those who want ministry can rely on it always being there when they turn up.

Better informed people, who know that the Church is actually the people who meet there, soon realise that the future of the Church in that place depends on a continuing community of those who come together in response to the message of Jesus. To quote one famous Christian writer: *God has many children, but no grandchildren*, while another once wrote that *in every generation, the Church stands one generation away from extinction*. There has been a Christian community in some of our villages for 14 centuries - whether there will be one tomorrow depends on the spiritual decisions people of our generation make today.

It's not enough to belong to the Church just to 'keep things going' - if you believe the Christian message, then you actually *need* to be part of the Church! The Church exists to offer Christ-like service, to continue the work which Jesus began.

During World War One, a church in France had a plaster statue of Jesus: after the building was struck by a shell they found the statue intact, but minus the hands. They rebuilt the church but didn't repair the statue. Instead they put it in the church as it was, with these words underneath:

CHRIST HAS NO HANDS BUT OUR HANDS

Christ has no hands but our hands

To do His work today.

He has no feet but our feet

To lead men in His way;

He has no tongue but our tongues

To tell men how He died.

He has no help but our help

To bring them to His side.

*by Annie Flint*

The other reason why we gather for worship is as *a witness*, as a sign to others that Christians mean what they say, as a reminder to others that in our over-busy and selfish world there are still people who aren't too proud to admit their need to spend time with God.

This old poem may be a bit old-fashioned, but it can still make people think!

I woke to hear as day was dawning  
My conscience said "It's Sunday morning!"  
My flesh my soft companion, said  
"Be sensible and stay in bed"  
The world that thinks itself so knowing,  
And Satan argued twice a minute  
"Why should you go? There's nothing in it!"

THE morning air, the sun-bright east,  
GOD'S holy house, the vested priest,  
The faithful gathering in twos and threes,  
The flesh washed, dressed and on its knees:  
The Church obeyed, the world well flouted.  
Our Saviour in and Satan ousted,  
The cross proclaimed and Christ our Lord  
Sought out, met, welcomed and adored.

*by Brother Edward*

## Always on a Sunday?

The idea that '*you don't have to go to Church to be a Christian*' is so widespread that some people actually think Jesus said it!

Sometimes people enquiring about belonging to the Church ask '*do we HAVE to go EVERY Sunday?*' If you've read this far you'll know that they're looking at this from the wrong angle. After all, nobody would start a loving relationship by saying '*do we HAVE to meet and spend time together?*, would they?

If you join the Church then don't come every Sunday, nobody turns up on your doorstep on Monday morning to ask where you were (*God wants friends, not prisoners!*). On the other hand, if we miss people who do come regularly, we want to be sure there isn't some kind of problem - real families look after one another!

When you think that the early Christians faced arrest and death for the privilege of being able to meet for worship, and that Christians in developing countries may regularly walk ten miles to get to a service, some of our reasons for not attending look a bit weak, don't they?

Regular worship is a bit like a regular mealtime - the routine is good for most of us, and keeps us in touch with what we really need. Spiritual hunger is like

physical hunger - if we don't respond to it, eventually it fades away, so that really starving people often don't actually feel hungry at all. People who starve spiritually when God's gifts are so easily found have only themselves to blame. What's more, there is now plenty of evidence that people who attend rarely soon lose their grasp of Christian teaching and the basics of what needs to be distinctive about Christian life and behaviour.

## Church-going today

Everyone knows that Church attendances in Western Europe are generally falling. Fewer people are attending, those who do attend do so less often, half the churches in England have no children, and on the present trend many churches are likely to close in the next twenty years.

People see many different reasons for the decline: busier lives, Sunday working, shopping and sport, the break-up of family life. Interestingly, loss of belief doesn't seem to be a reason - in the last census over 60% claimed to be 'Christian', whatever they understood by this.

General pictures of decline hide many local pictures where the opposite is happening: there are many good Churches, and they are growing.

## So what makes a good Church?

- A good Church is one where the truth of God is told in a way which people can understand, which doesn't water down the challenges of that truth hoping to be popular, but which offers people lots of imaginative and practical help and encouragement to respond to that truth.
- A good Church helps to put people in touch with God, and helps to keep people in touch with God in the midst of busy and complicated lives.
- A good Church is a real Family, where people have real relationships with God and one another, and where, despite our differences, there is real acceptance, and genuine love.
- A good Church is a meeting place between heaven and earth, and lives the love of God in the midst of the community it serves, sharing that love in practical loving service.

If you find a perfect Church, don't join it in case your arrival spoils it! But if you find a good Church, with real people living real lives in tune with God and with the community, why not make your home there? You'll be glad you did!