

I OFTEN HEAR someone say she finds God more readily in a sunset or a garden than in church. Some experience the church as a hindrance to their spiritual development and say they have outgrown the need of a church. These people often describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

One woman recently said to me: “The church is dead. And besides, it is unnecessary. All that matters is my own personal relationship to Jesus.” A personal relationship to Jesus may be very well, but it is not what Christian living is about, for one cannot be a Christian sitting alone in a room with Jesus. Moreover, the woman’s remark sounds suspiciously like spiritual pride, the deadliest of the deadly sins.

Imagine St. Paul’s reply if one of his converts had said to him: “Paul, I believe in the Jesus you preach about, but I don’t care to be a member of the body of Christ.” Jesus had his community of twelve, and it was to a *group* that the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit is not the private possession of one individual, and we can neither believe in nor receive the Holy Spirit without engaging the community of believers which is the church.

I know quite well what is wrong with the church (or the “institutional church,” as we often call it when speaking disparagingly of it). The church can

be petty, selfish, boring, impersonal, complacent, sanctimonious, and—well, the list could go on.

It could hardly be otherwise, for the church is constituted entirely of human beings. Human beings can be worse than irritating, but as C. S. Lewis once commented:

If there is anything in the teaching of the New Testament which is in the nature of a command, it is that you are obliged to take the sacrament, and you can't do it without going to church. I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit.¹

The church is so many things. It is a fellowship. It is the household of God. St. Paul says that “by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13), the mystical body of which Christ is the head and we are dependent members. Throughout the New Testament the church is the

1 C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 61-62.

instrument appointed by God for our redemption. However disgusting we may find the behaviors of individual Christians, to remove ourselves from the church is to cease to be a Christian, for no one can be a Christian alone. It would be easier if it were otherwise, but we are in relationship with other Christians whether it's pleasant or not, because we are members of one body of which Christ is head.

The trouble with being spiritual but not religious is that it doesn't mean anything. Or rather, it means whatever we decide it means. Faddish spiritualities are usually self-centered, devoted to self-fulfillment, self-realization, self-enhancement, and self-gratification. They affirm whatever makes us feel good. God and other people are perhaps mentioned, but they occupy the back seat; we sit alone in the front (perhaps beside a version of Jesus fitted to our wishes) and drive the car wherever it pleases us to drive it. But without the guidance that knowledgeable companions afford us, we're likely to drive off the road.

Whatever its failures, the church—yes, the “institutional church”—embodies a long history of tested, lived-out spirituality. It's true that the church has occasionally veered off course and had to backtrack. When that has happened, others before us explored the blind alleys and dead-end routes, identified them, and posted warning signs.

We are not the first to have been drawn to them. These blind alleys and dead-end routes are called heresies. Based on unreality, they make false promises and do not deliver the goods.

I have a group of friends who, though active in a prayer group, like to tear down the church, claiming that it offers its spiritually starving members stones rather than the living bread for which they hunger. I once thought that, too. But in my travels I find spiritually hungry people in the churches. They are presumably there because they find something in church that sustains them. The problem is those who are not spiritually starving, or who think they're not. They are indifferent. Spiritual food is offered, but they fail to respond or receive. So let us not continually be attacking the institutional church because it does not offer us living bread. I'm afraid the truth is that most people are more interested in caviar than in the living bread—and they'd rather not eat it in a church!

Now about the church being dead. The church *cannot* die (though it sometimes grows ill), because in addition to the other ways St. Paul describes it, he calls it the “bride of Christ.” He makes the analogy between the church and a human marriage. As a husband and wife are one, so are Christ and his church. The relationship is the important thing. It includes faithfulness, loyalty, commitment, and love—and when we (never Christ) fail to live

up to our part, it also includes forgiveness and restoration. The church cannot die because it is united to Christ.

Our personal relationship to Christ is not unimportant, and there is much talk of this in some circles. Some Christians ask, “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your *personal* Savior?” The word *personal* is sometimes meant to suggest an individual, perhaps even a private dimension to Christian commitment. The salvation of our own souls is of inestimable importance, but as Christians we cannot stop there. Gloating over the fact that we individually have been saved and basking in the glow of our intimate, personal relationship with God is the starting gate of Christian living, not the finish line. If we dally at the starting gate, we may never reach the finish line.

Paul says that “none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself” (Romans 14:7). We only partake of the blessed freedom of the children of God to the extent that we concern ourselves with the salvation of others. Those who are free in Christ must be concerned with freeing others from the enslaving power of sin and death. “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some,” says Paul (1 Corinthians 9:22). He even goes so far as to say that he would give up his own salvation to bring others to Christ.

If we reject the institutional, corporate side of the church, or seek a church of only like-minded people, nothing will save us from a narrow intensity, an over-emphasis on those aspects of the faith easiest and most pleasing to us, and an unchristian lack of charity.

A word about prayer. No Christian prays alone. A Christian prays always as a member of the mystical body of Christ, along with other members, even though she be at the moment stranded on a deserted island. Of course we pray wherever we find ourselves. We even strive to pray “without ceasing,” as St. Paul recommends. “I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord” (Psalm 122:1). And we also recall the words of Isaiah: “I will make them joyful in my house of prayer” (Isaiah 56:7). A church building is set apart in a unique way as a dwelling place of God. It is therefore an especially good place to pray. God is not only present in his house as he is everywhere, but he is *recognized* and called by name there, as Creator and Lord of the universe. Here it is so easy to receive God’s power and his love.

Jesus often used the word “Come” when speaking to people. “Come unto me,” he says (Matthew 11:28). “Come apart and rest awhile” (Mark 6:31). And we *come*, that we may follow his command to *go*—into all the world bearing the good news of his love.

We come to the church in order that we may leave it—in Christ’s strength, to introduce the world to its Lord. When we depart the church, we take him with us to all who are in need. God whom we worship goes before us, with Jesus reflected in all we say and do, our lives being filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This tract is based on a meditation by Emily Gardiner Neal (1911-1989), a pioneer in the healing ministry in the Episcopal Church. Her books and tapes are available from www.episcopalhealing.org or by writing: Episcopal Healing Ministry, Christ Church Cathedral, 318 E. Fourth St., Cincinnati, OH 45202.