

Tough Topics: Do You Have to Go to Church to Be a Christian? Or, Can You Be a Christian without Going to Church?

Psalms 95:1-7 (ESV)

Oh come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
**Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!**
For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
Oh come, **let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!**
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

I. First Things

It seems that the modern, American rejoinder to “going to church” is that *it is unnecessary*. For, it is asserted in many and various ways, that to be a Christian, **one need not go to church or have anything to do with a congregation**. It is said that the operative thing is **faith**. As long as one believes in Jesus, that’s enough. Faith is certainly operative, but we might call this assertion the **bare minimum approach**—*what is the least I can commit to in order to receive salvation*.

I seek to be charitable. Some of my closest family members say things along these lines. Another thing often asserted is that the Church (as expressed in congregations, or denominations) **just wants your money**. Therefore, one should/must “worship” God in any way one wants without “going to church”. By not going to church, one shows the purity of their devotion to Jesus. Is that right?

This raises the question: *is it necessary to belong to a church to be a Christian?* If so, why? What does “church membership” give that one cannot get directly by faith in Jesus?

II. Our Standing Before God on Account of Jesus

The first thing we deal with is our standing before God. For this is what determines whether we are “saved” or not. Not church membership.

Romans 6:5-11 (ESV)

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died **has been set free from sin**. Now if we have died with Christ, **we believe that we will also live with him**.

These verses express a new reality on account of the work of Christ. Paul earlier has argued that the Christian is incorporated into this reality through baptism. So, our “standing” before God is determined **by the work of Jesus**. The righteousness of God is imputed (given) to us by faith. This is not “our work” but that of Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-10 (ESV)

For by grace **you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing**; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

So, **our standing is not determined by how much one goes to church.** But, is this all there is to it? Do we get baptized, believe in Jesus and that's it?

III. What Does God's Word Say about God's Desire for Our Worship of Him?

There are too many passages to cite, but the pattern throughout the Scriptures is that there is **an expectation of worship**. There are stipulations, regulations, and places of worship established. Note the first instance of "worship":

Genesis 4:2-5a (ESV)

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.

Without getting into the broader story, was there an *expectation* of worship? Was their "proper" worship and improper?

What Does it Mean to "go to church"? What is Worship?

To "go to church" is to go to the place of worship, *where worship happens*. What is worship?

- First Part (Primary) Worship is *to receive what God has to give* (means of grace)
- Second Part (Secondary) Worship is *to respond to God's gifts with thanksgiving*

There is **a reality** that when we gather together in worship, **we are in the presence of God, and that He is with us.**

Matthew 18:19-20 (ESV) Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. **For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.**"

Matthew 28:16-20 (ESV) Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him **they worshiped him**, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. **And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**"

1 Corinthians 6:1 (ESV) **Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?** You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Hebrews 10:23-25 (ESV) Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **not neglecting to meet together**, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17 (ESV) The cup of blessing that we bless, **is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?** The bread that we break, **is it not a participation in the body of**

Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Ephesians 2:19-22 (ESV) So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of **the household of God**, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, **being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord**. In him you also are being built together **into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit**.

These passages paint a picture of **a corporate reality of the Church, unified by Christ and indwelt with the Holy Spirit**. Worship is a *localized place* where God dwells with His people, where His Word is preached and the Sacraments are given.

AND I DIDN'T EVEN INCLUDE ALL THE PASSAGES FROM REVELATION!!!

Our worship is meant to mirror what the final marriage feast of the Lamb is to be.

IV. What Does it Mean to “be a Christian”?

Note of interest—the name of “Christian” is first used in Acts 11:25-26.

Christian might be rendered something like “a follower of Jesus”. That’s a name.

But what do Christians do?

Acts 2:41-47 (ESV)

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And **they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers**. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, **attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes**, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

According to the above, what are *the marks of a Christian*? What are the activities? Is it *merely* a “belief” in Jesus?

The bottom line is this: if you search the Scriptures, you will NOT FIND anyone who is a member of the Kingdom of God and does NOT worship. IOW, **when you find a believer, you find a God worshipper**.

V. For Us: What Might We Take Away?

Let’s reframe the initial question: Do Christians worship? Are Christians ones who are *part of/members of/active in* a congregational church? Do Christians NOT go to church? When does someone stop following Christ?

Note that I **am not quantifying** the amount one goes...this is a false consideration, to ask how much is enough. What would be the answer? Once a month? Twice a year?

We instead should seek to orient our lives around the worship of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. *We should run to the rail to receive His life-giving meal!* We should avail ourselves of *every opportunity to hear afresh the preaching of God’s Word!* We should *crave to have the words “you are forgiven” wash over us like a cleansing breeze*.

The bigger question is: **where is your heart and upon what does it fix itself?** What does your heart desire most?

The biggest question: **Is it possible for one’s faith to “grow cold” during an absence from worship?**