

Rebuild



Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations, And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:4)

Listening In On A Conversation

Jim (non-churched Christian): I don't see the need to join a church. Quite frankly, I don't really think churches are necessary.

John (staunch church member): *How can you say that, Jim? Where will you hear the Word of God preached in a regular way if you don't go to church?"*

Jim: Are you kidding? The air waves are soaked with good preaching. I get five Christian TV stations and at least two times as many radio stations that broadcast all kinds of Bible teaching. In fact, the preaching on TV and radio is usually of a higher quality than the typical "church pastor's" Sunday sermon. On the odd occurrence that you hear something better being preached in your church, let me know and I'll pick up a tape.

John: *Yes, you may be able to hear preaching in other places, but there is nothing quite like worshipping the Lord in church - the choir, the soloists, the inspirational music, all the people worshipping God together...it's great.*

Jim: I have been to a lot of Christian concerts that have all the above, but better and more. Besides, I am more inspired to worship God by listening to a good CD than I am at a typical Sunday service.

John: *OK, one may be able to find good music and good preaching outside of church, but there is no place where one can be trained and called on*

to evangelize like the local church. The local church is the breeding ground of missionaries.

Jim: Good theory, but hardly reality. I don't know of any churches that provide serious training in evangelism or discipleship. Those that attempt to move in this direction are rare, and of those few that do, most do not do half as good a job as most para-church organizations.

John: *But what about the personal support that a person can receive from a church? Sure, there are many para-church groups that offer ministry to a special niche of people like unwed-mothers or college students, but the local church is there for all kinds of people - young, old, and in-between. And only in the church can one find an ongoing environment of personal support within the context of everyday life, not just help for a specific need at a specific time.*

Jim: Maybe most para-churches don't provide a long term environment of support, but neither do most churches. The average church member is a stranger to "fellow members." When I need support, I get it from my Bible study group, not a church. And if I need professional help, that is where I will go, to *professionals*, not someone who counsels "part-time" in a church.

John: *Here is an argument I am sure you have overlooked: How and where are you going to get the sacraments if*

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you refuse to become a part of a local church?

Jim: I was baptized in a river by a campus group, not a church, and as far as I am concerned it "worked" fine. As far as taking the Lord's Supper, I can go in just about any church and take it, no questions asked, though, quick honestly, I have recently been thinking about blessing some wine and bread by myself after my prayer time. Frankly, I think I would get more out of it than I would by taking it with a bunch of strangers...

John: *I don't know what to tell you!*

A Biblical Approach to Church

So what is the argument for becoming a member of a local Congregation?

If one looks at membership from the vantage point of a "consumer" (what he or she can "get out of it") there is little to argue for membership. People can get more "stuff" elsewhere. But the Biblical view of the Church turns this argument on its head. The Church is not a place to *get* things, Church is

a place to live out Covenant with God. It is a place to *give* - a place to die to self-centeredness and live for God. Most don't "church shop" for this.

The Church of God is to be an environment of relationships where people are encouraged to love like God. One cannot love like God on one's own, his/her own way, at one's convenience, only when "inspired," only with people he or she naturally "clicks" with. Such relationships do not represent love but simply mirror the world. Each person is in it for "self."

All Christians, whether they know it or not, are in a binding Covenant with Christ, and through Him, to those likewise covenanted to Him. "Beloved, if God so loved us [in Covenant] so we ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11).

Americans are not usually compelled to join a Church so they can be faithful to live out their Covenant commitment to God and His People. The average membership drive does not usually advertise by saying, "Come join our Church; we promise you a place where you will learn what it means to love God and others in committed love."

But Covenant - commitment to God, and to other brothers and sisters - is

what the Church is supposed to be before it is anything else. Music, preaching, getting good counsel, and a multitude of other things that make a church attractive is of no real value if those things do not flow from a network of relationships intent on living in Covenant love.

If the idea of Covenant were restored, much of the confusion around the Church would be gone.

When the meaning of Covenant is restored, God's commitment of love to us becomes clear as we give our lives to love like Him. For example, that God is a God who loves all, regardless how they look, how much money they make, their age, or social status, becomes clear when we commit ourselves to love brothers and sisters in Christ like that. Certainly, the Church will be seen more as a Spirit-indwelt Community.

In lived out, committed Covenant Love the Gospel of Christ is clear - the Gospel where the Father bonds us to Himself and one another through His Son. That is Covenant. That is the Church. [Certainly if this were understood, the absurdity of partaking the Lord's Supper (Covenant meal) on one's own would all the more seem to be an impossibility.]

Getting It Clear

The Bible tells us that to live in Covenant love is more than attending Church; it requires attending to one another.

Practically, to live in Covenant love means a commitment to live in love; to speak the truth in love, even if others may be a little angry with you for it; to serve and honor the brethren when one does not feel like it; to work out a conflict instead of running away from the person; to take responsibility for one's sins and mistakes without rationalizing or blaming; to open up one's life to others; to be accountable to others for what one says he or she believes... I think you get the idea. If the Church again honored Covenant in these and other ways, people would not wonder why they needed the Church.

To restore Covenant honor within our churches is not going to be easy. It will require a clear pastoral vision and a specific way of implementing that vision. It will require an entirely different way to look at what it means to be Church - and what it means to be Christian. So be it.

Rev. Jordan Bajis is the pastor of the community of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in Fort Collins, Colorado. In the last 20 years he has sought to restore the Covenant foundations of the Church as a missionary, author, speaker, and evangelist.

Holy Trinity Orthodox Church
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2136 Sheffield Drive
Fort Collins, Colorado 80526

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