Are you looking for the perfect church?

No, and I don’t anticipate finding one this side of eternity. Perfection is not my goal, but finding people with God’s priorities. It’s one thing for people to struggle toward an ideal they share together. It’s another to realize that our ideals have little in common.

I make no secret of the fact that I am deeply troubled by the state of organized Christianity. The vast majority of what we call church today offers nothing more than well-planned performances with little actual connection between believers. Many believers are mistakenly encouraged to become dependent on the system or its leadership rather than on Jesus himself. They spend more energy conforming behavior to what the institution needs rather than helping people be transformed at the foot of the cross.

I’m tired of trying to fellowship with people who only view church as a two-hour a week dumpling ground for guilt while they live the rest of the week with the same priorities as the world. I’m tired of those who depend on their own works of righteousness but who have no compassion for the people of the world. I’m tired of insecure people using the Body of Christ as an extension of their own ego and will manipulate it to satisfy their own needs. I’m tired of sermons more filled with the bondage of religion than the freedom of God’s love to satisfy their own desires and thus miss out on church life altogether. Neither are I a fan of ‘church hoppers’, who whip around to one place after another looking for the latest fad or the best opportunity to fulfill their own selfish desires.

But most of the people I meet and talk with are not outside the system because they have lost their passion for Jesus or his people, but only because the traditional congregations near them couldn’t satisfy their hunger for relationship. They are seeking authentic expressions of body life and pay an incredible cost to seek it out. Believe me, we would all find it easier just to go with the flow, but once you’ve tasted of living fellowship between passionate believers, it is impossible to settle for anything less.

Isn’t this view of church divisive?

Not of itself. People make it divisive when they demand that people conform to their interpretation of truth. Most of us on this journey are accused of being divisive because freedom can be threatening to those who find their security in a religious system. But most of us aren’t trying to recruit others to leave their congregations. We see the body of Christ big enough to encompass God’s people however he calls them to gather. One of the things often said about traditional church is that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in American culture. We only meet with people who look like we do and like things the way we do. I’ve found now that I have far more opportunity to get with people from a broader cross-section of his body. I don’t demand others do it my way and I hope in time that those who see it differently will stop demanding we conform to theirs.

Where can I find that kind of fellowship?

There’s no easy answer here. It might be right in front of you among the fellowship you’re already in. It might be down the street in your neighborhood or across a cubicle at work. You can also find it in compassionate outreach to the needy and broken in your locality as a way to live out his life in you and meet others with a similar hunger.

Don’t expect this kind of fellowship to fall easily into an organization. It is organic, and Jesus can lead you to it right where you are. Look for him to put a dozen or so folks around your life with whom you can share the journey. They may not even all go to the same congregation you do. They might be neighbors or coworkers who are following after God.

Wouldn’t that kind of interconnection among God’s people yield some incredible fruit?

Don’t expect it to be easy or run smoothly. It will take some specific choices on our part to be obedient to Jesus. It may take some training to shake off old habits and be free to let him build his community around you, but it is all worth it. I know it bothers some people that I don’t take my regular place in a pew on Sunday morning, but I can tell you absolutely that my worst days outside organized religion are still better than my best days inside it. To me the difference is like listening to someone talk about golf or actually taking a set of clubs out to a course and playing golf. Being his church is like that. In our day we don’t need more talk about the church, but people who are simply ready to live in its reality.

People all over the world are freshly discovering how to do that again. You can be one of them as you let him place you in his body as he desires.

Every person I’ve ever met who is thriving in the life of Jesus has a desire to share authentic fellowship with other believers.

If, like me, you are looking for this depth of fellowship, rest assured you are not alone. If you’d like to talk more about it and see what God might do in your area, please let me know.

Name: ______________________________________

Phone: ______________________________________

Email: ______________________________________

WAYNE JACOBSEN was a pastor for 20 years and currently acts as a Contributing Editor to Leadership Journal. He travels the world helping people discover the simplicity of cultivating a friendship with God and experience the joy of relational body life. He is the author of He Loves Me, The Naked Church and In My Father’s Vineyard. You can find out more at his web site: www.lifestream.org.

Why I don’t go to church anymore

What dynamics of body life do you look for?

I always look for a people who are seeking to follow the Living Christ. He is at the center of their lives, their affections and their conversation. They look to be authentic and free with others, to hurt when they hurt, to question what they question and to follow his voice without others accusing them of being divisive or rebellious. I look for people who are not wasting their money on extravagant buildings or flashy programs; where people sitting next to each other are not strangers; and where they all participate in sharing God’s life instead of watching passively from a safe distance.

He didn’t talk about it as a place to go to, but a way of living in relationship to him and others in his family.

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Dear fellow-believer,

I do appreciate your concern for me and your willingness to raise issues that have caused you concern. I know the way I relate to the church is a bit unconventional and some even call it dangerous. Believe me, I understand that concern because I used to think that way myself and even taught others to as well. If you are happy with the status quo of organized religion today, you may not like what you read here. My purpose is not to convince you to see this incredible church the same way I do, but to answer your questions as openly and honestly as I can. Even if we end up disagreeing, hopefully you will understand that our differences need not estrange us as fellow members of Christ’s body.

Where do you go to church?

I have never liked this question, even when I was able to answer it with a specific organization. It is true that I do go to church, but it is based on a false premise—that church is something you can go to as in a specific event, location or organized group. I think Jesus looks at the church quite differently. He didn’t talk about it as a place to go to, but as a way of living in relationship to him and others in his family. It is not a question of where but to whom to address me where I go to Jacobsen. How do I answer that? I am a Jacobsen and where I go a Jacobsen is. ‘Church’ is that kind of word. It doesn’t identify a location or an institution. It describes a people and how they relate to each other. If we lose sight of that, our understanding of the church will be distorted and we’ll miss out on much of its joy.

Are you just trying to avoid the question?

I know it may only sound like quibbling over words, but words are important. When we changed the church to church week-end gatherings or institutions that have organized themselves as such, it is not to make them extra-culturally, but it is based on a false premise—that church is something you can go to as in a specific event, location or organized group. I think Jesus looks at the church quite differently. He didn’t talk about it as a place to go to, but as a way of living in relationship to him and others in his family. It is not a question of where but to whom to address me where I go to Jacobsen. How do I answer that? I am a Jacobsen and where I go a Jacobsen is. ‘Church’ is that kind of word. It doesn’t identify a location or an institution. It describes a people and how they relate to each other. If we lose sight of that, our understanding of the church will be distorted and we’ll miss out on much of its joy.

But don’t we need regular fellowship?

That has been said so often today, that most of us assume it is in the Bible somewhere. I haven’t found it yet. Many of us have been led to believe that we can’t possibly survive without the ‘covering of the body’ and will either fall into error or backslide into sin. But doesn’t that happen inside our local congregations as well? Is it helpful for people to join structures and find not only an ever-deepening relationship with God, but also connections with other believers that far run deeper than they found in the institution. I haven’t lost any of my passion for Jesus or my affection for his church. If anything those have grown by leaps and bounds, because Jesus has been so true to me. Scripture does encourage us to be devoted to one another not committed to an institution. Jesus indicated that whenever two or three people get together focused on him, they would experience the vitality of church life.

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Some are traditional congregations wrong?

Absolutely not! I have found many of them with people who love God and are seeking to grow in his ways. I visit a couple of dozen different congregations a year that I find are far more centered on relationship than religion. Jesus is at the center of their life together, those who act as leaders are true servants and not playing politics of leadership, and that all are encouraged to minister to one another.

I pray that even more of them are renewed in a passion for Jesus, a genuine concern for each other and a willingness to serve one another. There are many people who would attest that these are rare in our communities and many only last for a short span before they unwittingly look to institutional answers for the needs of the body instead of remaining dependent on Jesus. When that happens does not mean God leads you not to go along with them.

So should I stop going to church, too?

I am afraid that question also misses the point. You see I don’t believe you’re going to church any more than I am. We’re just part of it. Be your part, however Jesus calls you to and wherever he allows you to follow his work in you, that is where you place you. Not all of us grow in the same environment.

If you gather with a group of believers at a specific time and place and that participation helps you grow closer to Jesus and allows you to follow his work in you, then I think you have to leave. Keep in mind, however, that of itself is not the church. It is just one of many expressions of it in the place where you live.

It is far more important that our children experience real fellowship among believers rather than the bells and whistles of a slick children’s program.

Don’t be tricked into thinking that just because you attend its meetings you are experiencing real body life. That only comes as God connects you with a handful of brothers and sisters with whom you can build close friendships and share the reality and downs of this journey.

That can happen among traditional congregations, as it can also happen beyond them. In the last seven years I’ve met hundreds if not thousands of people who have grown disillusioned with traditional congregations and are thriving spiritually, as they share God’s life with others, mostly in their homes.

Then meeting in homes is the answer.

Of course not! Let’s be clear: as fun as it is to enjoy large group worship and even be instructed by gifted teachers, the real joy of body life can’t be shared in huge groups. The church for its first 300 years found homes the perfect place to gather. They are much more suited to the dynamics of family and church that Jesus described his body.

But meeting in homes is no cure-all. I’ve been to some very sick home meetings and met in facilities with groups who shared an authentic body life together. But the time I spend in regular body life I want to spend face to face with hundreds of people with whom I have shared a journey. I know it isn’t popular today where people find it is far easier to sit through a finely tuned (or not so finely tuned) service and go home without ever having to open up their lives or take an interest in someone else’s journey.

What about the person whom I am closest to me who is not where or how we meet, but whether or not people are focused on Jesus and really helping each other on the journey to becoming like him. Meetings are less the issue here than the quality of relationships. I am always looking for people like that wherever I am and always enjoy relocation when I find them.

Aren’t you just reacting out of hurt?

I suppose that is possible and time will tell. I guess, but honestly don’t believe so. Anyone who is engaged in a real body life will get hurt at times. But there are two kinds of hurt. There’s the kind of pain that points to a problem that can be fixed with the right care—such as a badly sprained ankle. Then there’s the kind of pain that can only be fixed by pursuing something more that you can’t put your hand on a hot stove.

Perhaps all of us have experienced some measure of pain as we have tried to fit God’s life into institutions. For a long time most of us hung in there hoping if we tweaked a few things it would get better. Though we could be successful, we always knew that we were playing politics of leadership, and that all are encouraged to minister to one another.

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