Why I don’t go to church anymore

by Wayne Jacobsen
Why I don’t go to church anymore.  by Wayne Jacobsen

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 don’t end up agreeing, 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. I know what it means 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 a way of living in relationship to him and others in his family. Asking me where I go to church is like asking 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 only abridge the term ‘church’ to weekend gatherings or institutions that have organized themselves as ‘churches’ we miss out on what it means to live as Christ’s body. It will give us a false sense of security to think that by attending a meeting once a week we are participating in God’s church. Conversely I hear people talk about ‘leaving the church’ when they stop attending a specific congregation. But if the church is something we are, not someplace we go, how can we leave it unless we abandon Christ himself? And if I think only of a specific congregation as my part of the church, haven’t I separated myself from a host of other brothers and sisters that do not attend the same one I do?

The idea that those who gather on Sunday mornings to watch a praise concert and listen to a teaching are part of the church and those who do not, are not, would be foreign to Jesus. The issue is not where we are at a given time during the week-end, but how we are living in him and with other believers all week long.

But don’t we need regular fellowship?

I wouldn’t say we need it. If we were in a place where we couldn’t find other believers, Jesus certainly would be able to take care of us. Thus, I’d phrase that a bit differently; Will people who are growing to know the Living God also desire real and meaningful connections with other believers? Absolutely! The call to the kingdom is not a call to isolation. Every person I ever met who is thriving in the life of Jesus has a desire to share authentic fellowship with other believers. They realize that whatever they know of God’s life is just in part, and only the fullest revelation of him is in the church.

But sometimes that kind of fellowship is not easy to find. Periodically on this journey we may go through times when we can’t seem to find any other believers who share our hunger. That’s especially true for those who find that conforming to the expectations of the religious institutions around them diminishes their relationship with Jesus. They may find themselves excluded by believers with whom they’ve shared close friendship. But no one going through a time like this looks upon the time as a treat. It is incredibly painful and they will constantly look for other hungry believers with whom they can share the journey.

Don’t we need to be committed to a local 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?

I know many people who live outside those structures and find not only an ever-deepening relationship with God, but also connections with other believers that run far 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 in recent years. 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.

Is it helpful to regularly participate in a local expression of that reality? Of course! But we make a huge mistake when we assume that fellowship takes place just because we attend the same event together, even regularly, or because we belong to the same organization. Fellowship happens where people share the journey of knowing Jesus together. It consists of open, honest sharing and genuine concern about each other’s spiritual well being and encouragement for people to follow Jesus however he leads them.
It is far more important that our children experience real fellowship among believers rather than the bells and whistles of a slick childrens program.

But don't our institutions keep us from error?
I'm sorry to burst your bubble here, but every major heresy that has inflicted God's people for the last 2,000 years has come from organized groups with leaders' who thought they knew God's mind better than anyone around them. Conversely, virtually every move of God among people hungering for him was rejected by the 'church' of that day and were excluded, excommunicated or executed for following what God put on their heart.

If that is where you hope to find security; I'm afraid it is sorely misplaced. Jesus didn't tell us that 'going to church' would keep us safe, but that trusting him would. John the apostle told that each of us has an anointing of the Spirit so that we would know the difference between truth and error. That anointing is cultivated as we learn his ways in his Word and grow closer to his heart. Doing so will help you recognize when groups of believers become destructive or manipulative.

So 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, that 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 the world with God's love. But I think we'd have to admit 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 do not feel condemned if God leads you not to go along with them.

So should I stop going to church, too?
I'm 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 places 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, by all means don't 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.

Then meeting in homes is the answer?
Of course not! But 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 which is how 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 hungry people who are being transformed by Jesus. 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.

But ultimately what matters most to me is not where or how they 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 rejoice when I find them.

Aren't you just reacting out of hurt?
I suppose that is possible and time will tell, I guess, but I honestly don't believe so. Anyone who is engaged in 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 pulling away—as when you 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 in limited ways during moments of renewal, we also discovered that eventually the conformity of an institution demands and the freedom people need to grow in Christ are at odds with one another. It has happened with virtually every group formed throughout the history of Christianity.

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 real ups 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 of 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.
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 is. 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 dumping 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 where relationships take a back seat to the demands of an efficient institution.

But don’t our children need church activities?

I’d suggest that what they need most is to be integrated into God’s life through relational fellowship with other believers. 92% of children who grow up in Sunday schools, with all the puppets and high-powered entertainment, leave ‘church’ when they leave their parents’ home. Instead of filling our children with ethics and rules we need to demonstrate how 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 dumping 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 where relationships take a back seat to the demands of an efficient institution.

But don’t our children need church activities?

I’d suggest that what they need most is to be integrated into God’s life through relational fellowship with other believers. 92% of children who grow up in Sunday schools, with all the puppets and high-powered entertainment, leave ‘church’ when they leave their parents’ home. Instead of filling our children with ethics and rules we need to demonstrate how 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 dumping 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

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.
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 our 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.