



BEEEN

BURRNED?

Have you ever been involved with a church or a certain fellowship of Christians only to find out later that what you thought was the closest thing to the first century Church was in fact just another twenty-first century disappointment? Has the experience made you want to retreat into your prayer closet with your Bible and have your food slid under the door to you? Do you find yourself mistrusting of church leaders and other Christians?

You are not alone. As this century comes to a close it seems as though there are a record number of individuals who have withdrawn from the traditional, local church setting and have decided to "have church at home" --usually via watching a televangelist or church service on television or listening to cassette teaching tapes. Their reason for doing so...

I'VE BEEN BURNED!

Many Christians have been victimized by various forms of pastoral abuse -- Shepherding, dictatorial leadership, the "Superstar" pastors, etc. They have read in the Bible that they are to submit to those in authority over them (Heb. 13:17) and truly believe that the Lord has placed them under such leadership because they are in need of strict oversight and discipline. Their leaders appear so godly and spiritual and what believer doesn't want that for their own life? But the expected peace and communion never comes but instead bondage, condemnation, anguish.

After trying so many ways and so many times, the end result is to leave and never return. "Jesus is OK," they then say, "but it's the Church that I can't handle."

For many, the problem is one of doctrinal purity. They attend a certain denomination for awhile only to find that there are definite problems with certain interpretations of the Bible. So they join an independent fellowship and soon discover that there is no accountability or that certain doctrinal issues are taken to extremes. The Bible teaches that in the last days, there will be no shortage of false teachers or false doctrines. As is the case today with so many "winds of doctrine" blowing around, many Christians who have been involved in this movement or that vein of teaching have come to the place where they just don't know what to believe and are afraid to listen to another's teaching. They say, "I've been exposed to so much weird theology, I just don't know who I can trust anymore." They feel that they have "tried church" and it just didn't work for them.

Another common reason for the lack of local church involvement is because they feel that the churches that they had attended just didn't suit their particular needs. Maybe the nursery was inadequate, or there wasn't enough social activities, or the people just weren't friendly enough, etc. So they attend for awhile and then drop out of sight by saying, "I just wasn't getting my needs met." After a few attempts at different fellowships, they resolved themselves to school activities, the YMCA and "having church at home."

It is not the attempt of this brief article to address all the questions and problems that confront Christians today within the realm of non-involvement. Many of the experiences faced by Christians are real, valid, and painful. For some of these brothers and sisters who are victims of self-seeking, flesh-driven men, the answers often are not easy and they come slow. They must be treated with love and understanding and sensitivity. For others, the examples listed above are simply typical of reasons that are given as an excuse to be lazy or feed their own flesh. It is also not the focus of this article to place anyone in either category or in varying degrees of both. That question is left to the individual believer. The purpose of this tract is to simply raise the issue of non-involvement and look into God's holy Word for answers.

While there may be several valid reasons for leaving a local church -- moving, doctrinal impurity, marrying into another fellowship, etc. -- the Bible is very clear about God's will concerning a believer's

involvement in His Body. I Corinthians 12 teaches that God gives gifts to "each [Christian] individually as He wills." (v. 11, 18). Every believer who has been born anew by the Holy Spirit has been given a (at least one) specific gift for the purpose of building up the rest of the Body (v. 7, 12-22). The Lord wills for us (v. 11) to be involved and is pleased (v. 18) when we are. Romans 12:3-8, in another discussion of the spiritual gifts, imperatively states that if God has given a believer a gift, they are to use it -- to not do so is sin. The local church fellowship is God's ordained format to accomplish this. While no explicit Bible passages may be used to back up a statement such as that, carefully the books of Acts, I and II Timothy and Titus clearly implies it. The Church, then, does not necessarily exist to meet our needs, but our goal should be primarily to meet the needs of others. It is through this fashion that our own needs will become met. The clear teaching of scripture is that when you give of yourself, you receive (Pr. 3:9-10; Eccl. 11:1; Mt. 10:39-42; Luke 6:38; 2 Cor. 8:14-15; 9:6). Obviously, while the local church is not the only way in which a Christian may use his or her gifts, it is certainly the best way.

Even for those involved in various parachurch ministries, musicians, evangelists, etc., the local church is God's way of providing accountability and protection for His children.

"But," you might say, "I've been to every church in town and there's not a good one in the lot." You could move. We change addresses for many reasons -- jobs, climate, to be near friends and loved ones -- why not in order to please God and to do His will.

"But," the next person says, "You just don't know what I've been through." Probably not. But is it any worse than the persecution and strife that the 1st century Jewish Christians endured? The writer to the Hebrews exhorted them to "...consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together... (10:24-25).

As long as the Church is comprised of sinful humans, people will be left hurt, misled, and lacking. But that is only when our eyes are on those sinful humans. Let us instead fix our eyes upon Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2). There was once a tract titled "You didn't quit eating did you? (and on the inside page)...the first time your mother burned the biscuits?"

Beloved brother or sister, the bottom line of the matter is two-fold: The Church needs you and you need the Church. Proverbs 18:1 states that "a man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgment." Find a good, local body of believers. Be tenacious. Be steadfast. Be in the Lord's will.

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