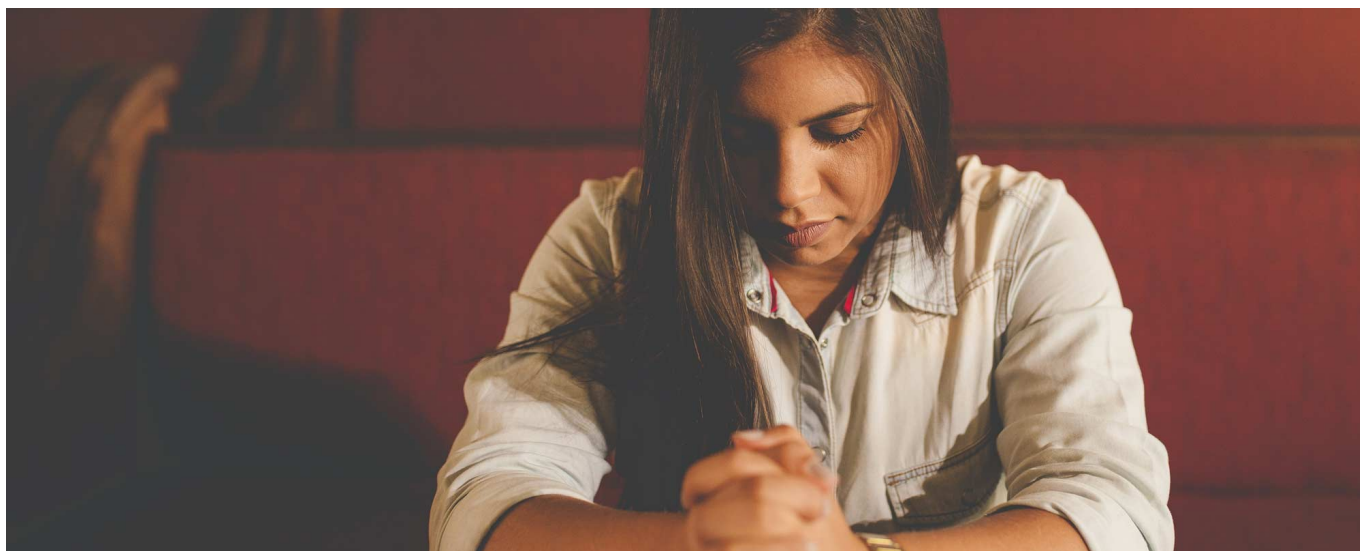


The Church I Couldn't Ignore

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Church is a dirty word to some people. It was to me. The entire church thing seemed like, at best, a waste of time and at worst, a toxic, dishonest brain-washing operation of epic proportions. As an atheist, I honestly could not fathom who would want to spend an hour a week with a church (much less *three* hours a week). However, by the grace of God, before too long I was one of those crazy three-hours-a-week-at-church people (and learned that the church was so much more than somewhere you *go*). In fact, I fell in love with the church, the bride of Christ. Here's why:

Her Impartiality

I was who most would assume to be the last person to receive a warm welcome from a church. I was a long-haired, outspoken atheist who was as politically liberal as can be. I was the supposed poster child for church ostracization. Thankfully, that's not what happened.

The church was the opposite of ostracizing. I first darkened the doors of the church with skepticism—not just of its claims, but of its members. I thought I would more than likely be relegated to the fringes and people would feel too challenged by me to be friendly (much less Christlike). Almost every stereotype I had in my mind about Christianity was shattered the first time I assembled with the church of Christ. There was no pomp. There was no

façade. The members were not wearing the masks of hypocrites. In fact, the congregation knew what they were doing religiously and why they were doing it. The congregants were loving and genuine, and I couldn't stand it. I wanted to dislike them for their philosophical ignorance. I wanted to disdain them for their backward thinking. However, their pure religion was unassailable.

This welcome was crucial. While there may be some congregations who would refuse to be so welcoming to someone so different, the church still gets it right sometimes (and, in my experience, often). If it wasn't for the impartiality of these godly Christians, I don't know where I would be today. The church welcomed me with open arms against all worldly odds. And for that, I love her.

Her Generosity

There are some who would have us to believe that God's command to "be generous and ready to share" (1 Tim 6:18 ESV) has fallen on deaf ears within the church. The church is often viewed (even among Christians) as tight-fisted and stingy. Not only is this view of the church ahistorical, it simply isn't true. Sure, some segments of the church are bound to be not as generous as others, but the church has been nothing short of magnanimous in my experience.

I didn't grow up in the church. It would be easy to view me as not of the fold, even after converting. Yet, the church has never ceased to see that all of my needs are taken care of, often through great sacrifice. The church has generously supported me through preaching school, times of transition, and last-minute mission trip needs. When I think about the church, I think about a collection of people who are willing to give you the shirts off their backs.

If it were not for the church's generosity, I wouldn't have had any livelihood over the past four years. This generosity isn't a matter of favoritism. I received generosity not because I'm special or have done anything to deserve it. The church has been generous only because she saw the opportunity to help a brother in need. And for that, I love her.

Her Companionship

The church gave me my best friends, people closer to me than family, and even my wife. Converting to Christianity how I did and when I did, I've lost many friends and have unfortunately strained some family relationships. Such is to be expected and is part of the

cost of discipleship (Lk. 14:25-33). What I didn't expect was that everything I lost by obeying the gospel would be given back to me a hundredfold.

I should have expected that, though. It's exactly as Jesus said in Mark 10:29-31:

Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.

It is within the church that the Christian who loses to follow Jesus gains a hundredfold. Like me, Christians throughout the ages have been inundated with friends, family, and love from a previously unlikely source. Though my newfound spiritual allegiance resulted in lost friends and relationships, the church filled this void to the nth degree. The church is a massive spiritual family, even for the outcasts. And for that, I love her.

Her Encouragement

Like any Christian, it hasn't always been smooth sailing for me post-conversion. I've given in to temptation. I've had months of doubting, weakness, pain, and second-guessing. I've felt spiritually lost and disoriented. Every struggle would be amplified if it were not for the church.

The church has always been there for me; to teach me, to encourage me, to mentor me, to let me know that I'm not alone in my struggles. The church has been there to stir me up to love and good works (Heb. 10:24), to keep me accountable, and to show me the more excellent way of Jesus Christ. I wouldn't trade the brotherhood I've found in Christ for anything in the world. If it weren't for my fellow Christians, I don't know if I'd still be one today. Far too often it is easier to quit than to keep going. When you realize, however, that you have more people in your corner than you can count, perseverance comes easy.

Conclusion

Christ loves His bride, no doubt. As part of that bride, I love her too. I owe her my deepest respect and thanks for being there for me, providing for me, encouraging me, and loving me. To the Christians who have been there for me and continue to be, thank you. Because of the love the church has shown me, I'm committed to pay it forward—to make the church the

type of place where everyone feels loved. God has done His part to make the church as awesome as possible. As God's children, let's continue to do our part.

Though many view the human side of the church as something that needs to be reimagined (and perhaps some aspects of it need to be), the church has shown me the purest love I've ever known this side of heaven. Those who make up the church are far from perfect, but if we swap our critical eyes for thankful ones, we'll fall in love with the church, too.