

If People Knew What I'd Done, They'd Never Let Me in Church

By Allen Webster (edited and adapted)

- Church is for good people, and I won't really fit in."
- "Church is for believers, and I have some doubts."
- "Church is for families, and I'm from a broken home."
- "Church is for people with good habits, and I've got some bad ones."
- "Church is for people who grew up in Sunday school; my parents didn't take me."
- "Church is for respectable people, and I've messed up my life."
- "Church is for married couples, and I'm single."

The list of excuses could grow long. The truth is there is no typical church member. No one will check your spiritual ID at the door on Sunday. There are no 2-page, extensive forms to fill out on your first visit; no references are required; no background checks to check us out. We all had to start where we were on our journey to heaven. Some came from farther in the far country than others, but we all had the smell of the pigpen on us (Luke 15).

Church is for you because:

GOD WANTS TO MAKE SOMETHING OF YOU, AND THE CHURCH IS HIS WORKSHOP.

If we are "His workmanship" (Ephesians 2:10), then He must have a workshop. Since He puts every saved person in the church (Acts 2:47), that would be the place He measures, molds, and makes us into masterpieces of His grace.

God took the wishy-washy Simon and made the rock Cephas (John 1:42). He took the persecutor Saul and made the missionary Paul (Acts 9:1–31). He took a hair-triggered Son of Thunder and made him the tenderhearted disciple of love (Mark 3:17; 1 John 3:14). He cast the demons out of Mary Magdalene and restored her normal life (Luke 8:2; 24:10). What could God do with you?

Have you thought of the simple phrase, God is "for us"? (Romans 8:31). It is easier for many to envision God as "against those who do evil" (Psalm 34:16), which is true, than it is to see the greater truth that God wants us to succeed and not fail—to go to heaven and not to hell. The prodigal son was a disappointment to his father to be sure; the father nonetheless ran to him, welcomed him, planned a party, and restored his son's status in the family (Luke 15:11–32).

God offers us the same grace—identical mercy, forgiveness, compassion, and opportunity. There is no sin too bad, no deed too awful, no thought too embarrassing to be forgiven.¹ God loves us (Ephesians 2:4), and what is more, we cannot keep Him from loving us (cf. Jeremiah 31:3; John 13:1). We can disappoint Him (Genesis 6:6). We can grieve Him (Ephesians 4:30). We can hurt Him (Psalm 95:10). We can put up an umbrella of sin to block the sunshine of His love, but we cannot make Him hate us. Love is who He is (1 John 4:8), and He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13).

The church welcomes sinners because God welcomes them. The church offers God's forgiveness because its members have received it (Colossians 3:12–13). The church gives us all a second chance at becoming the person God intended for us to be.

JESUS IS YOUR FRIEND, AND CHURCH IS WHERE HE MEETS HIS FRIENDS.

Jesus had friends on earth (cf. Luke 12:4; John 11:11). He has friends now: “You are My friends, if you do whatever I command you” (John 15:14). Where does He meet them? At church, of course. He eats and drinks with them there (Matthew 26:29; Luke 22:30).

Christ will welcome you to His church. It is as if He greets you at the front door with a smile (Matthew 11:28; 1 Timothy 2:3–6; 2 Peter 3:9). Every church says it wants to be a welcoming church, but the way churches welcome may be superficial—a warm greeting, a pleasant smile, a friendly handshake, and a welcome packet. Those things are good, but Christ's welcome is better. It is salvation (Romans 10:13), reconciliation (Romans 5:10), and reception into God's family (Romans 8:16).

There are conditions to these wonderful blessings. Christ receives sinners when they repent. He said, “Unless you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3, 5; cf. Mark 8:34; Acts 17:30). We do not go to heaven just because God loves us, nor because we love Him. We do not go to heaven only because we clean up our act. Salvation comes to believers who repent and obey Christ's gospel (Acts 2:38; 17:30–31).

Culture says that the church must change with the times, tone down talk about sin, and make no demands for life change. Just focus on God's love and do not mention sin, we are told. The world sees only two responses to sinners: either love them and accept their lifestyle as is, or disagree with them and thereby judge them and hate them.

Neither was Jesus' response—He loved sinners while maintaining holy expectations. He never condoned sin (John 8:1–11), and He never hated anyone or unfairly judged anyone (Matthew 7:1; Mark 10:21). His church must imitate Him (Ephesians 5:11). Since Jesus requires repentance, His church cannot offer cheap grace. The church is not just being old-fashioned. Christians are not backward bigots who refuse to get with the times. Despite what society says, abortion is sin. Racism is sin. Premarital sex is sin. Abusing women, children, the poor, or any person is sin. Pornography is sin. Greed is sin. Homosexual behavior is sin. Lying is sin. God's word is eternal (1 Peter 1:23–25). It does not change because opinions or laws change, nor when its principles become unpopular (Malachi 3:6; Romans 3:4). God's judgments have remained unchanged since the New Testament was completed (Hebrews 13:8; Jude 1:3). The Scriptures will read the same at the Judgment as today (John 12:48).

Jesus' church must meet people where they are and help them go where God wants them. Jesus' blood "cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Paul preached the gospel to adulterers, thieves, drunkards, homosexuals, fornicators, covetous, and idol worshipers. They changed, and God saved them (1 Corinthians 6:9–11). On the day of judgment, may no sinner in this generation say of the church, "You had good news to share, but you did not share it with me. Ashamed to call sin a sin, you condoned the behavior I'm condemned for."

THE HOLY SPIRIT WANTS TO COMFORT YOU,

AND THE CHURCH IS HIS HABITATION (EPHESIANS 2:21-22).

The Spirit, or Comforter (John 14:16), offers peace and joy in Christ (Romans 8:26–27; 14:17; 15:13; Galatians 5:22–23; Philippians 2:1).

The Spirit anticipated some would say, "If people knew what I have done, they would never let me in church," so He put encouraging examples in Scripture. The first church members were guilty of the blood of Jesus Himself (Acts 2:22–23). Yet they were forgiven (Acts 2:38, 41, 47).

The Philippian jailer gives no indication he had ever "been to church" in his life. He was a pagan Roman—not a Jew—so he was uninformed of Old Testament teaching about the Messiah. Paul and Silas taught him to believe on Christ to be saved (Acts 16:31). When they taught him and he believed, he was baptized "the same hour of the night" (16:32–34).

The Corinthians are another example (Acts 18:8). There was no Las Vegas or San Francisco in the Roman Empire, but there was a Corinth. Its citizens were widely known for immorality and ungodliness. Evangelizing in that place struck fear into the seasoned heart of the veteran apostle Paul (Acts 18:9–10; 1 Corinthians 2:3).

Surely, he must have thought, I'm wasting my time here. But the Lord knew what Paul did not. Those who perhaps were used to being featured in gossip columns or police records (1 Corinthians 6:9–11) soon composed the membership rolls of Christ's church in Corinth.

Take heart. You are not worse than those who became Christians in the New Testament. It is as easy for Jesus to save a great sinner as a small sinner. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). No one was ever saved because his sins were few; no one was ever rejected because his sins were many. If our guilt is enormous, He receives greater honor to pluck such a brand from the burning (Amos 4:11; Jude 1:23).³ Where sin abounds, grace abounds "much more" (Romans 5:20).

Jesus worked among publicans and sinners (Luke 7:34). He had success at changing them in the first century, and His gospel changes people today (Romans 1:16). Those involved in sinful behavior should not judge themselves unworthy of being Christians (Acts 13:46). People can change. It may not be easy, but with Christ it can be done. Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). If you need to make changes, do not use the excuse that you have been this way too long. Take a step in the right direction, and Christ will help you finish the journey.

THE DEVIL IS AGAINST YOU, AND CHURCH IS THE SAFEST PLACE FOR YOU.

To be blunt, Satan wants to destroy your life and take you to hell (1 Peter 5:8; Matthew 25:41). He is a wily foe (Ephesians 6:11) who has been doing this for thousands of years to billions of people. Do you think you will be able to defeat him on your own—your own wisdom, strength, and willpower? You will not. In fact, if you are mature enough to have sinned, he already has you (Romans 3:23; 1 John 1:8, 10). You need Christ's help, the Word's wisdom, and the gospel's power. These are available in the church through preaching (1 Peter 4:2) and the good examples of others (1 Corinthians 11:1; Hebrews 13:7, 17).

Satan's tactic is to distract and delay (Matthew 13:19–22; John 8:44; 2 Corinthians 11:3). If he can keep you away from church because you fear what others may say, or because you think you can never change or measure up to expectations, he has you where he wants you (Acts 24:25). If he can keep you from the flock, you will not find the Shepherd (John 10:1–10).

CHRISTIANS ARE LOVING PEOPLE, AND CHURCH IS WHERE YOU CAN CONNECT WITH THEM.

Many people are looking for a group to belong to, fellowship with, and enjoy their company. There is no better group than God's people. (Stereotypes are off-base. Christians are not a bunch of hateful hypocrites, stuck up and holier than thou.) The Christians I know are loving, fun, friendly people saved by grace.