

A Churchless Faith – Yeah Right!

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While across the western world there is increasing interest, research and concern being focused on church leavers many committed church leaders are also raising serious questions about the legitimacy of the faith of those who leave the church. Isn't the very idea of 'a churchless faith' and oxymoron, unbiblical and even a dangerous trend they ask?

Aren't all those who leave the church backsliding or at least potentially moving in that direction?

The title 'A Churchless Faith' was intended as both an engaging catch phrase and as something of a misnomer. Drawn from Bonhoeffer's earlier notion of 'Religionless Christianity' the phrase 'churchless faith' was an attempt to capture the lived experience of many people who see themselves as people of Christian faith but who are also completely alienated from institutionalized forms of church. A friend's experience may help illustrate this. When he was reading 'A Churchless Faith' in a local café at a large shopping mall he was interrupted by a shop owner who saw the title and said, "That's me." The man had not had anything to do with the book or the research that lay behind it, but simply saw the title as an apt description of his own experience. In this sense the idea of a churchless faith points to something which increasingly resonates with many people.

At the same time we must also remember that a churchless faith is theologically a misnomer. All followers of Christ (Christians, from the Greek Christianoi = 'christ people') are by definition part of the 'church' – the community of the Lord (from the Greek Kyriake = belonging to Kyrios, Lord, means the house or community of the Lord). That is the church universal, the church made up of all those who belong to Christ. Such people may or may not presently be actively involved in an institutional community of 'Christ's people' – a local church.

That is the difference – leaving an institutional form of church does not equate with leaving the church in the wider sense of the community of people committed to Christ. In fact many church leavers may no longer be going to institutional forms of church but they have on going faith companions and communities of involvement and service. And these are their new 'church'. Many are finding or forming new groups with whom to share their lives and faith.

John Wesley had it spot on when he said: 'Sir, you wish to serve God and go to heaven? Remember that you cannot serve him alone. You must therefore find companions or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion'.*

Many Churchless Faith people are finding such companions and forming new connections with people to serve and share their lives with. While the bible certainly knows nothing of solitary religion it holds open many more forms of Christian community and companionship than some might think.

* Serious Man (John Wesley – quoted in Howard A. Snyder, The Radical Wesley and Patterns for Church Renewal [Downers Grove Ill.; Intervarsity Press, 1980], p148.