

*If It Hadn't Been For the Church!*  
**Matthew 5:13-16**  
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I want to pose a simple question: If all churches suddenly disappeared today, would we be missed?

I think it a fair question in light of the low regard, if not downright hostility toward the church held by millions. We're not talking about the hostility found at the end of the first century when Romans were killing believers for their faith. Nor are we talking about the kind of hostility exhibited in the wildcat days of early St. Louis when many citizens marched in protest around churches and seminaries to oppose the church in that old river town. Still, I've lost count of the number of times I've heard people say to me or in the media, "I'm against 'organized religion' and the church."

So, what if we took the *church*-ocidal implications of the things these folks say to their logical conclusion and answered, "What if churches like ours were wiped off the face of the map? Would anything be lost?"

Of course, the first thing you would expect me to say, especially in the middle of a stewardship campaign is, "Yes!" Except, I think it also fair to say that some things *wouldn't* be missed: Senseless meetings and gossip and pettiness. And preachers more interested in telling people they're bound for hell than proclaiming God's love. Though about those meetings: I've also seen the Holy Spirit working at Worship Design Team and Outreach

and at our committee that planned René's ordination celebration, to name but a few.

So, would the world really be better off without us churches?

As my buddy Joe Culpepper and I cycled Adventure Cycling's Route of the Underground Railroad and slaves' route to freedom from the Gulf Coast to Canada we saw lots of churches: Southern Baptist, Missionary Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Disciple, and United Church of Canada. They were in big towns, small towns, and out in the middle of nowhere. We saw their buildings and occasionally some people, but no *obvious* evidence that any of these churches were making any difference at all!

Yet, as Joe and I journeyed northward we heard story-after-story of the ways churches helped escaped slaves find their way to freedom. There was the safe-house church in Madison, Indiana, First United Church of Christ in Oberlin, Ohio, and its notable abolitionist preacher Charles Grandison Finney, and the safe room at Michigan Avenue Baptist Church in Buffalo, New York, and countless other churches and safe houses dotting the landscape.

And you know what we realized in that slow-boat-to-China pace we kept up over 7 weeks? We realized *if it hadn't been for the church the abolition of slavery might never have occurred!* Or certainly when it did! I'll never again hear Jesus say, "***You are the light of the world. A city built***

*on a hill cannot be hid,*” without thinking of the Rankin House in Ripley, Ohio, and the lamp Presbyterian minister John Rankin put in his window to ensure slaves’ safe passage across the Ohio River from Kentucky! It’s impossible for me to think of the Civil Rights Movement springing from the Underground Railroad without thinking both happened because of the church!

Yet, the big picture doesn’t tell it all. It could well be argued that what has kept the church going for nearly 2 millennia is countless random acts of kindness one-after-another the church has done for us and for others!

You know this is the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the release of the movie “Ghostbusters.” Remember it’s most famous line? “Who you gonna call?”

When people look for a place to hold their wedding, a place to help raise their kids with solid values, or need help to get them get through an illness or a death, they also ask, “Who you gonna call?” Their answer isn’t “Ghostbusters!” of course, but the Church! Often this church! It’s like a sign René and I saw outside an Anglican Church in London several years ago: “We’re here to help you match, hatch, and dispatch.”

Of course, people can get married by a judge at a courthouse, give birth without ever thinking of the Christian nurture of their child, and die quite happily with a mortician offering a few words. Truth is: More and more folks are skipping services when they lose their loved one all the time!

The real witness to me of the difference a church makes is when I hear someone begin a sentence with the words, “If it hadn’t been for the church.”

“IF IT HADN’T BEEN FOR THE CHURCH!”

Like René’s and my friend Jim Barton. Jim was a member of Meadlawn Christian Church in Indianapolis when I went there as their pastor. Jim was one of the funniest people I’ve ever known. Jim was a teacher who also taught our 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Class. If he couldn’t pronounce a name he came across in the Bible he’d substitute the word “Sport!”

Jim decided to go to seminary. This struck those who knew him all his life as funny. Jim was a jokester, always getting into trouble in the neighborhood he grew up in because of the pranks he’d play. His favorite weapon was soap he’d use on people’s windows, especially this time of year.

But for all his juvenile delinquency, Jim had a serious side. He grew up with 5 brothers and a sister in a small, 3-bedroom house. With parents of modest means, this meant exiling Jim to the basement. It meant lots and lot of lonely time. A major period of difficult solitude often accompanies people’s call to ministry; like Jesus in the wilderness. Church was a place where Jim could go to stay out of trouble; unlike his brothers who were always in some kind of difficulty with the law.

He’d say, “If it hadn’t been for the church, I would probably have found myself in jail or in some other predicament.” Meadlawn Christian

Church was where Jim was baptized. It was where he met his lovely wife and was married, and then had three boys, one of who is now an attorney in Arizona, after getting a full ROTC scholarship to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in physics and philosophy, and spent time on a nuclear sub. It was that church where Jim was ordained 25 years ago. It was also that church where Jim's funeral was held earlier this year. Several of us toasted his life, his humor, and his ministry while in Indy at the General Assembly this summer. But I'll never forget hearing Jim say, "If it hadn't been for the church." Whenever I heard those words I think of Jim.

You undoubtedly know similar stories; perhaps your own, starts in the same way: "If it hadn't been for the church." "If it hadn't been for the church, I wouldn't have...Fill in the blank." "The church saved me" is a variation on this same theme.

You see, this is why we give and pledge and make all the fuss about money this time of year in the church. It's because we have a Jim Barton in our lives, someone whose life the church helped turn around, and someone to whom the church made an infinite difference.

But don't take my word for it. Listen to what our own Merlin Taylor has to say. Merlin would have been here to share his testimony himself, except for a terrible migraine headache that laid him low toward the end of last week. But these are his words he e-mailed me:

First of all, I have come to remind everyone of a fact I can never forget--a fact that should I somehow forget, God assuredly will remember: The fact that were it not for the extraordinary giving practiced by members of this congregation, during a period of great personal difficulty lasting from early 2006 to the beginning of this year, I would be either dead, destitute or insane today. I reiterate: were it not for your giving, I today would most likely be in a grave, a mental hospital, or a homeless shelter.

Giving means living! That appears true not only for the recipients of giving. Gain without giving can become a lethal trap. We all have witnessed a great nation now struggling to extricate itself from such a trap--that great nation being our own. Recalling my own sad experiences within that very trap, I secondly have come to say that Tami and I, who have gained much by membership in this congregation, now know that a bond of love compels us to remember First Christian of Omaha--even from a distance--in our giving.

As for words I have to give you, there remain a few: Thank you, and God mightily bless you--and as you are blessed, continue to find ways to give. Giving means living.