

A wooden cross stands on a hill, silhouetted against a sunset sky with orange and pink clouds. The cross is made of two thick wooden beams. The background is a gradient from blue at the top to orange and pink at the bottom, with some clouds on the right side.

CHRISTIANITY
— WITHOUT —
RELIGION

Following Jesus all by Yourself

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Mike Murphy

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Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Religion vs. Jesus](#)

[You are Spirit](#)

[Build Your Own Church](#)

[Christianity is all about Serving God](#)

[Why Must We Endure](#)

[A Hell of a Choice](#)

[Let's Get High](#)

[Sex is here to Stay](#)

[JC&LGBTQ](#)

[Following Jesus all by Yourself](#)

[About the Author](#)

Introduction

Christianity and religion are two different things. In many cases, religion is what gets in the way of Christianity. Some people avoid Christianity altogether because of religion. And some Christians avoid religion because it has actually damaged their sincere faith. Regardless of where you stand on the issue of religion, there is a spiritual battle going on in this world that involves each and every one of us. This battle is between good and evil. There is no middle ground. You are on one side or the other. As a follower of Jesus Christ, you are on the side of good. As a Christian you are supplied with tools to fight off attacks from the enemy. On the other hand, if you've turned your back on God, you are in deep trouble.

It's possible to access all the awesome advantages of being a Christian without ever stepping foot inside a church or becoming a part of any religion. If you know where to look in the Bible, you can be empowered in such a way that the devil's deception will be totally transparent. You can be guided and encouraged to walk in the light of Jesus with full confidence, without the need for any religious structure. Your Christian faith can be your own. Your walk with Jesus can become a personal relationship. Your faith can be made stronger. Your joy can be made complete.

No matter who you are, God loves you. For that reason, God has provided us all with a detailed instruction book that points the way toward knowing him in a personal way. The Bible is an enormous treasure chest full of vital information; but unless you know where to look, some of the most valuable nuggets can be hard to find. With the proper guidance, you can travel through the pages of the Bible on a journey that will lead to a deeper understanding of the Christian faith and your personal connection to God. You can do this all by yourself, right now, without attending church or following any particular religion. Today is a good day to take complete control over your personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Religion vs. Jesus

Whenever I think about religion, my brain fills up with an endless list of denominations: Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Latter Day Saints, Seventh Day Adventist, Judaism, Islam, Scientology, and the list goes on to infinity. My mind instantly becomes a giant blood clot filled with a conglomeration of religious doctrine that spans the gap between spiritual truth and pure insanity. God could not have possibly intended for his story to be so misconstrued as to produce this ocean of fact and fiction all mixed together in such a way that it's nearly impossible to identify where the misdirection ends and the truth begins.

All I want is to know God and clearly understand what he wants me to do with my life. I have to believe that's what God wants as well. So why is religion getting in the way? In my mind the answer is simple: the devil. We want to know God. God wants us to know him. The devil wants to keep us all running around in circles going nowhere. We can't make the mistake of discounting the devil as just a literary tool used to keep us focused on God. God is real. The devil is real. From the very beginning of Christianity, the devil has been subverting the message through a devious manipulation of the minds of religious leaders. The devil's tactic is to divide and conquer. He's winning.

The Bible

When I read the New Testament of the Bible, I'm struck by the fact that those who cheered to have Jesus crucified were the religious leaders known as the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The devil so clouded their minds they could not see God standing right in front of them. The devil so clouded their minds they elected to kill the human incarnation of God. Of course, God knew this would happen and used this awesome example to demonstrate that his power far exceeds the power of the devil. The devil's manipulation caused the death of Jesus Christ, but death could not hold Jesus because God had already established him to be the Savior of the world. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God left no doubt that he is the supreme power in the universe and if you hang with the devil, you will be on a losing team.

The History of Religion

And so religion has a history. I see some wonderful things being accomplished by religious organizations that build hospitals, feed hungry people, and help the disadvantaged; however, at the same time I see so-called religious organizations robbing people of their life savings so that religious leaders can live in lavish mansions and fly in private jets. I see so-called religious organizations that are outright frauds. I see respected religious organizations espousing the same kind of legalistic rhetoric that the Pharisees and Sadducees proclaimed right before they

murdered Jesus. Some religious doctrine appears to be sincerely God-centered Biblical thought on the surface, but deep down it is nothing more than an attempt to control and manipulate. Let's face it – Christianity has become an industry that needs to keep its people employed and its infrastructure well-maintained.

We Need Jesus

The bottom line is we all need Jesus. When we follow Jesus, we are on the winning team. Many religious organizations proclaim to be avenues to help followers of Jesus stay on track. The problem with many of these organizations is they have been so manipulated by the devil it is doubtful Jesus would even bother to visit them if he were to return today. As I see it, much of the doctrine of many mainstream Christian churches is more the creation of man, than the creation of God. The simple solution is to set man's agenda aside and focus completely on the teachings of Jesus. When man starts listing all the rules we need to follow, we only need to remember Jesus already completed the work on our behalf when he went to the cross. We have been set free. When religion clouds your mind, the best thing to do is turn to Jesus by focusing on his teaching rather than the teaching of any particular church. There is no power in submitting to any religious organization. There is great power when you submit your life to Jesus Christ.

True Religion

“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

James 1:27 (NIV)

The word translated as “religion” from the original Greek text of the New Testament is a word that essentially means worship or ceremonial worship. In the scripture from the book of James above, we learn that God believes our religion or our worship of him should be in service to others. This process of worship is “pure and faultless.” When we look at the account of the early Christian church identified in the book of Acts, we don't see them organizing a super talented worship band. There isn't any discussion about erecting any kind of a building. What we see is the kind of religion talked about in the above scripture from the book of James.

“All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”

Acts 2:44-45 (NIV)

I don't know of a Christian denomination today that has that kind of focus. “Everything in common” is hard to come by these days. And a focus on providing for everyone's needs is so enormously complicated in our world it is all but impossible. Certainly there are some Christian denominations that look out for “orphans and widows” but that is by no means a central focus. Perhaps the one thing identified by the Bible as being a valuable part of religion that is being

attended to in today's religions organizations, is an effort to "keep oneself from being polluted by the world." But do we need an enormous organization with big buildings and a board of directors to accomplish that goal? And what's going to keep the religious organizations from being "polluted by the world?" While there may be one exception, it's hard for me to imagine a denomination that has not been influenced by the world in some way. I'll leave it to others to decide which of the denominations has already been "polluted by the world."

The Problem with Religion

I don't think anyone can deny that Jesus had a problem with religion during his time spent here on this earth. It is for that reason that I feel comfortable saying I have a problem with religion in today's world. Is there more good than bad in today's Christian religions? I don't know how you do that math. I will tell you that I attend a Christian church just about every Sunday, but there were several years in my Christian walk that I did not. I still maintained a close connection to God during that time. I was still a Christian. I just wasn't attending church. It also should be noted here that Jesus frequently went to the Jewish temple to preach the gospel – he didn't avoid church. I think it's obvious there is value whenever people gather to worship God. People getting together to worship God is a good thing. Jesus believed in religion – corporate worship of God. Jesus also believed religion would be a focal point of the devil's attack on Christianity.

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."

Matthew 7:15 (NIV)

The Religion of Serving Others

Jesus carried out his religion – or his worship of God, in service to others. Jesus was the ultimate servant going all the way to the cross to die for our sins. As followers of Jesus, our mission is to have that same servant's spirit. Our mission should be to have the same religion that Jesus had – that is the religion of worshiping God by serving others.

It appears to me that Jesus had a love/hate relationship with religion. He also warned us there will be those who use religion to take advantage of us. The book of Acts and the book of James teach us that true religion – or true worship of God – is played out in service to others. Jesus demonstrated this kind of worship with his life. Jesus also spent time worshipping together with others the way we do in church today. Corporate worship is in fact a means of serving others through mutual support and fellowship. We need to find a balance of true religion – the religion of serving others – and corporate worship without falling victim to the devil's schemes. Make no mistake about it, the battle between good and evil is real and is being played out in the halls of organized religion. It's time for true followers of Jesus Christ to rise up and return Christianity to its foundational principle of serving others.

You are Spirit

*“But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await
a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.”
Philippians 3:20 (NIV)*

Christians are just passing through this world on their way to the Kingdom of Heaven. Our Savior Jesus Christ is preparing a place for us that will turn this life into a faded memory that will eventually disappear altogether. We will continue on into eternity. This life is a microscopic speck of existence in all eternity. Before we can consider further our relationship to organized religion, we need to clearly identify who we are and where we’re going.

*“The human spirit is the lamp of the Lord that sheds light on one’s inmost being.”
Proverbs 20:27 (NIV)*

When we look in the mirror, we see the human body that is our current vehicle. These human bodies are our means of transportation through this world. When we have completed our journey here, we will leave these bodies behind and travel on to be with God.

*“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead.
The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable;
it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory;
it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;
it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.
If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”
1 Corinthians 15:42-44 (NIV)*

Christians will one day leave their “natural body” behind and continue throughout eternity in their “spiritual body.” So the body in which we currently reside is disposable. Everything we experience in this world will one day be left behind. This life has been provided for us to develop our “spiritual body.” Every joyous moment, every tragic event, every bit of laughter, every bit of sorrow, every amazing revelation, and every shocking realization is all part of our spiritual growth experience. We are in training. This is not permanent. This life is a brief moment in our eternal existence. This world is nothing more than an elaborate and deeply meaningful maturation of our spirit.

Traveling from this Life to the Next

High school is a grand example of traveling through another world and coming out the other side leaving that world behind. Entering high school for me was a bit frightening. The juniors and seniors all seemed so much older and wiser. The teachers had an air of academic authority that I found intimidating. The social structure was challenging for a shy kid who was much smaller than all the other boys. And I wasn't much of a student. I'm not sure I did any homework the entire time I was there. My grades were a clear reflection of that dereliction of duty.

While I failed to learn much academically in high school, I did feel like I had learned a great deal about life – how to deal with the older kids, how to deal with the teachers, how to navigate the social structure. By the end of my senior year, I felt like I was an expert high school student. The frightened and unsure kid who entered high school was now a confident master of this stage of life subculture. Of course, that world was soon left behind. It was time to go out into the real world; a very different environment. While much of what happened in high school was profoundly impactful – some bright moments and some challenging moments – most of that experience would be useless in the world that was to come. Some of the most tragic moments and some of the most triumphant moments would be totally meaningless to my existence as an adult.

As Christians, when we arrive in the Kingdom of Heaven to begin our eternal life, like high school, we will leave our old life behind and be left with those experiences from this world that will inform our spiritual lives beyond. What happens in this life will be largely meaningless in our eternal life other than the fact that our spirits will have been molded in such a way as to prepare us for our next journey.

Traveling Spirits

This concept of being a spirit traveling in an earthly body is largely ignored in the churches I've attended; but from my point of view, it's a critical piece of the puzzle. A large part of this understanding is the acknowledgment that evil spirits can also occupy these earthly bodies. The Bible is full of examples of people who have been inhabited by evil spirits. A large part of the ministry of Jesus was the dramatic removal of evil spirits from people who had been long tormented by their occupation.

“For Jesus had said to him, “Come out of this man, you impure spirit!”

Mark 5:8

It's also important to note that more than one spirit can take up residence in our earthly body.

*“When an impure spirit comes out of a person,
it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it.
Then it says, ‘I will return to the house I left.’*

*When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order.
Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself,
and they go in and live there.”
Matthew 12:43-45 (NIV)*

Fortunately, God has provided Christians with a way to protect our earthly bodies from being overrun by evil spirits. God has provided us with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit joins our spirit inside our earthly body, we are then protected from evil spirits.

*“But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one.”
2 Thessalonians 3:3 (NIV)*

Traveling with the Holy Spirit

As Christians, we share our earthly body with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit not only protects us from evil spirits, but also provides us with guidance. This is where Christians can find themselves in conflict with their earthly body. These bodies that we inhabit have their own fleshly desires that we need to contend with on a daily basis. The Holy Spirit is living with us and pointing us in the right direction, however, our spiritual self has the full authority to follow the guidance provided by the Holy Spirit or obey the fleshly desires of our earthly body. This is a critical part of our ongoing training. How we respond to these desires sets the tone for our walk with Jesus.

*“Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires;
but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.”
Romans 8:5*

Not all of us are good at making choices. I made the wrong choice in high school. I decided to ignore the academic rigor that would get me into a good college. There were teachers and guidance counselors along the way that were advising me to work hard, read my textbooks, and complete all my homework. I decided to play with my neighborhood friends and watch TV instead. This same opportunity for success or failure applies to our relationship with the Holy Spirit. We can decide to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit or succumb to the desires of our flesh. Of course, spirit communication is not the same as human communication. How do we know for sure when our spirit is communicating with the Holy Spirit?

Holy Spirit Communication

I'm not sure I have the answer to Holy Spirit communication. I'm tempted to say you just know. When I was a young man, I worked as an assistant cook in a large kitchen that included a bakery. One day, the baker had to leave early and he enlisted me to remove some cakes from the oven when they were done. I didn't normally work with the baker so I requested a little more guidance. I asked him how I would know when the cakes were done. His response was, "You

just know,” and with that he walked out of the kitchen. I’d like to tell you I miraculously removed the cakes at just the right time, but the truth is I asked someone else for help and together we were able to remove the cakes before they burned.

For me, connecting with the Holy Spirit is much the same process. I get help from the Word of God, from qualified Bible teachers, and from Christian friends and family. There are, to be sure, times when I just know what the Holy Spirit is telling me. But make no mistake about it, there are evil spirits also occupying the space around us and they will do everything possible to distract and misdirect. Following the advice of the Holy Spirit is a matter of ignoring our own earthly desires and blocking the schemes of the devil. The simple advice given in the scripture above from the book of Romans is for us to set our minds on what the Spirit desires. We learn the desires of the Holy Spirit through careful study of the Word of God.

Focus on Serving God

We are spirits. We are challenged every day by the evil spirits of the devil. Christians are protected from those evil spirits by the Holy Spirit. The spirit of God is overseeing all of this with his awesome power, authority, and love. Our mission is to follow the path that God places before us by trusting the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When we approach that directive with a sincere heart focused on serving God, we will in the end be found blameless and faithful.

*“May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.
May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
1 Thessalonians 5:23*

Build Your Own Church

You don't hear much talk about it these days, but the Christian church has been infiltrated by the devil and he has so confounded the church leaders, many of them are unaware of his destructive manipulation. Finding the real Christian church can be next to impossible these days.

It is a common understanding that the church is not a building. The church is the collection of all those people who are followers of Jesus Christ. If you are a Christian, you are a part of the church. In the book of Acts, we read about the early church and how they were divided up into smaller churches located in various cities. There is no discussion about Catholic and Protestant. There is no distinction between Charismatic and Evangelical. There is only a discussion about how these people gathered together to share meals, study the Word of God, and take care of each other. In its purest sense, that is what the church is supposed to be doing.

At some point along the way, a long, long time ago, Christian church leaders began making rules. They made these rules with good intentions and used the Bible as the basis for their rule making; however, make no mistake about it, many of these rules were not Biblical. The Bible was, and is to this day, often twisted and manipulated to fit a pattern of control these church leaders intended to maintain. When one group of church leaders objected to the rules of another group of church leaders, they simply started a new church with a new set of often non-Biblical rules. As a result, two thousand years later, we now have thousands of different so-called Christian churches.

The Devil and the Church

It doesn't take a historian to see that all of the Christian denominations today have developed their own certain set of rules, either written or implied, that congregants are expected to follow. These denominational norms are established to control people. I believe the primary focus of that control is to help people move closer to God and ensure salvation in the name of Jesus Christ. But if we're honest, some of that control is there to perpetuate the financial security of the denomination or church making those rules. In today's world, churches have bills to pay. In order to pay those bills, you need a certain number of people donating a certain amount of money to the cause. As a result, many hours are spent by a ministry staff dedicated to generating the needed funds to make payroll and maintain the church facility. Those churches with the purest heart will tell you they preach the gospel and trust God to deliver the needed funds to stay afloat. The truth is, you can't operate in today's world solely on faith – you need to budget.

This is the devil's manipulation. The devil has so confounded the Christian church leaders they can no longer agree on one single path for the church to follow. This is not a new problem.

Much of the New Testament is dedicated to the apostles trying to keep the Christian church on track. The devil had already started his work and was making significant progress. The Christian church has been fighting this battle with the devil since the very beginning. Fortunately we now have the New Testament record as our guide. If we want to find the Christian church, our search needs to begin in the pages of the New Testament.

If you've put your faith in Jesus Christ, you are part of the Christian church. If you travel across town to the nearest Christian church building and join the congregation, you will find a mixture of genuine believers, people pretending to believe, and lost souls. Many, if not all, of these people will be preyed upon by the devil. The devil will be making the church leader's job harder. The devil will be sowing the seeds of doubt in the minds of believers. The devil will be pointing the lost souls in the wrong direction. I don't know that there is any Christian church building that is solely comprised of sincere members of the Christian church. I pray to God that such a congregation exists; but if it does, it will likely be a very small group. The devil is just too busy sending his demons out to do his work for any church group of significant size not to be infiltrated.

How do You Build Your Own Church?

The secret to building your own church is to begin with the model from the book of Acts. The early church was dedicated to studying the Word of God, prayer, sharing meals with each other, and supporting each other as needed.

*“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship,
to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”*

Acts 2:42 (NIV)

*“All the believers were together and had everything in common.
They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.”*

Acts 2:44-45 (NIV)

*“All the believers were one in heart and mind.
No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own,
but they shared everything they had.”*

Acts 4:32 New (NIV)

Those three verses from the New Testament are the foundation of the Christian church. If we are true followers of Jesus Christ, this should be the kind of church we want to attend. The truth is this kind of church is extremely hard to find. The devil has so complicated our lives it's totally unrealistic to consider selling all our possessions to give to anyone who has need. There isn't any group of people with which we have everything in common. And it's unrealistic to consider sharing everything we have. The devil has made the perfect Christian church model nearly impossible in today's world

The only way to join a church that fits the perfect model presented in the Book of Acts is to build your own church. Each and every one of us can build our own church. We build that church within the boundaries of our heart. This is ground protected by the Holy Spirit. This is the one location the devil cannot occupy. When we build our own church in our heart, we can take it with us wherever we go. Wherever we go to have fellowship with other believers will be our church. Wherever we go to study the Word of God with other believers will be our church. Wherever we go to share our possessions will be our church. Wherever we go to give to those who have need will be our church. Wherever we go to share a meal and pray with other believers will be our church.

Joining the Local Church

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I am a member of the Christian church and I carry that membership with me in my heart. Wherever I go, my church membership goes with me. As I write this, I am also currently a member of a local church congregation and have been for many years. However, there was a time in my life where I drifted away from local church attendance and went several years only sporadically attending church. At no time during those years did I feel separated from my membership in the Christian church. The church was always in my heart. The church I'm attending now is a wonderful church, but it is not perfect. That doesn't matter. The perfect church is always with me in my heart.

The value in joining a local church is the proximity to people of like mind. Finding those with whom you have common Christian goals, is much easier when you're a member of a local church. In addition, I believe we have some responsibility as true believers to join a local church, if possible, to make ourselves available to other believers. Ideally, joining the local church will provide us with opportunities to serve God by serving others. When we attend a local church with the true Christian church in our heart, we can put any negative aspects aside, thereby turning our back on the devil's division and focusing on fellowship and the other positive opportunities provided.

Alternative Churches

In an effort to get back to the early Christian church example found in the Book of Acts, some believers have returned to the home church model. Rather than big buildings and large congregations, these home church Christians are keeping their congregation below 20 members and holding service in their own home. While I see great value in the intimacy of this style of church, it also has a number of limitations. The home church eliminates a dedicated children's ministry and specific services for Jr. High and High School students. The home church also greatly limits the ability for the church to develop a music ministry. And the home church also limits the ability to have any kind of significant impact on the surrounding community.

Many larger local churches have small group ministries that work in conjunction with the larger congregation. In this model, church members are encouraged and assisted in building small groups that meet at the church or in private homes after the regular full congregation meeting. This model provides the intimacy of the home church while maintaining all the benefits of a larger congregation. Of course, it should be noted that a small group often is limited to meeting certain weeks out of the year and does not usually have the same level of commitment that a true home church group would have.

The Perfect Church

Never forget that the devil is in an all-out campaign to disrupt and confuse the Christian church. He has been so diabolical in his effort, the Christian church has been fragmented into thousands of pieces. The only perfect church we will find in this world is the church we build in our heart. We can walk into any church building and find perfection if we build the church in our heart on the foundation provided for us in the New Testament.

We may need to go to more than one location to gather together all the needed components of a true Christian church. That's how we circumnavigate the distractions of the devil. We need to find a group of believers with whom we can have fellowship, share meals, and pray. We need to find a group of believers with whom we have a common understanding of all things Christian. We need to find a group of believers who are dedicated to helping one another. We need to find a group of believers who are willing to share everything they have. We need to find a group of believers who share a common focus on loving God and serving Him by serving others.

Ideally, we would find all of the above characteristics in one location; but if that is not possible we should expand our efforts and look beyond our local church. It would be nice if our local church facilitated our desire to help and serve others, but if necessary, there are many service organizations that can fulfill that component. It would be nice if our local church was dedicated to connecting with the community in a way that encouraged interaction between believers and non-believers. If that is not the case, we need to get involved in organizations that are reaching out to others in this way. We all need to be more willing to make suggestions, encourage collaboration between local churches, and take on leadership roles when our talents are needed.

You don't hear much talk about it these days, but the Christian church has been infiltrated by the devil. We can outsmart the devil. We can build the perfect Christian church in our heart. With a little effort, we can find all the components of the true Christian church by looking beyond our local church or encouraging greater collaboration between churches. Even if we don't have the talent to take on a leadership role in the church, we all have the ability to support those who are working hard to move the church in the right direction. It takes commitment. It takes dedication. That's what it means to be a Christian.

Christianity is all about Serving God

*“What does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God,
to walk in obedience to him, to love him,
to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul”
Deuteronomy 10:12-13*

Serving God is a demonstration of your love for Him through loving service to others. Loving God with all your heart and loving your neighbor, as Jesus Christ taught, is the essence of serving God. All service to God is accomplished through the power which He supplies and therefore binds us together with Him.

Everything we do is in service to something. We serve God, serve ourselves, or serve the devil. Whenever we put ourselves aside and serve others, we are at the same time serving God. God has placed us here to serve each other. When we neglect those around us and focus on our own personal needs, we are acting in service to ourselves. And when we make decisions that harm others, we have stepped into the darkness and are in service to the devil.

When we obsess on our own needs and neglect those around us, we are playing into the hands of the devil. The devil wants us to turn our back on God and focus on ourselves. When we separate ourselves from God by seeking our own needs above the needs of others, we make ourselves available to the devil. We are only one step away from stepping into darkness. It is selfish desire that causes us to take advantage of others. Our selfish nature is the weakness the devil exploits. When we focus on the needs of others, we are essentially closing the door to the devil and standing firm in service to God.

We Don't Need to Serve Religion

There are some religious practices that may be portrayed by a particular church as service to God, but in truth they are nothing more than self-serving rituals. I don't want to call out any specific practice because I don't want to disparage any specific denomination or church. I'll simply make the point that the Bible tells us to worship God, study the Word of God, pray, and serve others. Anything that does not fall within that basic framework is extra-curricular and might be construed as in service to that particular religion rather than in service to God. I'm not of the opinion that all church rituals are bad; for the most part they are fairly benign. I do worry about rituals that might cause someone to be more devoted to the church than they are to serving God. Of course, serving the church in a capacity that helps others worship, study the Word, pray, and serve others, is in fact serving God. Serving the church in a capacity that is only designed to increase attendance, or stimulate revenue, could be seen as a selfish desire of the church and not a direct service to God.

This is an example of how religion can muddy the water and dilute the value of pure Christianity. Every denomination has some form of ritual practice that extends beyond what the Bible directly teaches. This leaves us with tens of thousands of examples of potential misdirection. That doesn't mean one cannot partake of these rituals and still be a true Christian. I'm simply saying some of these rituals are completely unnecessary and living without them will have absolutely no consequence in our effort to serve the Lord.

We Serve God by Following Jesus

Serving God is not a matter of following the doctrine of any religion. Serving God is all about following the teachings of Jesus. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ provided us with the ultimate example of service to others. We were all given a death sentence and Jesus stepped forward on our behalf and took that punishment on himself – dying on the cross for our sins.

*“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.
For even the Son of Man did not come to be served,
but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
Mark 10:43-45*

Christianity is the practice of following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. We will never attain the perfection of Jesus but we should never stop trying. By focusing on the teachings of Jesus, we are serving God as we serve our Savior.

*“Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am,
my servant also will be.
My Father will honor the one who serves me.”
John 12:26*

The New Testament is our guidebook for following Jesus. The four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all contain the words of Jesus himself. The rest of the New Testament contains the apostle's explanation of the teachings of Jesus and provides an enormously detailed path for us to follow. In the book of First Peter, we find a sort of summation of what it means to follow Jesus.

*“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.
Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.
Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others,
as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.
If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God.
If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides,
so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.
To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”*
1 Peter 4:8-11

Love God and Love your neighbor are the two commandments that Jesus identified as the most important (*Matthew 22:36-40*). This makes the practice of Christianity very simple. If everything we do travels through a filter of love, we can’t go wrong. If we are acting out of love there is no room for the devil to infiltrate. If we allow love to guide us in our daily lives, we will be traveling a road of service to God all day long.

Serving God Outside of the Church

It’s entirely possible to serve God within the confines of what may be considered a secular organization. The Red Cross is a perfect example of an organization that is serving God by serving others without a specific religious doctrine. Habitat for Humanity, an organization that uses volunteers to build affordable housing, is another example of an organization that is not specifically Christian but is without question serving God by serving others. In addition to these two organizations, there are many homeless shelters and food banks that operate outside of a specifically Christian framework; but are most certainly serving God by serving others. Essentially these are examples of institutions that are serving God without religion.

There are many other organizations dedicated to serving God that are outside of a specific religious structure but are founded on Christian principals. Samaritan’s Purse is a Christian humanitarian organization. World Vision is another Christian humanitarian organization. Compassion International is still another Christian humanitarian organization. Volunteering with any of these Christian organizations or any of the non-Christian organizations dedicated to serving others, is a way to serve God by serving outside of a specific church or religion.

Sadly, most churches or religions offer little in the way of providing service opportunities outside of the church. Most churches offer service opportunities in children’s ministry, in music ministry, or in other duties that directly benefit the church operation. What is often lacking is a connection to those in need outside of the church. If you’re attending a church that is not involved in serving those in need in your community, I would challenge you to speak up and suggest such a program be developed. Ideally, our churches should be facilitating a connection to those in need that provides members a way to fulfill their duty to serve God by serving others.

Serving God Day by Day

Every moment of every day is an opportunity to serve God. If we follow the teachings of Jesus, our eyes will be opened in a new way. As Christians, we have the Holy Spirit working with us to help identify service possibilities. As we begin our day, we typically take care of our personal needs for hygiene and nutrition. Being good stewards of the bodies God gave us, is a form of service to God. If we neglect our bodies or abuse them by overeating, drug abuse, alcohol abuse, or living a sedentary life that doesn't provide enough exercise to keep everything in good working order, we are mismanaging a gift from God. Our service to God starts with how we take care of ourselves.

If we live in a home where other people reside, our next opportunity to serve God will be in how we interact with our family or roommates. Jesus made it clear that our approach when dealing with others should always come from a place of love. This can be difficult when there is conflict in a relationship. Family members can irritate us from time to time. Roommates can sometimes cause friction. This will be our first test of the day. Will we remain in the footsteps of Jesus or will we allow less than perfect relationships to open the door to the devil's manipulation? There are righteous reasons for anger. Jesus was angry when God was disrespected. When we are challenged with anger or frustration, we need to temper our emotions with understanding and a forgiving spirit. We will be serving God when we find a way to renegotiate a loving relationship with those who have aggrieved us.

Serving God at Work or School

When we go off to work or school, we will once again have an opportunity to serve God as we interact with coworkers or our fellow students. The same truths apply here as when we are managing our relationships with our family members. Depending on the kind of work we are doing or the school we are attending, our opportunities to serve God may be greatly enhanced. Any education is an effort to improve the mind God gave us and is therefore a form of service to God. Our ability to serve God is multiplied further if we are studying a subject or working at a job that is service related. Teachers, nurses, doctors, firefighters, police officers, are all occupations that are dedicated to serving others. When you are training to be this kind of a professional servant, or when you are actually working that kind of a job, you are greatly blessed with a constant wave of service opportunities.

Of course, in every job there are many opportunities to serve others. Helping your coworkers or going out of your way to assist customers or clients are examples of the many ways we can serve God by serving others as we go about our daily lives. Jesus taught that we are to change our lives completely when we become his followers. We are to focus our lives completely on serving God.

Serving God Completely

Serving God is about worship. We need to dedicate a portion of our week to worshiping God in a structured way. This can be in a church, in a home, or on top of a mountain. This can be on Sunday morning, on Saturday afternoon, or on Friday night. Serving God is about the study of the Word of God. We need to spend some time each day reading the Bible or listening to someone teach the Bible or in reflection on some Bible passage. Serving God is about prayer. We need to pray about everything. We should be in constant communication with God through prayer. Serving God is about serving others. Our lives should be focused on what we can do for others, not what we can do for ourselves.

*“But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you,
then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...
But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”*

Joshua 24:15

Why Must We Endure

I don't know what you're going through or what you've already endured. And there's no way for us to know what the future holds. I do know that if you became a Christian because you were expecting to have a trouble-free life full of blessings, you will be sadly disappointed. As a follower of Jesus Christ, God is with you every step of the way, but his goal is not to make your life easy – his goal is to make your life hard.

We are travelers. We do not belong in this world. As discussed in chapter two, we are spirits residing in disposable bodies that will be left behind when we transition to the kingdom of God. If you have not read chapter two, you should do that now to help you fully understand what is to follow. Our time spent in this world is training for our eternal existence. Followers of Jesus Christ are like specially selected Olympic athletes. Our mission in this life is to train for victory and we do so with the greatest coach of all times.

“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.

*They do it to get a crown that will not last,
but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.”*

1 Corinthians 9:25

If you were ever involved in any kind of athletic training, you will know the best coaches don't make training easy – they make it hard. You have to train hard to be ready for game day. Typically, those who train the hardest are those who claim the most victories.

*“Do you not know that in a race all the runners run,
but only one gets the prize?*

Run in such a way as to get the prize.”

1 Corinthians 9:24

A good coach will push you to your limits but not beyond. A good coach will work you in a way that will help you grow and develop to your full potential. A good coach will do everything possible to protect you from injury. A good coach will not keep you from pain. We've all heard the phrase “no pain, no gain.” This also translates to our spiritual life perfectly. God is training us to be victorious in our eternal life. Any pain we endure means God believes we have the strength to overcome and grow stronger. We should praise God for every moment of pain and rest in the knowledge that he is right beside us all along the way. In the end, God will make certain we are ready to win on game day.

Cancer, bankruptcy, addiction, divorce, deception, manipulation, betrayal, and all the other tragedies of life that leave us devastated, broken, and alone all have a purpose. God challenges

us with these calamities so that we might learn to depend on him. Living through pain prepares us for the next challenge. Our reaction to these difficult times can determine how we'll stand up to the next onslaught or trouble. God wants us to feel pain. God wants us to use that pain to serve others. After we work beyond our pain experience, we then have the ability to empathize with others going through a similar situation. Our pain can then become a teaching tool. We can then use our pain to offer loving support to others.

As Christians, we are called to trust God. We demonstrate our trust in God by our reaction to difficult times. As Christians, we have been blessed with the gift of eternal life. We did not earn that reward. We were granted eternal life by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. How we respond to trials and tribulations is a measuring rod of our faith. Our Savior endured pain and suffering that is unimaginable. He did this for our benefit. He did this for the joy of our salvation.

*“For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame,
and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.
Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners,
so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”*
Hebrews 12:2-3

Like Jesus, we are to endure pain in our lives. We are not to run from this pain, or pretend it does not exist, we are to experience it fully and completely as Jesus did. This is our training. The specific reasons for our pain may never be explained or revealed. Explanations are mostly useless to someone who is in pain. The antidote for pain is love. And no one loves us more than God. Even when God is doing little to ease your pain, he is with you. Sometimes God heals. Sometimes God only comforts. In all cases he remains by your side day and night.

*“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them,
for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”*
Deuteronomy 31:6

Suffering in the World

When we look beyond ourselves at the troubles that fill the world around us, it can be difficult to understand how God can allow things like horrific terrorist attacks, suffering children, debilitating diseases, and destructive natural disasters. Even when we are in what seem like the darkest days of our lives, we can look out at the world and see pain that far exceeds our own. Looking back at the history of the world, we see an enormous abundance of tragic circumstances. When we read the history recorded in the Old Testament of the Bible, we see some horrific events of death and destruction. How can this be God's plan?

I worked many years in the construction field. Much of the work I did was in remodeling construction. Most remodel jobs start with demolition. You have to tear apart the old construction before you can begin the new work. More than once I had clients that were shocked when they returned home to find walls removed and bare studs exposed. To an untrained eye, it can be difficult to see the finished project in a pile of demolition debris. My clients had to trust that I could put it all back together and make it better than when I arrived. They had to trust that all the destruction would lead to an amazing finished project.

God is in control. He has been in control from the very beginning. While it may be hard to see beyond the destruction, God has detailed plans that will lead to an amazing finished project. We need to trust him. Keep in mind, we are spirits. These earthly bodies are disposable vehicles. The death of a human body is not the death of that spirit. God still maintains control of that spirit once the earthly body is destroyed. The details of this process are not fully explained in the Bible. What we know is those who die as believers will one day be brought together in the kingdom of God. We also know that everyone will have a chance to stand before God and give an account of their life. My understanding of that knowledge is that even if you don't place your faith in Jesus before you die, you will be given one last opportunity before other arrangements are made.

The God I know is not going to let anyone slip through the cracks. All those who deserve to be in the kingdom of God will find their way there. Only the most evil spirits who have pledged their allegiance to Satan will find their accommodations less than favorable. Of course, this doesn't solve the problem of a painful life. When I look at the awful circumstance some people in third world countries endure on a daily basis, I have to believe God has provided a special kind of protection for those spirits. The loving God that I know would not allow that kind of pain without a healthy dose of divine comfort. I have to believe God has a profound reason for allowing that kind of suffering. Like the destruction of the kitchen walls in my remodeling project, in the end something amazing will be revealed.

*“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”*
Habakkuk 3:17-18

No matter what we see in the world or in our own lives, we have to stand firm in the understanding that God is good. God is in control. God is love.

“Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever.”
Psalm 107:1

Strategy for Endurance

Count your blessings. That's the best approach for getting in touch with God's work in your life. If you do this over an extended period of time, it will become quite obvious God is taking good care of you through good times and bad times. For most of us, our lives move in a sine-wave pattern of highs and lows, ups and downs. If we look back on our lives, we will see how those dark days eventually turned into bright sunshine. Sometimes we can even look back on the events of one day and see God's hand sustaining and supporting our path forward. Keep a record of every blessing in your life for a year and you should be overwhelmed with the presence of God in your life.

Connect with God through Prayer

We connect with God through prayer. Some seem to believe prayer is a kind of drive-thru window where you order up a new set of life circumstances. In my experience, prayer is nothing more than an opportunity to connect with God. I've seen lots of examples of so-called answered prayer, but I have to tell you these often seem more like coincidence than a real intervention from God. I say this because unanswered prayer seems to be far more prevalent; in the sense that we don't get exactly what we ask for. I've come to the conclusion that God's plan is unalterable and will proceed in its preplanned direction regardless of the amount of prayers directed toward change. That doesn't mean that I believe prayer is a waste of time. I believe staying connected to God is profoundly important. I simply recommend praying to maintain your relationship with God and without expectations of granted wishes. Connect with God because you want to be with him, not because you want something from him. God already knows what you want, and more importantly, what you need.

*“And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans,
for they think they will be heard because of their many words.*

*Do not be like them,
for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.”*

Matthew 6:7-8

After you've communicated with God, listen for his instruction. Rather than prayer being answered with changed circumstances, it's far more likely prayers will be answered with new directions. In my experience, God much prefers we solve our own problems along with his guidance. God may speak to us through the Holy Spirit living inside of all believers. He may speak to us through our pastor, Christian friends, or family members. God speaks to us through circumstance. God will speak to us through his Word. Once we've identified what we believe to be a message from God, it is often confirmed through one or more of those same resources. When we have more than one reliable source pointing us in the same direction, there's a strong likelihood it is a message from God. Keep in mind the devil is a master of disguise and will

most definitely try to push you off in the wrong direction. God is not the author of confusion. No message from God will be inconsistent with the Word of God.

God is with You

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are on a training mission. It's important for us to stay in close communication with our God – he needs to hear from us frequently. Our loving Father has carefully crafted our circumstance not only for our own benefit, but also for the benefit of everyone we come into contact with in our life. Every event we witness has been specifically calculated to impact all those involved in a precise way. Every event throughout history has been specifically calculated to impact all those involved in a precise way. It's impossible for us to comprehend the complexity of God's plan. This should not minimize any pain or hardship you are going through. You may be carrying an enormous load at this moment. If you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, God is with you at this moment. You are not alone. You will never be alone. And when God finishes his work, your contribution will shine brightly in the amazing tapestry of the kingdom of God.

A Hell of a Choice

The world we live in was designed top to bottom by God. There are some things about his creation that cannot be changed. Take for example, the fact that lots of people take great pleasure in skydiving. For some, jumping out of an airplane thirteen thousand feet off the ground is exhilarating. However, this same experience takes a drastically different turn if the jump is done without a parachute. In the world God created, jumping out of an airplane at thirteen thousand feet without a parachute will likely end in death; depending on where you land. Perhaps a more absolute example of the dangers of flaunting God's creation would be trying to remain under water without a source of air. The current world record is about twenty-two minutes. Beyond that, you will most certainly die. In God's creation, you can go without breathing safely for a period of time, but if you go beyond your limit death is imminent.

Hell is real

The Bible very clearly teaches there are two possibilities at the end of our lives. One is to join God in heaven. The other is to remain permanently separated from God in anguish, in a place called hell. Keep in mind both of these locations are not for human occupancy. These are places our spirit will go after it leaves our human body. We cannot know precisely what is meant by all the graphic depictions of fire found in the biblical descriptions of hell. Personally, I believe it simply means those in hell will be in a state of deep regret. Imagine that feeling you get when you have made a horrific mistake that cannot be corrected. One could characterize that internal emotion as a "blazing furnace," like the description Jesus gives of hell in the book of Matthew.

*"This is how it will be at the end of the age.
The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous
and throw them into the blazing furnace,
where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."
Matthew 13:49-50*

We know hell is real because most of the references about hell come from Jesus Christ. There is no more trusted source. Jesus wants everyone to understand that God's creation has some absolutes. Using some hyperbolic language, Jesus makes the point that we should avoid hell at all cost.

*"And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.
It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."
Matthew 5:30*

One of the groups that received God's greatest condemnation was the overly religious Pharisees who used the name of God to create rules and regulations for their own personal gain. The best way to ensure a trip to hell is to turn against God.

*"You snakes! You brood of vipers!
How will you escape being condemned to hell?"
Matthew 23:33*

There isn't any doubt in my mind that hell is real. Jesus would not have referenced hell so frequently if it was not a genuine threat. The good news is hell is easily avoided.

Going to Hell is a choice

There is a common myth that one is sent to hell because of their misdeeds. That notion is completely misguided. Our misdeeds are referred to in the Bible as sin and we can abolish sin from our life by simply turning to Jesus for salvation. Jesus died on the cross as payment for our sins, and if we put our faith in him and dedicate our life to following his teaching, we will be saved from our sin and enjoy eternal life in heaven. Those who end up in hell have made a choice to ignore Jesus Christ.

*"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
and all are justified freely by his grace
through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."
Romans 3:23-24*

Make no mistake about it – the devil doesn't want you to know about God's free gift of salvation. For reasons we may never fully understand, there is a spiritual battle going on between God and the devil. The devil is trying to disrupt God's plan and take as many souls with him into hell as possible. The devil has sent out demons that will do anything and everything to get us pointed in the wrong direction. This includes pretending to be a religious leader of some kind. Without question, some religious leaders are tools of the devil. This is why it's so important for everyone to be intimately familiar with the Word of God. If you've studied the text for yourself, it will be difficult for a false teacher to carry you off in the wrong direction. We are all sinners. We are all sentenced to death for our sin, but Jesus came to save us

*"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."
Romans 6:23*

Imagine you're in that airplane at thirteen thousand feet and it's time to jump. Are you going to jump with or without a parachute? The devil will be telling you how restrictive wearing a parachute feels. The devil will be telling you there's a soft landing spot below that will perfectly

cushion your fall. The devil will be pushing you out the door before you can strap on your parachute. On the other hand, Jesus would be the jump instructor who would clip you safely into his tandem parachute rig, push the devil out of the way, and safely carry you to the ground. Thanks to the devil, our world is full of conflicting information. Nevertheless, God has made sure the truth is found in the pages of the Bible. It is in the Bible that we learn no one is sent to hell. Everyone has been given a choice.

Everyone is given the opportunity

If you're a caring individual, you have to be concerned about those who do not take the time to study the Bible or for whatever reason simply don't have access to a Bible. How can you make a choice if you're never given all the facts?

God has implanted in all of us certain elements of understanding that are universal. Everyone agrees it is wrong to violently murder a stranger on the street. Everyone is uncomfortable when it is too cold or too hot. Everyone feels good when there is someone who cares deeply about their well-being. There are certain attributes of God's creation that are undeniable. These invisible qualities are clear evidence of our Creator and compel those who have not been distracted by the devil to seek out and know God.

*“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven
against all the godlessness and wickedness of people,
who suppress the truth by their wickedness,
since what may be known about God is plain to them,
because God has made it plain to them.
For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities
—his eternal power and divine nature—
have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made,
so that people are without excuse.”
Romans 1:18-20*

If you're driving your car on the freeway at a hundred miles an hour, weaving in and out of traffic, coming within inches of a traffic accident countless times, it will come as no surprise when you get pulled-over by law enforcement. Even if you honestly didn't know the speed limit was sixty five miles per hour, you would still be guilty of violating the law. In fact, even if the speed limit was a hundred miles per hour, you would still be guilty of reckless driving. The simple fact is your common sense should have told you that your behavior was dangerous. The foolishness of your actions would be clearly evident and worthy of punishment.

In this same way, God has made it clearly evident that there is a Creator that should be sought out and respectfully considered. Denying the existence of your Creator is a matter of listening to the manipulation of the devil's demons rather than listening to the inner voice God has implanted inside each and every one of us. Those who have not had the opportunity to study the Bible will

be admitted to heaven and avoid going to hell by their attitude toward those invisible attributes of God.

*“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,
so that each of us may receive what is due us
for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.”
2 Corinthians 5:10*

All of our misdeeds can be forgiven through faith in Jesus Christ. If someone appears before the judgment seat of Christ having never heard the good news of the gospel, they will at that moment be given the opportunity to trust Jesus as their Savior. God is not going to let anyone slip through the cracks. Everyone has the opportunity to make a choice to accept or reject a trip to hell.

Hell is a demonstration of God’s love

God has given all of us the free will to accept or reject the offer of salvation provided by Jesus Christ. The fact that God sent his son to die on the cross on our behalf is the ultimate demonstration of his love for us. God is love. True love has to include freedom of choice. God would never force us to trust Jesus. Love without free will is meaningless.

*“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”
1 John 4:8*

For reasons no one can fully explain, God has allowed the devil to have his way in this world. In so doing, God has allowed the creation of hell – the devil’s destination. This set of circumstances compelled God to pour out his love on us by sending his Son to save us from this tragic consequence. Precisely how the death of Jesus Christ is payment for our sins is unknown. Precisely how we will suffer by following the devil into hell is unknown. What is made clear in the pages of the Bible is that God’s motives are love for his creation and the devil’s motives are self-interest. Perhaps we will one day be made aware of all the intricacies of this grand battle between God and the devil; but until that day, we should trust the instructions given in the Bible.

The existence of hell provides God with an opportunity to clearly illustrate the difference between living under his care and living in a world without him. The devil is ruthless and diabolical. God has a fully capable adversary. The descriptions of hell indicate dramatically how misguided it is to live life outside of the loving arms of God. Praise God for providing us with this glaring warning sign. Praise God for making us aware of the dangers of hell.

I recently watched a video of a man who jumped out of an airplane at twenty-five thousand feet without a parachute. He survived the event by landing in a large net. According to the Bible, our sinful nature guarantees we will one day die. Fortunately, God has provided us with a net. By placing our faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we will survive our fall. If we make the choice to trust God, we will receive the gift of eternal life and escape a visit to hell.

Let's Get High

The Bible is silent on the topic of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, and every other street drug you can name. There also isn't any mention of smoking, consuming too many caffeinated beverages, or eating cheeseburgers and French fries as the foundation of your diet. Alcoholic beverages do come up often in the Bible although there's some debate about exactly how much alcohol those drinks contained. Regardless of the fragmented references and the uncertainty of exactly what kind of wine and strong drink was being used, we can still extrapolate a good deal of instruction regarding these issues from the record provided.

Nothing is Prohibited

It may shock you to hear that you can use any or all of the currently available forms of intoxication and still remain a Christian. There are no banned substances in the Bible and nothing we have today that wasn't available then would be prohibited. When Jesus died on the cross, all the rules and regulations died with him. The old Mosaic Law which includes the Ten Commandments is still valid; however, it is now used as a reference and not as a strict code that requires enforcement. Christians are now concerned with the spirit of the Mosaic Law rather than the letter of the law.

*“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away
have been brought near by the blood of Christ.
For he himself is our peace,
who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier,
the dividing wall of hostility,
by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations.”
Ephesians 2:13-15*

*“But now, by dying to what once bound us,
we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit,
and not in the old way of the written code.”
Romans 7:6*

*“God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,
having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness,
which stood against us and condemned us;
he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross.”
Colossians 2:13-14*

Praise Jesus for setting us free! We have now been commanded by Jesus to love God and to love one another. When we focus our lives in this way, it is impossible to break the spirit of any

of the previous laws. If we truly love God, we will set aside time to worship him; perhaps it will not be on the Sabbath as the Ten Commandments demand because that specific day is not the spirit of the law – the spirit of the law is to set aside time to worship God. In this same manner nothing else has been prohibited. What is required is that we operate from the perspective of love for one another.

*“I have the right to do anything,”
you say—but not everything is beneficial.*

*“I have the right to do anything”—
but I will not be mastered by anything.”*

1 Corinthians 6:12

But we need to be careful. The freedom we have acquired through our faith in Jesus leaves us vulnerable to the misdirection of the devil. When nothing is prohibited and everything is available to us, it's easy to become complacent and take our liberty too far. The devil's demons are always around pushing us toward overindulgence.

Self-Control

If we are not careful, the devil will convince us that more is better. More alcohol, more drugs, more food, can all lead to a dependency that allows those things to become our master. One of the main ingredients in a Christian's spirit filled life is self-control.

*“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy,
peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
Against such things there is no law.”*

Galatians 5:22-23

The above list contains the elements in the life of a Christian that have rendered the old rules and regulations obsolete. When we use these watchwords as our guide, it's difficult, if not impossible, to get off track. The world we live in wants us to believe that it's okay to blow off steam by drinking too much, eating too much, and using whatever drug we need to reduce the stress of everyday life. That attitude does not come from God.

*“Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—
his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

Romans 12:2

That doesn't mean that there isn't any room in a Christian's life for stimulants of any kind. Food and drink are often portrayed in the Bible as appropriate tools for celebration and fellowship. The book of Proverbs makes this recommendation:

"Let beer be for those who are perishing, wine for those who are in anguish!"

Proverbs 31:6

The above passage seems to recommend alcohol as a means to help calm troubled emotions. I don't think it's a stretch to assume from this that all mood altering substances are a viable tool and are not emphatically banned in some way. As Christians, we are given the freedom to make choices based on our relationship with God and our resistance to the misdirection of the devil.

*"So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do,
do it all for the glory of God."*

1 Corinthians 10:31

Eating or drinking more than you need of anything demonstrates a lack of self-control. Eating and drinking more than you need likely indicates a capitulation to the lies the devil has been whispering in your ear.

Taking Care of Your Body

If you are prone to addiction, you will need to avoid that which triggers your habitual over consumption. Even those who are not addicted may be prone to eat or drink too much. One glass of wine often makes us feel like we need another. One slice of cake often makes it seem like a good idea to have another.

*"Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat,
for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags."*

Proverbs 23:20-21

Our God-given common sense tells us that intoxication is a useless state of mind. We all know from experience that overeating adds excess pounds that only make life more difficult. So why do we pursue these valueless endeavors? It is because we have misplaced our connection to God and are seeking comfort elsewhere. The Holy Spirit resides inside every Christian as our direct link to God. We should honor that connection by taking good care of our bodies.

*"Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit,
who is in you, whom you have received from God?*

You are not your own; you were bought at a price.

Therefore honor God with your bodies."

1 Corinthians 6:19-20

As most Christians know, when the Bible refers to the church, it is not discussing a building or place of worship. The church is the collection of all those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. All Christians are part of the church. Nothing is more precious to Jesus than the church. Jesus died on the cross for the church. Our bodies are a gift from God, and we should take care of them with the same intensity that Jesus takes care of us.

*“After all, no one ever hated their own body,
but they feed and care for their body,
just as Christ does the church.”
Ephesians 5:29*

Jesus would never over-feed, over-medicate, or over-stimulate the church. We should take care of our bodies in that same way. Just as Christ is the caretaker of the church, we are the caretakers of our God-given bodies.

The devil wants us to focus on what we can do for ourselves. Overindulging is all about doing more for yourself. This is classic demonic misdirection. The devil uses our appetite for self-satisfaction to pull us down a road of destruction. While in the short term, overindulgence is harming no one; in the long run, it can lead to self-harm and neglect of those we love. In the extreme, overindulgence can cause serious harm such as drunk-driving accidents, serious health issues, and addiction that can destroy a life and the lives of many more that are caught up in the collateral damage.

A Christian life should be about giving, not about taking more for yourself. When we focus on others, we push the devil aside and connect completely with the Holy Spirit guiding us from within. Everything we seek from overindulgence is available to us through other means. In fact, following the guidance of the Holy Spirit will lead to a high that far exceeds anything this world has to offer.

Getting High without Intoxicants

God supplies us with some extraordinary experiences that provide a level of exhilaration that no artificial stimulate can replicate. At the top of my list would be the birth of my children. Nothing can compare. Falling in love is another incomparable experience. Of course these rare events are few and far between and not everyone is so blessed. But there are many everyday experiences that most, if not all of us, can claim as a spirit-filled high. Any moment of success delivers that kind of stimulation. It may be something as simple as completing a routine task or something as complex as a major project for school or work. Another spirit-filled high would be any chance you get to brighten someone’s day. Consider the joy you feel when you bring a smile to someone’s face.

*“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.
Instead, be filled with the Spirit.”*

Ephesians 5:18

One of the beautiful things about God's creation is that we are all different. We all have different experiences that stimulate our spirit. Hiking in the wilderness, sailing in the ocean, snow-skiing down a mountain, dancing, singing, cooking a meal for your family, are all ways one might enjoy a spiritual high. Some of us are full of joy when together with friends. Some of us are full of joy when we are alone in nature. God has provided us with an enormous variety of possibilities to connect our spirit to his, and enjoy life fully and completely.

Nothing is prohibited. Everything is available to us. But as Christians, nothing other than Jesus Christ should be our master. When we employ our spirit filled self-control, guided by the Holy Spirit living inside our God-given body, we avoid the misdirection of the devil and seek our joy and peace in God's creation. No artificial means can compare to the spiritual high delivered by God's own hand. All other forms of intoxication should be consumed as seasoning, not as the main course. Nothing is more satisfying than that which God provides.

*“For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.
It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions,
and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,
while we wait for the blessed hope—
the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,
who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness
and to purify for himself a people that are his very own,
eager to do what is good.”
Titus 2:11-14*

Sex is here to Stay

Many of the various Christian religions have made a big issue out of sex. Perhaps because sexual desire is such a powerful contributor to human behavior, religion has seen it as something that needs to be controlled. In order to formulate our own path forward, we need to separate ourselves from the religious point of view regarding sex. We need to turn to the Bible and do our own analysis of the topic. We need to have a frank and honest discussion about sex.

Masturbation

In an effort to stay connected to the body of Christ, I spend a good deal of time reading concerns posted in online Christian forums. One of the issues I see over-and-over again from young people, is anguish over masturbation. I frequently see posts from young people who believe they may have lost their salvation as a result of being unable to control their urge to masturbate. Let's start by looking at the available secular data. Studies on masturbation conclude that over 90% of boys engage in this practice and over 70% of girls partake. These numbers cannot be fully trusted since many people lie about these private experiences; however, based on this information it seems clear that this is an extremely common human behavior.

As Christians, we are more concerned with God's point of view than what is common in the population. The truth is, it is impossible to determine God's point of view since there is absolutely nothing in the Bible regarding masturbation. That's right. Not one word. If something is left out of the Bible completely, I think it's safe to say God is not overly concerned about that issue. Masturbation seems to be something God is not much concerned about.

For the sake of thoroughness, I will tell you that some people suggest that a story in Genesis about a man named Onan (Genesis 38:9-10) is an example of masturbation; however, that is a misinterpretation. This is actually a story about a man who refused to impregnate his dead brother's wife to supply her with an offspring which was the Jewish law at the time.

There is also a section in the Bible that some interpret as an example of a positive reference to female masturbation. It is suggested that in the poetic language of Song of Songs (Song of Songs 5:5) a woman is waking from an erotic dream while masturbating. It's hard to know the true intent of the author in writing such as this; however, this interpretation is certainly possible.

If we separate ourselves from religion and study the Bible from our own point of view, I think it's hard to make a case against masturbation. It's also hard to fathom why God would supply humans with a means of pleasure that was never to be explored other than within the confines of marriage. This would leave a lot of people frustrated and confused. Since there is no restriction designated in the pages of the Bible, one should conclude there are no restrictions.

Pornography

The most common biblical claim against masturbation is the use of pornography or simply the lustful thoughts that accompany the practice. The scripture most often cited is a statement Jesus makes in his Sermon on the Mount regarding looking at a woman with lust in your heart as being equivalent to adultery (Matthew 5:28). A careful reading of this section of the Bible will confirm that Jesus was not making a new law in this statement, he was instead pointing out the fact that we are all incapable of living up to God's standard of righteousness.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Romans 3:23

Jesus was in essence saying that we all have sexual desires that we fight to control. This is why we need a Savior to attain righteousness. Jesus was saying that our difficult-to-control sexual desire is an indicator of our human nature. That desire is not going away. In order to control that desire, we need to trust Jesus.

*"The mind governed by the flesh is death,
but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace."*

Romans 8:6

If we allow our sexual desire to control us, we are not living by the Spirit. In regards to masturbation, it seems safe to say if it is not taking over our life, there is no restriction.

*"I have the right to do anything"—
but I will not be mastered by anything."*

1 Corinthians 6:12

Pornography is a much more complicated topic. Clearly some forms of pornography are far worse than others. Images that were created by consenting adults may be less onerous than those created through some form of coercion. Some may see all forms of pornography as abhorrent; however, again there is no Biblical reference. For whatever reason, God has left this matter of discretion up to the individual believer. There is plenty of religious doctrine from various denominations that will emphatically state that all forms of pornography are evil; however, there is no Biblical basis for those claims. God wants you to make this choice on your own.

Pre-Marital Sex

Pre-marital sex is another topic that is overlooked in the pages of the Bible; however, you would not know this from following most Christian religions. The Bible verses usually used to condemn pre-marital sex are generally those discussing sexual immorality, which is not clearly defined. As a result, religion has decided how to define sexual immorality. An entire book

could be written on this topic, but for the sake of brevity I'll point out that the sexual culture at the time the Bible was written was vastly different than the sexual culture of today. Some of the acts considered to be examples of sexual immorality in those times would likely be inconceivable in our modern culture – not to be overly graphic, but these would include pedophilia, orgies, and other practices far outside the norms of today's culture.

God is not afraid to let you decide the definition of sexual immorality. One might conclude that the central teaching of Jesus gives a clear perspective on how to make this kind of judgment.

*“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you,
for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”*

Matthew 7:12

Essentially, if we are treating people in the same manner that we would treat ourselves and we are not causing harm to anyone, we are within the boundaries of God's morality.

Abortion

Abortion is another topic that is completely overlooked in the Bible; however, murder is not. An abortion is the willful termination of a human life. I don't know how one can describe abortion as anything other than murder. I apologize to any of those reading this that may have already had an abortion. I don't mean to condemn you or judge you for your decision. I know how difficult that decision must have been. I want to also assure you that God welcomed the spirit of your baby into his arms. Abortion is not a problem for God. It is a problem for humans.

Our modern culture has made abortion all too common. This is the devil's work. The devil has cultivated an understanding in this world that abortion is a personal choice that has nothing to do with God. Of course it has everything to do with God. Abortion is a decision to destroy God's creation. It is the devil that backs you into this corner and forces you to make this choice. Any rational person should concede the devil supplies many valid reasons for considering the termination of a pregnancy. We all might turn our backs on God if placed in a similar situation. The solution is to simply avoid this circumstance altogether.

A rational Christian should conclude that having sex outside of marriage without taking precautions to avoid pregnancy is a form of sexual immorality. It is immoral to risk the life of an unborn child, and pregnancy outside of marriage is the number one tool the devil uses to push his abortion agenda. There are any number of ways to engage in intimate relations without risking pregnancy; I don't think there is much need to enumerate them here. God has made this knowledge available and we should demonstrate our thanks by making good use of the information.

*“All who are prudent act with knowledge,
but fools expose their folly.”
Proverbs 13:16*

Sex inside of Marriage

The Bible contains a book titled Song of Songs which is a collection of love poetry. Within these verses, much of the poetic language alludes to physical intimacy between a man and a woman who are deeply in love. The picture painted is one of supreme ecstasy found in the arms of two lovers. I think it's safe to say that nothing compares to a sexual encounter that evolves out of an expression of love.

The ultimate expression of love is a commitment to marriage. When a man and woman come together in marriage, the Bible says they are no longer two people – they have become one.

*“That is why a man leaves his father and mother
and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.”
Genesis 2:24*

As a result of this God designed connection, each partner becomes responsible for the other's need for physical intimacy. The apostle Paul, writing in the book of First Corinthians, states clearly the need for a healthy sexual relationship between married couples.

*“The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.
The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband.
In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.
Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time,
so that you may devote yourselves to prayer.
Then come together again
so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.”
1 Corinthians 7:3-5*

The apostle Paul is teaching that sex inside of a marriage is an important component of that relationship and is essential to eliminate the desire to go outside of that relationship for sexual gratification.

Conclusion

The Bible does not contain a rule and regulation for every aspect of our lives. There are many religions that want you to believe there is a rule and regulation for everything, but this is simply not the case. The Bible is more like a collection of tools than it is a list of rules. God didn't create robots. God created intelligent human beings. God created a collection of unique

individuals. The answer to every question is not the same for every individual or in every circumstance. God wants us to take the tools found in the Bible and put them to use in our lives. God wants us to spend our time in this world learning to make Godly decisions. We can't do that if we are simply following a list of rules. We can only develop our Godly decision making skills through careful study of the Bible and constant practice through our personal life experience.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we have been given special knowledge through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. God wants us to use that knowledge and connection to answer our own questions about how to conduct ourselves in this life. Early in his ministry, the disciples of Jesus came to him and asked why he speaks in parables.

*“He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.”
Matthew 13:10-11*

The answer Jesus gave, teaches that he expects us to be thinking individuals, not rule followers. Believers have been given a special ability to interpret his parables and unbelievers lack this key; therefore they are unable to understand his instruction. Followers of Jesus have a special ability to discern the truth.

*“The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.”
1 Corinthians 3:14*

If you are a true follower of Jesus Christ, you know what sexual immorality is and how to conduct your life in a way that avoids the devil's misdirection. You don't need a list of rules or some religious leader who has no knowledge of all the subtle nuances of your life evaluating your every decision. You need prayer and a total dependence on God.

JC&LGBTQ

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”

Hebrews 13:8

The 66 books of the Bible were composed by 40 different writers over a period of 1,500 years. The most recent book of the Bible was written more than two thousand years ago. God has not changed over that time period; however, the culture we live in has changed profoundly. In addition, God has continued to play an unrecorded role in this world over the last two thousand years. While God himself has not changed, he has been the catalyst for a great deal of change in our world. We have no direct revelation that tells us God played a role in the extraordinary medical advances that have saved countless lives, but we know he did. We have no direct revelation that tells us God played a role in helping develop the ability to feed hundreds of millions of people all over the world, but we know he did. We have no direct revelation that God is responsible for the amazing technological advancements that make our lives more productive, but we know he is. We know God is in control of everything.

There is absolutely no question that our lives have evolved dramatically since Jesus left our world to sit at the right hand of God. Things are as different as night and day. It may be time to reevaluate our understanding of God’s instruction on matters involving the LGBTQ community. For those who are unaware, LGBTQ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Lesbians are women with same sex attraction. Gays are men with same sex attraction. Bisexuals are attracted to both sexes. Transgender are those who are born with the physical characteristics of one sex but have the brain of the opposite sex. And queer has become a sort of catch-all phrase for the entire group or a title for an attitude that simply doesn’t believe sexual preference should even be an issue – no more than the color of your hair.

God has contributed to changes in our health, the way we eat, the way we live, the way we work, the way we communicate, and all the other astounding changes that make our world look so much different than it did in Biblical times. It is also undeniable he is responsible for the creation of every individual on our planet – this would include all LGBTQ men and women.

Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual

If you’ve ever had the opportunity to talk at length with someone about their same sex attraction, you probably discovered they acquired this desire at a very early age. Most don’t remember a turning point that triggered same sex attraction. Most will tell you that same sex attraction is all they have ever known. The idea that people are somehow manipulated into acquiring same sex attraction because of bad parenting or coercion by some older, same sex attracted individual is simply a myth. People are born with same sex attraction. God creates people with same sex

attraction. These people cannot be changed by intense therapy. That's another myth. Same sex attracted people are God's creation – and God doesn't make mistakes.

Transgender

While the science regarding transgender individuals is still inconclusive, the basic understanding is that a developing fetus will acquire the physical characteristics of one gender and then at another stage of development will acquire the brain characteristics of the opposite gender. A transgender who is born with the physical characteristics of a boy and the brain of a girl will tell you she never felt like a boy, she always felt like a girl – even though she had a male body. Transgender boys and girls are not psychologically disturbed, they are physiologically mismatched. Their brain gender does not match their physical gender. They are born this way. God makes transgender people – and God doesn't make mistakes.

What the Bible Says

Contrary to popular religious beliefs, there is nothing in the Bible that condemns same-sex attraction or same-sex love. What you will find are about six verses that are either mistranslated or misinterpreted. The word homosexuality didn't even show up in an English translation of the Bible until 1946. The verses in question in the original text are discussions of promiscuity, idol worship, shrine prostitution, elitist overindulgence, abuse, exploitation, perversion, and the act of pederasty, which was the practice of Greek elite elder men who would adopt young men as sexual objects. In general, these passages are about self-serving individuals who are more concerned with fulfilling their own desires rather than worshiping the one true God.

Same-sex attraction and/or same-sex love were never the issue. Self-serving indulgence and a rejection of God were the unforgivable sins.

Religion and LGBTQ

There is a large population of LGBTQ Christians in spite of the fact that most Christian religions have condemned them as habitual sinners. Isn't it sad that the place many LGBTQ Christians most fear condemnation is at church? A Christian church should be a place of refuge – not a place of condemnation. The mere fact that someone with same-sex attraction would live a life devoted to God, demonstrates without question that this is not some form of demonic possession – all LGBTQs are children of God. They should be welcomed into the church with open arms like all of the other sinners who attend. If same-sex attraction is a sin, and I'm not convinced that it is, it is no more of a sin than lust for a woman other than your wife, or jealousy of someone who has a bigger house than you have. Same-sex attraction is not debauchery – it is a God-given emotion that does no harm. Religions that ostracize the LGBTQ community are operating in opposition to the God they profess to worship.

Love the Sinner Hate the Sin

As stated above, I don't see any aspect of the LGBTQ community as being anymore sinful than the average churchgoer. I cringe when I hear the phrase, "Love the Sinner Hate the Sin." It conjures up in my mind a need for some kind of special immunization in order to tolerate these specific kinds of people. I'm more inclined to take a sort of Martin Luther King point of view and judge LGBTQ churchgoers by the content of their character, as I would every other church member. In my mind there is no difference. There is no reason to have a special phrase that codifies our behavior. We are to love one another; even church gossips, even those who never donate a dime, even those who attend on Sunday and never think about God for one minute during the rest of the week. God does not separate believers into special groups and neither should we.

"Then Peter began to speak:

*"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism
but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right."*

Acts 10:34-35

LGBTQ Suicide Rate

Christians should be approaching the LGBTQ community with love and compassion rather than with fear and discrimination. The LGBTQ community has an attempted suicide rate that is significantly higher than among the general population and this is especially prevalent among young people. Discrimination, bullying, and being constantly misunderstood are enormous challenges for young LGBTQ boys and girls. In addition, the overall national attitude toward the LGBTQ community in areas such as same sex marriage, and gender identity acceptance play a major role in the mental health of these young people. Consider how difficult it is to transition from a child to an adult in our society and then add on top of that, the struggles of the LGBTQ community's constant barrage of negative stereotypes and misinformation. In large part, Christians have been making this situation worse rather than helping to resolve the emotional trauma these young people are going through.

Same Sex Marriage

Same sex marriage is another issue that is not found in the Bible. This may be a result of an evolution in the LGBTQ community that has brought them to a point of understanding that didn't exist in Biblical times. The Biblical LGBTQ community that existed more than two-thousand years ago has absolutely no correlation to the modern day LGBTQ community. While it's clear in the Bible that marriage is to be a sacred bond between a man and a woman, there is absolutely no prohibition against same-sex marriage. Obviously, marriage between a man and a

woman is needed for procreation and therefore uniquely special. Nevertheless, the notion that the Bible limits marriage specifically to a man and a woman is not supported by the text.

*“But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’
‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,
and the two will become one flesh.’
So they are no longer two, but one flesh.
Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.”
Mark 10:6-9*

The Bible is unambiguous about the union between a man and a woman, but there is no statement anywhere in the Bible that prohibits same-sex marriage. The God that I know would honor two people who have pledged to dedicate their life together in love. God is love! The idea that God would, for some reason, be opposed to an expression of love is ridiculous. The reason same-sex marriage is not mentioned in the Bible may simply be because the LGBTQ community had not yet evolved to a point that included marriage as part of their culture. This brings me back to my original point. The world has changed since the writing of the Bible and I know God expects us to adapt to those changes while standing firm on the basic principles found in the Bible. In that regard, our first priority is to love one another.

Embracing the LGBTQ Community

God expects us to take the information supplied in the Bible and use it to create change. God doesn't expect us to remain stagnant and unresponsive to the ever-changing world we live in.

*“Though I am free and belong to no one,
I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.
To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.
To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law),
so as to win those under the law.
To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from
God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.
To the weak I became weak, to win the weak.
I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.
I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”
1 Corinthians 9:19-23*

The apostle Paul was flexible and malleable adapting himself to the population he was attempting to serve. In this same way, as the world around us is changing, Christians need to adapt to the circumstance in a way that serves the gospel. Like any other community, the LGBTQ community is comprised of a mix of personalities. Some are lost souls traveling in the wrong direction. Some are devoted Christians seeking fellowship with other Christians. As

followers of Jesus Christ, we should be doing everything possible to embrace our Christian brothers and sisters, and everything possible to bring those lost souls to Christ.

Following Jesus all by Yourself

Religion isn't all bad. If we were able to list all the pros and cons, my guess is religion would come out on the mostly positive side. Most religions were started with a sincere desire to move closer to God and to help others do so as well. Most religious rules and regulations were designed to keep people actively pursuing their relationship with God and avoid the schemes of the devil. Most religions were built on good intentions.

In the early days of the Christian church, people depended on the church for information about the Bible. In those days, the church was often the only place to find a Bible. People who wanted to know God and follow Jesus had to attend a church and accept the interpretation of the Bible presented there. We now live in a world where the Bible is widely available. Anyone who has a smart phone can access the Bible at any time in many different translations. Bible commentaries are readily available to help readers better understand the deeper theological meaning of what they are reading. And there are endless volumes of literature available discussing every aspect of the Bible, Jesus, and Christianity. We no longer need the church or religion to understand the Bible.

The Devil's Deception

It is the work of the devil that has so twisted Christianity into thousands of different denominations. It is the devil that wants us to leave the church and wander off on our own with no religious foundation as backup. If we make the decision to follow Jesus without religion, we have to be prepared to stand our ground against the devil. Trusting Jesus, praying, and spreading love may not be enough to shield oneself from the devil's manipulation. We are not clever enough to fly underneath the devil's radar. If we wander off on our own, the devil will most certainly take advantage of our isolation and attack at a time we are most vulnerable – during a period of emotional weakness. Following Jesus all by yourself will require a support system that will protect you from looking like easy prey to the devil.

The Bad Parts of Religion

There are some specific problems that tend to be the reason many turn away from religion. Most of us are turned off by religious hypocrites; those who attend church on Sunday but live a questionable life the rest of the week. Another group that turns people off to religion is those who are constantly judging the actions of others while hiding their own offenses. Sometimes the religion itself seems hypocritical when little or no effort is given to help those in need. And when a preacher spends a great deal of time condemning our current culture but has no plan for helping those who have lost their way, those words seem empty and meaningless. Finally, some

religions avoid discussing the difficult questions that plague today's world or hide behind outdated rules and regulations that need to be reevaluated for today's world.

Most religions or Christian churches have some or all of these problems. If these are the reasons we are avoiding religion, we need to formulate our own solutions to these issues. It doesn't make any sense to be against these practices without doing anything ourselves to combat them. Obviously, as individuals we are limited in what we can do, but we can make an effort to eliminate hypocrisy and unfair judgment from our own lives. We can find a way to contribute our time and resources helping those in need. We can attempt to influence those around us toward showing more concern for others. We can take the time to understand and carefully consider the hard questions like same-sex marriage, pre-marital sex, and casual drug use. If we're going to follow Jesus on our own, we need to take steps to correct the mistakes religion has made.

The Easy Way to Follow Jesus

If you're looking for an easy way to follow Jesus that doesn't cut into your free time, I've got news for you – that isn't possible. Following Jesus is a twenty-four-seven commitment. However, it may be possible to weave your commitment into your life in such a way that it becomes almost invisible. If you build a church in your heart as suggested in chapter three, you will be taking that church with you wherever you go. Your worship life and your secular existence will be seamlessly woven together in a way that will leave no room for the devil to infiltrate.

The Bible

Start by developing a seamless habit of reading the Bible. Following Jesus has to include some connection to the Bible in order to protect yourself from the devil's attacks. These days there are many different ways to consume Biblical information other than a formal reading plan. You can watch or listen to Bible teachers online. You can listen to an audio Bible while you work out or travel. You can take an online Bible study course that allows you to plan your own schedule. You can put together a small group of friends to work through a structured Bible study program. You can find a website or blog that offers brief Bible study devotionals that take as little as five minutes a day. Yes, you can remain a Christian without every opening a Bible again, but you will be missing an important connection to God that can supply you with spiritual energy that cannot be acquired any other way.

Worship

Develop a seamless way to worship. If you have a group of Christian friends, it's easy to set aside time to worship together. Sharing a meal that includes sincere prayer is a form of worship. You can expand that worship service by including a Bible devotional or some brief Bible study presented by one of the members of the group. Simply asking each person in the group to share how God is working in their life is also an easy way to turn a friendly gathering into worship. Of

course, you can also remain separated from religion while at the same time attending church simply to hear the message delivered by the pastor. You can visit a different church each week and thereby become somewhat of an expert on the Christian thought in your community. If your heart is moving you toward a more personal form of worship, you can find a place in nature to be alone with God and worship him there.

Prayer

Prayer is your personal communication with God and it should be an ongoing conversation that never stops. The well-known Bible verse that instructs us to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18) actually is not encouraging continuous prayer; when read this verse in the original language it is clearly encouraging us to never give up on prayer. These two ideas can be married together in the understanding that God never leaves you and for that reason we should never ignore his presence. We should continuously give thanks to God in prayer as we go about our day and no matter how difficult our life becomes, we should acknowledge his presence.

Fellowship

Our Christian faith has to include interaction with other Christians. This is a critical component to our defensive stance against the devil. The devil prefers to get you alone where he can subtly push your buttons until he hits the right combination that sends you into despair and turns you against God. This may sound ridiculous if you're currently in a period of spiritual strength in your life; but look back to a time of despair and it won't be hard to identify the devil's attacks. There's safety in numbers. If you already have several Christian friends, praise God! If you do not, it's vitally important that you find a Bible study group, or a church where you can develop supportive relationships. If you live in a relatively isolated area, you may need to find your Christian support group online in a Christian forum or online Bible study group.

Serving Others

Following Jesus is all about serving others. Jesus Christ was the ultimate servant, going all the way to the cross on our behalf. Chapter Four has a detailed discussion of what it means to serve God and how we can serve others throughout our day. Every time we encounter another human being, it is an opportunity to serve. Simply listening carefully to someone speak is a form of service. All too often we only casually listen and miss the deeper connection that constitutes service. There are many opportunities to serve others in most people's lives. If you live in a situation with limited opportunities, you can always reach out to others online and find some way to serve in that capacity. As followers of Jesus Christ, we should always be looking for ways to volunteer our time or donate some of our treasure toward well-structured service projects.

Put on the Armor of God

I can't emphasize enough the importance of standing strong against the devil. Before I send you on your way, I have to remind you that you are in a spiritual battle against determined evil forces. As a follower of Jesus Christ, there's no reason to be intimidated by this onslaught. Jesus Christ has already defeated our enemy by going to the cross and rising from the dead. As Christians we have that awesome power at our disposal; however, the battle continues as long as we reside in this world and we have to be prepared.

*“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.
Put on the full armor of God,
so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.
For our struggle is not against flesh and blood,
but against the rulers, against the authorities,
against the powers of this dark world
and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”*
Ephesians 6:10-12

If you read the above scripture carefully, you will discover there is an immense organized force actively attempting to destroy the work of God. The rulers, authorities, powers of the dark world, and spiritual forces in the heavenly realms, are all conspiring to disrupt our Christian faith. No fear. We have been given all the tools necessary to combat this enemy.

*“Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.
Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”*
Ephesians 6:13-17

Our defensive weapons are truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and salvation. And our offensive weapons are the Word of God and prayer.

*“And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.
With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.”*
Ephesians 6:18

As a follower of Jesus your faith, by the grace of God, has brought you salvation and righteousness, allowing you the opportunity to put on the armor of God and stand firm against the devil. You are a child of God. You will never be alone.

*“You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them,
because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”
1 John 4:4*

Go Into All the World

Your final mission as a follower of Jesus is to share your faith at every opportunity. Let your light shine in such a way that others will want to know the secret of your joy; then be ready with an answer that guides those interested toward faith in Jesus. Even if you don't have the gift of evangelism, you certainly have the ability to support others in that endeavor. Search for a missionary organization that is spreading the gospel and support their work as best you can through financial donations, active participation, or prayer. God does not want us to keep this precious gift hidden away – it is to be shared with the world.

*“Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”
Hebrews 13:20-21*

About the Author

Over the past thirty-plus years, Mike Murphy has struggled with the fragmented nature of the Christian church. Frustrated by all the denominational differences and the seemingly endless interpretations of the Bible, Mike was determined to engage in his own methodical study to uncover what he believed to be the truth. His study is ongoing and admittedly will likely never end; however, his writing about the Bible has become a popular choice for those looking for a point of view separated from religious dogma. Many believers and those seeking to know more about the Bible flock to his blog, WhatDoesItMeanToServeGod.com in hopes of finding a clear connection to God and the teachings of Jesus Christ.