

What on Earth is the Church For?

Rich Nathan
January 7 & 8, 2017
Spiritual but Not Religious?
Acts 2:42-47

Over the past decade, the news has regularly reported on the growth of the percentage of adults in America who say they don't belong to any organized religion.

Currently, 23% of American adults are religiously unaffiliated. That's up from 17% a decade ago.

These folks that are religiously unaffiliated, are not connected to a church or synagogue or mosque. These folks are called the "Nones".

Now, it's important to point out that being religiously unaffiliated doesn't mean that that person is an atheist. A majority of so-called "nones" say that they believe in God. In fact, belief in God in America remains remarkably high compared to other Western economically developed nations.

89% of American adults say they believe in God.

Why then, is there this growing trend toward people disassociating themselves from organized religion? Why are there so many religiously unaffiliated people, so many "nones" that we keep reading about in the news?

Let me tick off four reasons why I think there's been a growth in this category of folks who don't go to church and who are not part of another religious community. The first reason is

People are becoming more honest

Part of the growth of the religiously unaffiliated "nones" is due to the reality that there's no longer a stigma attached to not going to church in most parts of America. It used to be that people were ashamed to admit that they just slept in on Sunday morning. But now there's no perceived social penalty for being unattached to church.

So part of the rise in numbers of the religiously unaffiliated may be that we're getting more honest responses. But there is no doubt that's only part of the reason we're seeing this change in numbers. There is, in fact, a very real increase in people's disaffiliation from organized religion and religious institutions.

I think another reason for a rise of the “nones” is because

People are becoming more anti-institutional

Part of what’s happened in America is a loss of confidence in almost all institutions not just religious institutions. In fact, over the last three decades confidence has grown in only two institutions in America. Do you know what those are? The military – people are more positive about the military than they were 30 years ago. And small business – people are more positive about small business owners for some reason than they were 30 years ago. I’m not sure why!

But surveys tell us that people have lost confidence in virtually every other institution. Some in a major way, according to Gallup polls. For example, what percentage of people say that they have quite a lot of confidence in Congress? What do you think?

Only 9% of Americans say they have quite a lot of confidence in Congress.

That’s one-third of what it was just 20 years ago. What about the presidency? What percentage of Americans say they have quite a lot of confidence in the institution, not just the individual, but the institution of the presidency. The presidency scores significantly higher than Congress, but still

Only 36% of Americans say they have quite a lot of confidence in the presidency.

Confidence in TV news, banks, big business, public schools, organized labor, the medical system all score really poorly. Confidence in organized religion actually ranks fourth after the military, small business and the police.

Part of what’s happening in the rise of the “nones” is that people are becoming alienated from all institutions. If the 1950’s was the highpoint of institutional confidence, the 21st century has become the low point. Religious disaffiliation is following a broader social trend of anti-institutionalism in general.

Why has there been a growth in the number of “nones” in America? People are becoming more honest. People are becoming more anti-institutional. And here’s a third thing,

People are becoming more upset with church

Some of the upset is due to scandals in the church over the past few decades. When I think about the American church, I think about the well-publicized televangelists’ financial and sexual scandals that we heard so much about in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. Then there was the really tragic revelation of sexual abuse, particularly in the

Roman Catholic Church. It was going on for decades, but only became widely reported in the last 20 years.

Some people ask, “How can you go to church when the church has been associated with so many terrible things?” Maybe you’ve had a conversation like this with someone. I certainly have. The moment that someone finds out that I’m a pastor, they either want to avoid talking about religion like the plague with me or they feel compelled to ask me a question about religion that they’ve wondered about or tell me why they dislike the church so much.

My goodness, the church is responsible for the Inquisition and the Crusades and the killing of a million witches in Salem, Massachusetts, back in the 17th century. [Well, really not one million. There were 20 people who were killed, but usually people get on a roll and exaggerate how terrible the church has been.]

Let me ask you, if you are a regular church goer and somebody throws this question out to you, “How can you go to church when the church is guilty of so many terrible things? How can you associate yourself with such a horrible institution?” What do you say? How do you respond?

Sometimes you might honestly apologize and say, “Yes, the church has been associated with some really bad things. That’s true. We haven’t represented Jesus very well.” As Gandhi once put it, “I like your Christ. I just don’t like your Christians.”

But after I’ve gotten done apologizing, I’m tempted to turn the tables on the person and say, “Let me ask you a question. How can you live in America? With all the terrible things that we are guilty of in America. I mean, the genocide against Native Americans and slavery and our materialism and all the wars that we’ve been involved in. How can you bear living in this country?”

If they say, “Well, I’m not really from America, I live in France.” You can say, “Well, don’t get me started about France. What a horrible country! With what you did in Algeria and your history of colonialism. Don’t get me started about France, I can’t see how anybody could live there. Or England or India or China or Russia. In fact, I can’t see how you can be associated with any country if you really explore that country’s history.”

Or if you didn’t want to get so political and somebody asks, “How can you be associated with the church with all of its faults?” You could respond and say, “I can’t believe that you still watch football – with all the drug abusing, spouse abusing players, and all the concussions. Don’t get me started about baseball – with the steroid use and taxpayer financed stadiums for billionaire owners. Don’t get me started about sports. In fact, in general I don’t know how you could allow yourself to drive a car with all the highway deaths and drunk drivers and pollution. How can you associate yourself with cars?” The

bottom line is that the church like every other human institution – government, football, baseball, car driving, and whatever you can think of – they’re all filled with people and people are, in the words of the Bible, sinners.

To say you couldn’t be associated with the church because of terrible things the church has done is to say that you can’t be associated with anything that people do. I can’t be associated with marriage because of all the hurt that people have done to each other in the name of marriage. I can’t be associated with parenting because of the number of horrible parents. People are sinners – in the church and outside the church. We are all made of crooked timber. There’s nothing that human beings are involved in that doesn’t have some degree of crookedness or corruption or hurt attached to it.

But there’s a final reason why we see a rise in the number of “nones” in America.

People are becoming more spiritual but not religious

More and more people are distinguishing between being spiritual, which they take to be real and authentic and personal, over against being involved in organized religion which many people feel is all about going through meaningless rituals and being hypocritical, and inauthentic. Being spiritual for many people means cultivating an inner life over against just going through external forms and rituals. I think there’s something very good about the desire for authentic spirituality. I think there’s something very good about not wanting to just go through the motions – just going to church because you are supposed to or because you’re running for political office and you want people to think that you are a church goer or you don’t want your family to be mad at you. I think there’s something really positive and authentic that people are trying to get at when they call themselves spiritual but not religious.

Today, and over the next month, I want to talk about why we ought to bother with the church at all. Given all the criticism of the church in the media and the growth in the number of people who have pulled away from church, who no longer associate with church. What on earth is the church for? That’s the title of today’s message. Let’s pray.

Acts 2:42-47

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

⁴⁶Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Let me give you a little bit of background to this text. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his followers to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of the Holy Spirit. He told them that they would receive power when the Spirit of God came. Jesus said that the power of the Spirit would enable them to become witnesses all over the world. So, as Jesus instructed, they waited. Here's what happened on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover, 50 days after Jesus died.

Acts 2:1-4

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

The disciples in Acts 2 had a profound spiritual experience. In fact, the whole book of Acts is about the activity of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is mentioned 70 times in the Book of Acts. Many people believe that the book should be titled The Acts, not of the Apostles, but The Acts of the Holy Spirit. Now, Luke, who wrote the Book of Acts, started with the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit, this wonderful spiritual experience of spirit-filling and speaking in tongues. But why did he go on to talk about the church? In fact, why does Luke talk about the church in the Book of Acts so often that he used 19 different terms to describe the church? He calls God's people: the brethren 23 times; the disciples 21 times; and the church 19 times. If it was enough to be spiritual without being part of a religious community, Luke would have stopped with the experience of the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, but he goes on. He writes Acts 2:42-47, which is all about the church.

Indeed, you could say from the New Testament that there is no such thing as an unchurched Christian. The church is at the very center of the purpose of God. Even when a biblical text talks about a spiritual experience, or spiritual gifts that text is almost always in the context of the church. Being the part of an organized Christian community. Why is being spiritual but not religious not enough?

Let me share with you four reasons why spiritual but not religious is not enough. First, because

Over against the cultural conformity of the "Spiritual but Not Religious" the church is devoted to the apostles' teaching

Here's what we read in Acts 2

Acts 2:42

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Let me tell you a story. When I was a teenager, I really cultivated a self-image of being a rebel. I had a huge afro.

I wore the clothes of the revolution. Flannel shirts and bell bottoms and work boots. And I used to read revolutionary literature – Malcolm X and Abbie Hoffman and James Baldwin. I marched against the Vietnam War and went to Grateful Dead concerts. I cultivated this image of being a rebel. One day as a teenager, I was reading an editorial in the newspaper where this older guy just slapped me in the face with something that he said. He said, Young people today are just part of a

Herd of Individualists

I remember reading that phrase, “herd of individualists” and as a teenager I thought, “That’s all I am. I’m just part of a herd. Totally conformed.” My reading tastes, my music tastes, my dress style and my hairstyle and my political views are exactly like everyone else in my high school. I was just part of a herd of people who thought of themselves as being rebellious. But, in fact, I am a total conformist.

Part of the negative edge of being spiritual but not religious is that many people who label themselves this way, think of themselves as being really daring, really counter-cultural, really avant-garde. But they are just part of a herd. When you talk with the “spiritual but not religious folks”, they almost are just an echo of the larger culture. In fact, when you meet somebody who is spiritual but not religious they will likely say something like, “I just can’t believe in a God who would ever judge someone or send anyone to hell. I believe in a God who is going to embrace everyone in the end. I believe in a God of love and tolerance and inclusivity or “I don’t think you have to go to church to find God, I find God by taking a walk in the woods. I get more out of reading the *New York Times* or listening to a TED talk on Sunday morning than listening to a sermon.”

Saying things like this does not make you radical. It means you are just an echo of the larger culture. You want to be really counter-cultural? Do you want to be really radical? Be like the people in Acts 2:42, devote yourself to the Apostles’ teaching.

When we talk about the apostles’ teaching, we’re talking about what the apostles wrote in a book we call the New Testament. If you want to be really radical, don’t pick and choose what you’re going to accept from the New Testament – accept all of it! If you want to really be counter-cultural and you’re dating, don’t sleep with your girlfriend, don’t sleep with your boyfriend. That’s radical! If you don’t want to just be part of the

herd, if you want to be a person who thinks for yourself, if you don't just want to be an echo then don't run up debt on your credit card. Get married and then have kids. Forgive people who hurt you.

One of the most counter-cultural things a person in America could do these days is go to church every week. Less than 1/5 of Americans go to church every week. You're not being some radical free thinker by not going to church on any given weekend, more than 4/5 of American adults are not in church. By the way, if you take this idea seriously of being devoted to the apostles' teaching it means you have a regular rhythm in your life of engagement with the scriptures. As we're starting this New Year, why not set a goal of trying to engage with the Bible at least five days a week. Five days a week, I'm going to read the scriptures. We have some tools to help you. In the bookstore on Cooper Road, we have copies of a book called *Search the Scriptures*

Which is a guide that will take you through the whole Bible over the course of three years. It will tell you a Bible passage to read and ask some questions. You could get a notebook and write your answers to the questions as you read the Bible. Marlene and I used *Search the Scriptures* for several years as we were becoming acquainted with the Bible. I highly recommend this book.

A second thing you can do is use the Bible studies on the back of your outlines. Every week we have five Bible studies that follow up the weekend sermon.

A final thing that you could do is on your way out of church today at all of our campuses, we have a simple Bible reading plan that can help guide your reading over the course of the next year. Pick one up. Carry it home. Put it in your Bible. Use it to spur you on so that you could be devoted to the apostles' teaching.

There's a second negative edge to simply being spiritual but not religious that we see in this text. That is

Over against the selfishness and individualism of the "spiritual but not religious", the church is devoted to fellowship and sharing

Here's what we read in Acts

Acts 2:42

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

Now, I love this Holy Spirit created balance that existed in the early church. The church wasn't just full of truth, devoted to the apostle's teaching, the church was full of love, devoted to fellowship. We have not only a teaching church, but a loving church. You

talk about something that is radically counter-cultural, coming into the midst of a group of people where a person experiences warmth and acceptance and love – that’s radical.

Listen, a lot of people say, “What do I need church for? I’ve got my community. I get together with a few Christian friends whose company I enjoy. We talk about things we care about. We talk about the Bible. But we talk about politics, craft beer and craft bourbon and we all roast our own coffee beans. I have community after my yoga class or my spin class a few of us have coconut water together or we go out for a vegan lunch.”

So, what do I need the church for? One of the beautiful things about the church is that you and I don’t pick the people who God wants us to connect with. The church is more than just a few hand chosen friends that you totally agree with about religion and politics. Church is more than a few hand chosen friends whose lifestyle and interests you share. The church is a supernatural gift of God. It’s not a human invention. God supernaturally breaks down dividing walls and brings people together who would never otherwise be together.

The church is a guy coming out of prison and someone with their PhD from India and an older American widow and a young student from Iran that’s come to the US to study and all these different people come together because of their encounter with one person – Jesus Christ. The church is not centered on our common interests or our common socioeconomic backgrounds or our common race or our common culture. There’s one reason why we’ve all gathered here and that is because we have had an encounter with Jesus Christ. There’s where our commonness is with the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit. That’s where our fellowship is. That’s what the church is. It’s supernatural, it’s not a natural gift.

Notice that they didn’t just meet with each other on Sundays. They met in one another’s homes.

Acts 2:46

⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

The church had a pattern of large central meetings and then smaller home fellowship meetings. We try to imitate the early church’s pattern here at Vineyard Columbus. We come together in large gatherings for our weekend services, but then we break down during the week in hundreds of small groups and meet all over central Ohio, all different ages – from middle school to empty nesters. Men’s, women’s and co-ed groups. Meeting for breakfast, meeting on the weekends, meeting in downtown offices, in apartments and living rooms everywhere. Why not set a goal this new year of getting involved in one of our small groups.

The early church didn't just share in fellowship in Christ and with each other, they also shared out in offering financial help to one another.

Acts 2:45

⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

You know, the Greek word for fellowship is

Fellowship = *koinonia*

Koinonia wasn't just referred to fellowship and relationship that we have with each other, when the Apostle Paul took up a collection to give to the poor, he used this Greek word, koinonia, for the collection. It's a real fellowship. It's a supernatural gift. God determines who you are going to share with. Koinonia is also a sharing out of your financial resources. You don't have fellowship in the Christian sense if you're picking your friends and you're not financially sharing.

Here's a third negative edge to simply being spiritual but not religious.

Over against the utter ineffectiveness of the spiritual but not religious approach to spirituality, the church offers spirituality that works

Lots of people today are saying, "I don't need to be attached to some religious institution in order to be spiritual." But, guess what? Everything we know from sociologists of religion tell us that you almost certainly will not be able to sustain a spiritual life without being attached to a religious community. Spirituality without religion just doesn't work. Sociologist of religion, Nancy Ammerman, finished a new study of religion in everyday life and she concluded in her book that spiritual but not religious is a unicorn. By this she means that it is a species that doesn't actually exist in reality. Ammerman found that spirituality and religious affiliation are not two separate things, instead they are entirely one. The people who are most active in organized religion are also the same people that engage in spiritual practices, like prayer and giving to the poor and worship. That's what we see in the early church.

Here's what we read in verse 42:

Acts 2:42

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

The breaking of bread may refer to the sharing of a meal together in one another's homes, but it almost certainly involves the taking of communion. The bread and the

wine that point us to the broken body and shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is in the context of the church where miracles were being done.

Acts 2:43

⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.

It was in the context of the church that people were worshipping

Acts 2:47

⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

What Nancy Ammerman found in her study of truly spiritual people, that is people with the most spiritual view of life and people who engage in spiritual practices, that virtually always they are attached to a religious community. This notion that religion supports spirituality, but you're not going to have long-term spiritual commitments without a religious community. Nancy Ammerman's findings are exactly what we have found here at Vineyard Columbus.

Every two years we do a survey of people who come to this church. What we've discovered is that if you compare people who have joined Vineyard Columbus, who have become members here, with those who are not members but may occasionally attend, there is a 40 percentage point gap in things like: Bible reading, prayer, commitment to give, small group connection – a 40% point gap between members and non-members. Our surveys indicate that if you want to be a spiritual person engaged in spiritual practices, the only way that you are going to be successful is to root yourself in the church.

In two weeks at our Cooper Road campus, I'll be teaching our Membership 101 class on January 22 at 2:30pm. If you aren't a Member, please come.

I will just say one other thing before I move on to my last point. This is absolutely the case if you have children. If you want to see your child or your grandchild have a living, active Christian faith when they get older you must make a commitment to bring your children or grandchildren to church every week. It is the rarest person who is raised without any church connection whatever who ends up being a passionate follower of Jesus as an adult. You do find people like that – I'm one of them. I wasn't raised with any church connection. But there's not a lot of kids who have no church connection who grow up to have one. If you care about your child or grandchild or niece or nephew or neighbor an active Christian faith as an adult, you'll bring them to church.

Here's the last thing:

Over against the completely inward focus of the spiritual but not religious, the church also has an outward focus

Here's what we read in verses 46-47:

Acts 2:46-47

⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

It's interesting that the church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to worship, to prayer, to ministry of healing and signs and wonders. They reached upward to God in worship and in submission to God's word. They reached inward into people's hearts with prayer. There was an "among" dimension as they shared in fellowship with each other and shared out their belongings. But we would have a lopsided picture of the church unless these upward, inward and among dimensions of the church was balanced by an outward focus. "The Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved."

The early church wasn't so preoccupied with learning and fellowshiping and worshipping and signs and wonders that they forgot about witnessing. The Holy Spirit is a missionary spirit and he created a missionary church. Now, notice some things about this phrase in verse 47:

Acts 2:47

⁴⁷ ... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Bearing witness wasn't just an occasional thing - part of a yearly revival, part of a crusade for the early church. People in the church were daily sharing their faith – they regularly had Jesus conversations – as they went about their activities in their neighborhoods and workplaces and families. They kept expanding the church. And notice this wonderful balance over against the nominalism of so many churches today. Verse 47 says that "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Churches have no business membering people who are not converted to Christ. But that it's not enough to be converted to Christ. The process of evangelism is not completed until you're added to the numbers of the church. You have to become a responsible church member. The converted are added to the church!

What on earth is the church for? Here are the purposes of the church. The church is a loving, fellowshiping church. They become members. The church is a learning church. We become mature. The church is an experiencing church. We meet God and heal the sick. The church is a sharing church. We minister to each other. The church is an evangelizing church. We engage in missions. What on earth is the church for? God created the church to teach us to love, to learn, to experience, to serve and to witness.

Let's pray.

What on Earth is the Church For?

Rich Nathan

January 7 & 8, 2017

Spiritual but Not Religious?

Acts 2:42-47

- I. Why has there been a growing number of “Nones”?
 - A. People are becoming more honest
 - B. People are becoming more anti-institutional
 - C. People are becoming more upset with the church
 - D. People are becoming more “spiritual but not religious”

- II. Over against the cultural conformity of the spiritual but not religious, the church is devoted to the apostles’ teaching

- III. Over against the selfishness and individualism of the spiritual but not religious, the church is devoted to fellowship and sharing

- IV. Over against the utter ineffectiveness of the spiritual but not religious approach to spirituality, the church offers spirituality that works

- V. Over against the completely inward focus of the spiritual but not religious, the church also has an outward focus