

# Going to Church Alone

How to stop doing church in a way that fosters individualism and isolation.

Jason Johansen

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About 10 years ago, I grew disillusioned with the church I had attended all my life. I continued to attend, but I avoided the people there. I kept greetings brief and conversations superficial. I came late and left quickly after the service. It surprised me how easy it was to hide in plain sight in church, especially when I had been active there my whole life.

What has surprised me even more since then is how common this experience is. This Sunday thousands of people will arrive at church right as the music starts, find a seat in increasingly dim auditoriums, sing music that touches an array of emotions, listen to an interesting sermon, and leave having never really spoken to anyone.

These reclusive congregants neither give nor receive hospitality, share no burdens, do not assist the weak, receive no prayer for discernment over major life decisions, no repentance for grudges or grievances, no healing of estranged relationships, no rejoicing with another's joy, no sorrow in another's tears.

You cannot have intimacy with Christ and remain aloof from his body.

Sermon and songs will conspire to give the worshiping consumer an experience of having connected with Christ even while they ignore the very real members of Christ's body sitting right next to them.

For many this has become normal. In my case, this was a phase of anonymity and alienation (wasted months that still grieve me). For many, however, anonymous attendance is all they know of church. It is perpetual and permanent.

These days it is far too easy to go to church alone.

## **Dangerous Isolation**

Now I'm a pastor, and this phenomenon is no surprise to those of us in ministry. It is, in fact, the result of our calculated efforts to never ever make anyone feel uncomfortable or pressured at church. Trying not to be intrusive, we dim the lights to make it feel like it's just me and Jesus. We plan out every moment of the service so there are no awkward moments where someone might feel obligated to make conversation with someone next to them.

And don't dream of asking folks to pray for one another! Leave no space for an uncouth congregant to burden anyone with their needs (we have proper channels for that anyway).

In short, we alleviate our congregants of the awkward impression that they might be obliged to engage another human being. Our format communicates that as long as you and Jesus are alright, you can go to church alone.

This is a dangerous game for churches to play. Dangerous because we pretend that people can connect with Christ even while remaining disconnected from his body.

At its ugliest, we teach congregants not only to ignore those who worship beside them, but to resent those who might distract from our well produced worship presentation—the elderly man oblivious to his squealing hearing aid, the mother and her fussy baby, the malodorous transient.

All these become hindrances to communion with God rather than opportunities to serve God. It's not long before everyone is an interruption to my consumption of a worship experience.