

# Why I Left...And Why I Keep Going Back

NOTE: THIS POST IS SORT-OF CONNECTED TO MY POST "RELIGION VS. FAITH":

*"I am the spiritual person I am because of religion. It taught me Scripture, prayer, and the joy of being a friend of God. Religion has also caused me heartbreak, but it has not interfered with my relationship with God! (It might have even brought me closer to God ... which might need to be another post!)"*

- Honest Theology Post, "[Religion vs. Faith](#)," posted 2/27/26



This is not a story about walking away from God. It's a story about wrestling with the institution that bears God's name.

"Leaving" is never easy. It's almost always a mixture of despair, grief, and pain. Over the course of my sixty-six years, I have formally left a religion two times, and it just about destroyed me. I lost a community that had upheld, encouraged, comforted, guided, and honestly loved me. When you find a community that is rooted in a *spiritual* faith, the connections you establish extend beyond the present and can reach both into your past and ahead into your future. Like the roots of a tree, the extent of this connection [exceeds anything you could ask for or imagine](#). Leaving can cripple you.

My initial experiences with formal religion (I distinguish this from personal faith) were all positive. Shy, anxious, and insecure for most of my life, it was in this religious setting that I found my personal faith and came to see what God wanted for me. That community gave me a comforting assurance that faith in Jesus Christ and the presence of the Spirit within me enabled me to never be alone again (a super power!). Successes and failures within this safe environment helped me experience the amazing transformation that was indeed possible for "even" me. My love of teaching, my joy in writing, my confidence in speaking ... *and the ability to get out of bed in the morning* all can be attributed to this faith community.

I know that every good thing in my life is from God. Hear me clearly: *everything*. It has *nothing* to do with a brick-and-mortar place. I thank God for the cold glass of water coming from my kitchen tap, the fat little bird sitting outside my closet window, and the inspired words that come out of my mouth (and my fingers). I *live* with God; I don't just visit God on Sunday.

Sunday, is a *community* worship day for me. I show up (sometimes in a not so good place I might add) and sit in that space that is entirely focused on God. The community that surrounds me is filled with this Spirit, too, and – some better off than me and some worse off – who are seeking the same thing: to be closer to God than they entered. I want God to talk to me, clarify things for me, encourage me, and give me peace. This involves recognition of Who I'm approaching and personal honesty, humility, remorse, trust, and faith. (It's a lifetime process.)

## Why I Left...

The first thirty-five years of my life, even though I was a woman, I never felt oppressed or discouraged because of my gender. Shocking stories I would hear in later life about how women were held back simply because they were women were incomprehensible to me. I grew up surrounded by women who could [move mountains](#). They had remained standing despite profound sicknesses and sorrows and they had selflessly sacrificed time and talents for my benefit. I wanted to be just like them when I grew up.

To discover, in my adult years that a religion I embraced could refuse women the right to lead, preach, teach, or govern men went against everything that had shaped me into the woman I had become. Carolyn Custis James writes in her excellent book, *Half the Church*, “*When half the church holds back – whether by choice or because we have no choice – everybody loses and our mission suffers...*”

I remember looking at my young, 3-year-old daughter. I knew she might be told she couldn't be a singer because she couldn't sing. But there was no way I'd attach her to a religion that wouldn't let her serve in a leadership capacity simply because she lacked a penis. Yeah, I said “penis.” How could I deny my daughter (and teach my sons) the very opposite of what had made me, *me*? So (my husband and) I made the heart-breaking, soul wounding decision to leave.

Wanting our children to have a community of faith like I had experienced, we found one that was gender inclusive. (The formal word for a church that does that is [egalitarian](#); the opposite being [complementarian](#).) Once again, new opportunities flourished for me that would eventually lead me to enroll in – [seminary](#) – at the ripe old age of sixty. There are still many areas of my life that the shy, introverted girl exists – or must be fought back – but I now preach and teach and speak ... Talk about miracles.

Yet, what do you do when the institution that you are actively a part of, that you publicly represent in many areas of your life suddenly behaves in a way that is contrary to what you value and embrace? Leadership decisions at any level must never contradict the values that are taught and believed.

What do you do when you realize leadership decisions damage what is present and threatens what is in the future? What do you do when you suddenly feel a shame that haunts you even in your sleep?

True leaders must know when to be courageous and speak up publicly. They also must know when to leave without becoming part of the continual problem.

## ...And Why I Keep Going Back

*This second time* the pain and heartbreak was so great that I honestly thought, “Why bother going back to a church?” I was in seminary – and had more weekly God time under my belt than

just about any average church attendee I knew. My seminary studies, Bible studies, conferences, and writing were still going strong. As our kids were now grown that wasn't a concern. It was a valid argument.

But the Spirit put a lot of questions in my head. ([Remember, I'm never alone ... that superpower thing.](#)) What about all those wonderful blessings I got being involved with a church community? What about all those joys I consistently experience? Was giving up attending a religious service, actually cutting off my nose to spite my face?

God let me grieve. [The Spirit comforted me in my prayer closet](#) (yeah, I've got one). Through my tears (and rage) peace once again crept in. Do you know what was most influential? *The faith community groups I was still a part of.* I had one wise friend say to me as I cried, "Look what you've got going! Your Bible studies are *thriving!* Your conferences are popular. Do you hear what God is saying to you?!" (XO to you, Mary!) I healed through personal devotions and simple quiet time looking out my closet window at my favorite tree.

Yeah, we're at another church now. It's right up the road. (God has graciously given us a church *closer* to our home each time, lol.) I've already preached a few times, already done a woman's conference, and am having a blast leading another Bible study. Once again, the joy I'm experiencing is ... you guessed it ... more than I could ask or imagine.

SO, I returned to a denominationally organized faith community (AKA "Church") because:

- It is [one of the few places in my life](#) that I can consistently find an indescribable burst of joy. (It's a joy far greater than any sorrow, btw.)
- I have to realize that only God is perfect – I'm not nor is the church community I choose to be a part of. (Churches *are filled* with broken people.)
- I hope I can continue to make a difference or be a blessing to someone – anyone and this community offers me a lot of opportunities to do so.
- My partner in this life wanted to – and we are a God-blessed super team. (If God can't get through to me, God often works through him!)
- I want to know more about my God; I've still got so much to learn.
- God encourages us in Scripture to be part of a community and, well, I need to do what God tells me to do.

*All* these "experiences" (such a safe, polite word) have made me a better person, a more capable leader, and a more insightful teacher. God doesn't work with just the "good" stuff you know – God works with [all things](#). My skin is a bit tougher yet my heart is bigger. My core values are more refined yet my need to listen and understand is more expansive. God seems to want me to have connections in multiple church communities, not just one. I now have a collection of eternal friends from many religious denominations *and I believe that pleases God greatly* (and me, too!). My "church," once a building, is now a faith community that spans time, geography, denominations ... and I am so much better for it.

The smile of God is the goal of my life, after all.

If you are standing at the edge of leaving, I hope you know you're not alone.

### **Scripture to maybe check out:**

I have a lot of them, but these might be my top favorite Bible verses:

- [Ephesians 3:14-21](#) Paul's excellent prayer (it's showed up in a lot of my posts, I know.)

**P.S.** For this post, The New Living Translation of the Bible published by Tyndale House Foundation in 1996, 2004, and 2015. Feel free to check these passages out in whatever Bible version you prefer—almost all of them are available on Bible Gateway!

### **Bibliography notes:**

1. My “the smile of God is the goal of my life” comment was inspired by something that Rick Warren said almost exactly in his great book, *The Purpose Driven Life*. It's published by Zondervan publishers and is a great read. You can get it cheap, used – it's well worth your money and time. (I quote him in “Wish I'd Said That”.)
2. My quote by Carolyn Custis James is from her fantastic book, *Half the Church*, published by Zondervan in 2010. The quote is found on page 18. Buy this one, too, lol.

What are your thoughts about this post? Email me and let me know!

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