

The Most High does not live in houses made by men (Acts 7:48).

Stephen's spirited defense of his faith, answering to the criticisms of the religious authorities of his day, was considered so heretical that the leaders of big business religion stoned him to death (Acts 7:57-60). They did not have him stoned—they disposed of him themselves.

Perhaps one of the most shocking statements Stephen made that upset the religious apple cart concerned the attempts by religion to confine God to its buildings, creeds and practices. Stephen insisted that God is not confined to the literal boundaries of a building or the theological boundaries of an organization or denomination.

The popular definition of "church" is a building and/or a religious organization. Many seem to visualize a church somewhat like a club—a club with a religious emphasis. Of course, many religious buildings have a distinctive style and architecture and are easy to identify, resulting in their being thought of as a church. Church buildings within Christendom often feature a cross, stained-glass windows and some prominently displayed religious figures or symbols.

Those who frequent church buildings are often defined as "members"—somewhat like members who affiliate with clubs and political parties. During church "meetings" or "services" members normally sit and listen politely, a captive audience to a speech (called a sermon or homily), then sing a few more songs, say a prayer or two, give their weekly dues

(called offerings) and then head for home.

BUT—*the church* is not a building. *The church* is not identified by a sign outside of a building or by a steeple that soars above a building. *The church* is not a legally incorporated entity. One may be a member of *a church* and not be a member of *the universal body* of Christ, which is *the church that really counts*. One may be a member of the

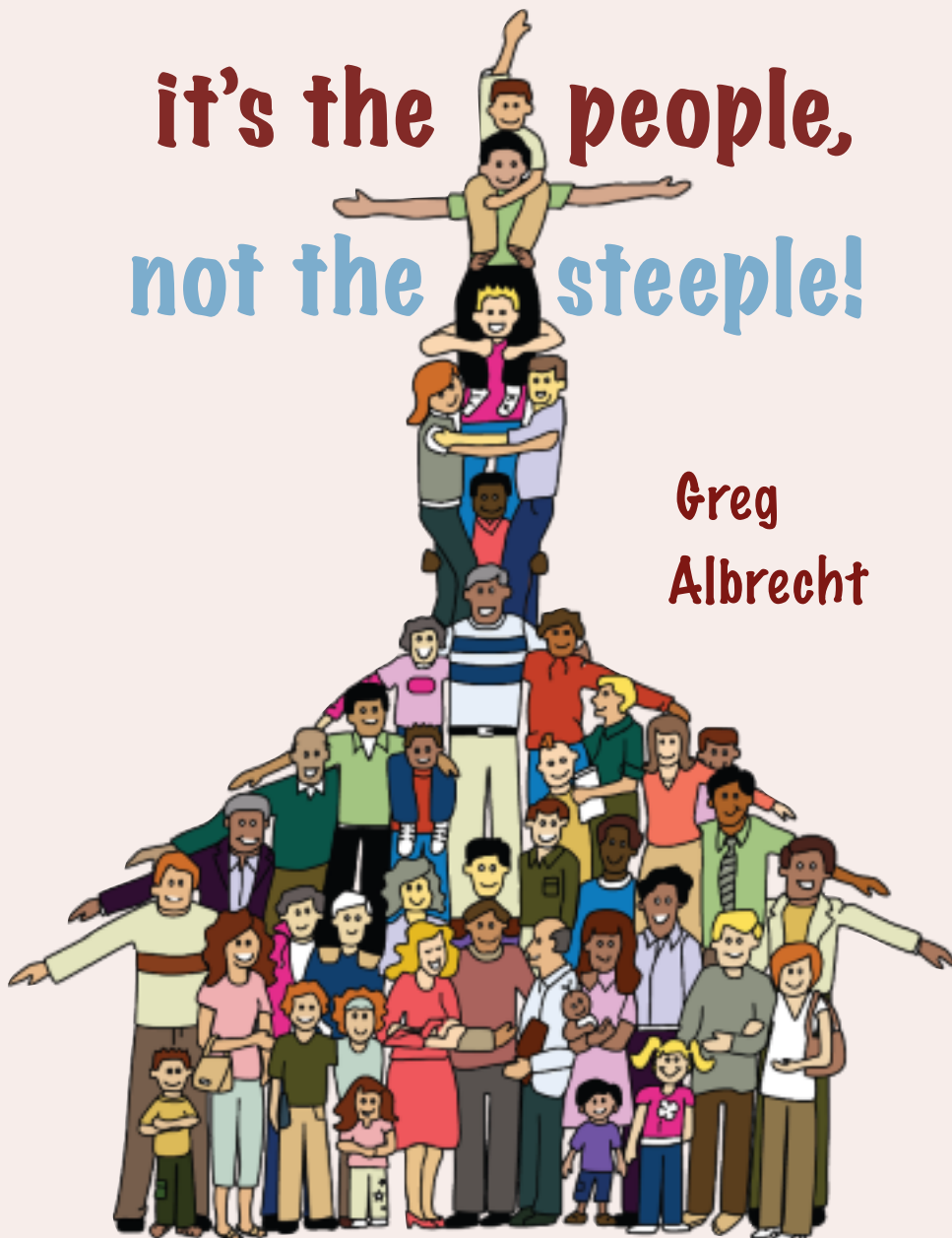
universal body of Christ and thus free in Christ (Galatians 5:1) to affiliate with a church. But one's membership in a church is not required or a necessary prerequisite for membership in the universal church founded by Jesus Christ.

The church is described in the New Testament as the body of Christ, the body of which he is head (Ephesians 1:22-23, 4:15-16, Colossians 1:18). Every Christ-follower is the church—by the

THE CHURCH:

it's the people,
not the steeple!

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grace of God, not because of (and even in spite of) membership in a church, political affiliation, age, gender, race or any other characteristic.

Christ-followers are *the church*—it is not a building to which we travel or a denomination or legal entity to which we belong. Members of the body of Christ belong to Christ. As the head of the body, Jesus Christ lives through his church. The universal body of Christ is the living representation and reflection of the Lord Jesus.

This universal body is composed of believers not only of this age, but all those Christians of the past, and all those who will live in the future. They constitute one large family—the family of God. Some believers are children, others are senior citizens. They come from every race, tongue, tribe and place.

Whether the church is in Indonesia or Japan, Germany or Russia, Africa or North America, the desert or the mountains—regardless of the languages or cultures—Christians are part of this body. The church includes believers who are part of many different denominations.

Though they may look and sound differently across the world, those who have trusted in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation are part of his body.

You are the church—the church is not a place or a building you attend or to which you travel. The church is within you, by the risen life of our Lord

Jesus and by the grace of God.

Whose Idea Was the Church?

On the day of Pentecost, a few weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, believers who had been waiting for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit suddenly experienced his arrival (Acts 1:5, 2:2).

With great signs and wonders, the church was inaugurated. A loose collection of individuals



was suddenly, miraculously knit together into one marvelous body by the divine act of God. *A brand new family had been born—a new society had been created*—not another religion.

The church was founded but no vote was taken. The church was founded but no by-laws had been agreed upon. There were no stained glass windows, no steeples, no choirs and initially, no one even took an offering! But the universal body of Christ had miraculously begun.

Later, the apostle Paul made it clear that the body of Christ, a metaphor for the church, had begun at that historic moment when God joined all the believers together in what he

called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. **The birth of the church was God's idea.** It wasn't started by a group of religious leaders trying to exert control over their adherents.

Explaining this brand new community, Paul described how the church is one body, with the same characteristics of human bodies:

"The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

When a person becomes a Christ-follower, they are placed into the body of Christ on earth, not by church policy or group vote.

Membership in the body of Christ is not determined by the will or decision of a pastor or a priest, nor is it

based on the amount that one donates—membership in the church is given by the grace of God and by an act of God the Holy Spirit. Members are spiritually born into the church and become a vital and necessary part of the body, the church. The church encompasses all believers in Christ.

It's the People, Not the Steeple

The body of Christ was God's idea! God calls humans to his church and places them within it.

"But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:18).

The church is not a club that we join—the church is a divine community to which we are called and invited. The church is far more than a building or a denomination. The church is far more than a place where we go and a club we affiliate with through membership. ***The church is what we are, by God's grace, far more than it is a geographical location!***

Meeting certain requirements or performing specific rites and rituals do not obligate God to give us membership in the universal body of Christ. Merely attending services in a building that calls itself a church does not make one a Christian.

As Billy Sunday, an evangelist of an earlier generation in America once said, “Going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile.” We are placed in the universal body of Christ when we place our trust in Jesus as our Savior and surrender our lives to him.

Some have the idea that the church is a place where Christians gather together to put up walls in an attempt to keep the world out.

Occasionally, they venture out far enough to make some judgment upon society, then dash back to the safety and cover of their church fortress.

There are many who attempt to “do” church this way. Their concept of church is a “holiness club” whose membership standards and requirements insist upon near-perfect behavior as determined and policed by its hierarchy and authorities. Yet God's purpose for the church is much different. The church isn't a sacred holding tank for Christians until their death. ***It is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.***

Many people fail to understand that the church is not a trophy case or a sacred museum where perfect Christianity is displayed. Rather, the church takes place in the lives of people who are being transformed, slowly and imperceptibly, from who and what they once were into who and what God makes of them.

The New Testament is frank and honest about the failures and shortcomings of New Testament Christians. Those who commit themselves to the universal body of Christ are enabled to reflect the Light of Christ to others and Jesus himself lives within them so that they become more forgiving, kinder and more compassionate. One of God's great strokes of counterintuitive genius is the reality that he uses imperfect people, like you and me, as his tools to help others become aware of his forgiveness, patience and love.

Christ-followers are the church. Christians may be Christians without ever attending a geographically-located church—and tens of millions are.

It is not church attendance that makes someone a Christian, but placing their trust in Jesus, and his work on the cross. There are no “second string” Christians, those who just warm the bench while others do the important work. God has given each Christian some special and unique ability or gift of service to be useful to the whole body. All Christians, regardless of how, when and where they reflect the new life that Jesus lives within them, are part of the universal body of Jesus Christ. □

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“It's the People” Test Case “Menno-Nones”

In the December 2017 issue of *CWR magazine*, Eden Jersak shared the story of her Mennonite family's flight from the Ukraine (“God With Us”). One unspoken element of that experience might help us understand and speak to the “nones” (Christ-followers not affiliated with a church) of our day.

The Mennonites were joined with each other, rather than to any institution. Their sense of community may provide a model for those who are done with institutional church attendance.

After the Russian Revolution, the Communists confiscated all Mennonite church buildings and converted them into granaries. Eden's ancestors could not “go to church” at all from at least 1917-1943. This is a recent historical example of a people group who managed to “be the church” without going to a building or even attending services. The Mennonites' faith survived and flourished without any reference to church buildings, services or denominational ties.

Oma Wiebe, Eden's Grandma, never once visited a church building or service from the time she was eleven-years-old until she was at least 37. We are not sure when Oma got a Bible, but once she did, she read Bible stories daily for herself, to her children and grandchildren.

That, plus the rich Mennonite hymns (which Eden remembers her Oma singing continually), sustained not only their faith, but their lives.

Their faith heritage was built, not on “church attendance” or denominational loyalty, but on scripture, song, loving families and God's presence despite persecution.

They were simply Christ-followers who lived together in close-knit communities, practicing the Jesus Way in daily life. □