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Price H. Gwynn III, Moderator of the 202nd General Assembly (1990) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), is the son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, and became a successful businessman as well as an extremely effective elder of the Presbyterian Church. Prior to his election as moderator, this North Carolina native

was vice-president and director of Lance, Inc., having previously served as president of two other major companies. After being elected, Gwynn became the only moderator of our denomination to be featured in *The Saturday Evening Post* for his extensive business experience. Such experience prepared him to serve as chairman of the board of Presbyterian Publishing Corporation during an important time of transition. Gwynn served on the board from 1993 to 2001.

His experience and leadership at all levels of the Presbyterian Church are equally impressive. Gwynn has served as deacon, elder, Sunday school teacher, and synod representative and has held extensive presbytery committee assignments, as well as acting as moderator of his presbytery. He was awarded five honorary degrees from Presbyterian colleges, including Davidson, where he also served on the board of trustees. During his distinguished career, he chaired the board of Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte, and he is an active member of the board of trustees of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond.

Further national church leadership roles include former membership on the General Assembly Council, the Committee on the Spiritual Welfare of the Church, and the Special Committee for Review of the General Assembly. Gwynn has combined all of these activities with a distinguished military career, outstanding civic service, and, with his wife, Katherine, strong family ties with their three sons and their grandchildren.

Who Needs the Church?

Barbara G. Wheeler



Geneva Press
Louisville, Kentucky

Note from the Author

This series of pamphlets, sent annually to Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) leaders by the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, honors Price Gwynn, the first chair of the PPC board (1993–97). I served with Price on the Committee of Seven, the General Assembly Task Force that proposed the creation of PPC, and on the board while he headed it. He was an extraordinary leader—organized, energetic, farseeing, fair. Price’s leadership as much as any other factor kept PPC moving ahead during its difficult early years.

Price’s contribution to the church extends beyond his service to PPC. He is, in fact, the very model of a Presbyterian elder. He has served numerous terms on session and been member and chair of several pastor nominating committees. He is active in his presbytery and as a member of the board of Union Theological Seminary/PSCE in Virginia. He was elected Moderator of the General Assembly. During that year of extensive travel to represent the Presbyterian Church all around the country and the world, he kept in touch weekly with the leaders of Steele Creek Presbyterian Church. He has belonged to that church (and, indeed, to the same Sunday school class) for his whole adult life.

Price has also been a great Christian friend to many people, including me. He and I have divergent theological and political views, but they have not impeded our ability to work together and to support each other in the faith. Price’s honesty, integrity, warmth, and love of the Lord have made that possible. It is a great joy to recognize these qualities and Price’s many accomplishments by dedicating this essay to him.

Who Needs the Church?

Back in the 1960s, when I was part of the next generation, the path to rebellion was clearly marked. If you wanted to show your parents and the rest of the establishment that your goals and values were different from theirs, you knew where to go—to a commune, preferably in the Haight-Ashbury section of San Francisco—and what to do—tune into hip music; turn on to illegal substances and love, which was allegedly free; drop out of the rat race for money, success, and middle-class respectability; and maybe even get arrested in a demonstration for civil rights or against the Vietnam War. Most of us did not do any of those things, but the very existence of a counterculture helped all of us, even timid kids like me, to imagine something different from the world of consumerism, cold war, and racial segregation into which we had been born.

Where is the counterculture today? Where can you go, what can you do to rebel against the establishment, to demonstrate that you do not share the ideas, goals, and values that most people hold in contemporary America? My answer to this question may surprise you. I don't think you'll find today's counterculture among the young. Despite superficial differences in dress, music, and comfort with technology, contemporary kids and their parents have remarkably similar values. Where you can go to rebel these days is to a church or synagogue that is linked to a mainline religious tradition. What you can *do*—if you really want to be different from many of your friends and perhaps much of your family as well—is become a member.

This concept is probably not news to you. Within our lifetimes, we have crossed a major cultural divide, in this country and other Western societies. Though levels of participation in the institutions of organized religion have varied a lot in American history and have usually been lower than people think, until very recently most people felt obliged to explain why they did not hold traditional beliefs and belong to established congregations. Now the pressure is to explain not why one doesn't believe and belong, but why one does. One of my hobbies, as I travel around the country, is to read the personal ads in local papers. More and more among the undesirable characteristics in a person being sought is organized religion—it's not as bad as smoking, but in some parts of the country, it's close.

The ads reflect a general cultural mood. It is fine to be spiritual, to pray, to read sacred scriptures, and to believe in supernatural realities such as ghosts, guardian angels, astrological forces, even God. But religious institutions are widely viewed today as unnecessary or worse. People accuse them of very serious offenses, such as wastefulness—the older, well-established ones especially, say the critics, use scarce charitable dollars for their own maintenance rather than for other people's needs. Another charge is hypocrisy. Some congregations are bitterly conflicted even while they preach forgiveness and love. They tend to narrowness, ignoring what is good in other religious traditions as well as what is faulty in their own, and almost all are discriminatory in one way or another. Social commentators often say that 11 A.M. on Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week, and indeed, most congregations do exclude people, either by moral criteria or by making certain racial, cultural, or economic groups feel unwelcome. In the face of such sharp criticisms, the decision you made to join the kinds of religious groups to which most of you now belong is indeed a countercultural act.

In the next few paragraphs, I say a little bit more about what is happening in our culture—not a long lecture on social trends, but just enough to back up my claim that joining an established mainline congregation is a pretty radical choice. Then I turn to some of those sharp criticisms and the people who make them, and say why, even though many of the charges leveled at organized religion are true, the decision not to join a church or synagogue is less wise than the choice most of you have made.

* * *

What is happening in American society and culture? What has made it unusual and unlikely that people will affiliate with a mainline church? Several trends in North America have greatly affected not only religious groups but also established organizations of all kinds.

Americans are more and more inclined to do things on their own. Many activities that used to be based in groups have become individual pursuits. This trend has been under way for a long time, but it came sharply to people's attention when a sociologist named Robert Putnam published an article in which he reported that more people than ever have taken up bowling, but bowling leagues are dying fast. Putnam concluded that

Americans are, in the title of his now-famous essay, bowling alone.¹ We North Americans not only bowl alone but also increasingly search for God by ourselves, without joining any organized faith community. Half of the more than 90 percent of U.S. residents who claim in surveys that they believe in God also admit to the pollsters that they do not attend any religious gathering, and some enterprising researchers who went out and counted how many people were in religious meetings during a particular week say that the actual number of attendees is much lower than the polls suggest.²

Several years ago some other sociologists wrote a book called *Habits of the Heart*, in which they quote a young California nurse named Sheila who has become a poster child for all those, probably about four out of five Americans, for whom religious faith is a largely individual matter:

I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.³

Listening to the preaching of one's own little voice is the dominant pattern of religious activity in this society. These days, meeting regularly with others to listen and to talk about God is minority activity.

Another trend: *When Americans do join or place their confidence in organizations, those groups are more likely to be local than national ones.* Some of us are old enough to remember a day when, if the federal government or a large corporation made a statement, people automatically believed it. That, of course, is no longer the case. In fact, press secretaries and public relations directors are pretty much assumed to be hiding something we need to know; the accompanying assumption is that the large national agencies and companies that employ P.R. staff do not have our interests at heart. So when individual effort is not enough, when we need a group to accomplish something, we turn if we can to local ones. We are far more likely these days to trust, support, and join organizations that are simple in form and close enough to home for us to monitor them personally than we are to have anything to do with institutions that are distant and complex.

This approach is certainly true for church attendees. Studies show that many stalwart members of local congregations have no interest and little confidence in the denomination of which their church is a part. Denominations, those church

members say, are too highly bureaucratized and too far away to be trusted. Recognizing that people feel this way, some churches have begun to minimize or even conceal their denominational identity in hopes of attracting larger crowds, and many of the new megachurches are fully independent. So if you not only attend a church but also pay some attention to the larger denominational organization of which it is a part, you are doubly unusual, and swimming against a strong tide that favors local, independent, simpler institutions.

A third trend: Americans, says one writer, are a “future-chasing people.” On patriotic and religious holidays, we have a few spasms of sentimental attachment to the past, but *we are more deeply attracted to novelty than tradition*; today, more than ever, we believe that progress, not history, will enrich our lives. As a result, you can sell almost anything in this country if you can convince people that it’s not your father’s Oldsmobile or his dot-com company that is on the block.

You also need to convince people it’s not your father’s or mother’s religion. Another discovery of the churches that are determined to grow as fast as possible is that many of those individual seekers are turned off not only by big national organizations but by old ones that are steeped in tradition. These fast-growing churches try to make themselves look and feel brand-new. They avoid everything that people traditionally associate with church: stained glass, pews, organs, hymnals, formal clothing, candles, robes, even crosses. Instead, the “new paradigm” churches have theater seats, popular music, casual dress for everyone (including the worship leaders), PowerPoint slides of the songs and prayer texts, and plain, symbol-free decoration like you find in research parks and malls. These signs are surface indicators of something deeper: These churches do not look back. You do not hear much in them about tradition or the theological debates that have occupied the churches for two thousand years. Some of these churches do not even feature the term “Christian”—“too much baggage,” one of their leaders said recently. What such churches talk about mostly is a very friendly Jesus, a Jesus who is available, right here and right now, to anyone who opens a Bible; a Jesus who is ready to come into your life and save you without you having to shoulder any of the dead weight of Christian tradition.

The list of differences between you who belong to a main-line church and most other people is lengthening. You are associated with a church; most of them are not. And if you

have any interest in the denomination of your congregation, or if you are attracted to your local church because you value its link to the rich treasury of faith that Christians have been building for all these centuries, you are more different still.

Some of the readers of this essay are even farther out, more countercultural than the rest, because you are lifelong Presbyterians. You are defying another major trend in American life. *Previously whatever identity was ascribed to you at birth was the one you kept as you grew up, formed a family, and raised your own children. But now, to a much greater extent today than in the past, you can choose.* You can stay close to or move away from the racial and ethnic group into which you were born. You can move up—or down!—the class ladder by the choices you make. You can even switch religions.

Very substantial numbers of Americans have chosen to do just that, to relocate in a religion they like better than the one in which their parents raised them. Two-thirds of Protestants will belong to more than one religious group in their lifetime, and not all will switch to other Protestant denominations. Some will join the Catholic Church; others will convert to Judaism, especially if they marry a Jew; and still others will become Muslims or Buddhists or Mormons. Generally speaking, switching receives as much social approval these days as staying put. Because of all this openness and tolerance, most of our fellow Presbyterians have switched, and lifelong adherents to a single tradition are the exception, not the rule.

Some of you may be bucking one other trend. *Religion in America, like many other important activities, is becoming more private.* Many features of our lives that used to be public are now, Americans think, no one else's business. Take, for example, political affiliation. Recently I heard on the radio a story about a town where, in the nineteenth century, a man who was an avid lifelong Republican started a cemetery for Republicans only; of course a Democrat in that town started his own burying ground so that he wouldn't have to spend eternity near any members of the Grand Old Party. Today we don't wear our political sentiments on our sleeves or our headstones. I cannot tell you what I am sure I would have known a century ago: how my friends and neighbors vote.

Religion too has been taken indoors. Despite the doings of some noisy political activists who decorate their views with piety, most Americans prefer that religion be treated as a private matter that is not discussed with others and that is kept separate from the more public and visible parts of their lives.

Religion is now a domestic activity; as law professor Stephen Carter says, it has become Americans' favorite hobby.⁴ So if you believe that God cares about the well-being of the world as well as the state of the church; and if, therefore, you think that, without imposing your faith on others you must nevertheless bring it with you, in some form, when you go to school, work, and out into the wider community—if you believe that, and you act on it, you are at odds with the dominant values of this culture. Maybe you don't think of yourself this way, but you are a rebel.

* * *

That's how things are these days. Most people in this society believe in God and say they lead spiritual lives, but they do not participate regularly in a congregation. If they do join one, they are not likely to be interested in the organized, denominational side of religious life, or in longstanding religious traditions. When their location or life circumstances or interests change, they may well change their religious identity too. Moreover, whatever they believe and do, they keep it to themselves. So who has made the wiser choice—this majority, who are free to graze for spiritual nourishment among all the great religions, who don't have to put up with bureaucracy and old-fashioned ideas, who get to protect their privacy? Or have you chosen the less popular way: casting your lot with one church that links you to an organized denomination, to an older tradition, and to life out in the world?

If you've done the latter, I think you have made the better choice. In fact, I think that, in the long run, you have no choice. For people of Christian faith, the only viable option is life together, over time, in a community that has come into being for the purpose of praising and serving God in concert with all God's other people, in all places and in all times.

The claim I have just made—that you can't be a person of Christian faith without the church—is pretty extreme. To back it up, I need to take a moment to define what I mean by faith, Christian faith in particular. Faith, as I am using the word, is not doctrines or specific teachings about God, Jesus Christ, salvation, sin, and the rest. Doctrines are important. The best of them tell us who God is, and if we care about God we want to know that. But doctrines are complex, and you have to sort out the good from the bad. Faith is profound but very straightforward. Faith is simply the acknowledgment that God is God,

and we are not God. God has come very close to us, even sent God's son, we Christians believe, to live as one of us. You cannot get more intimate than that. We are also made in God's image. We can look into the face of another human being and see the face of Christ, but still we are not God. Ultimately, says a famous old Reformed catechism, we are not our own; we belong to God, who is much more and much better than we are.

From what I can tell, many of today's spiritual seekers do not share my conviction that we belong to a God beyond ourselves. They seem to expect to find the spirit they are seeking inside, "a spark of the divine in every person," some of them like to say. On their terms, believing on your own, by yourself, makes sense because (as they see it) what is needed to give life richness and depth is within you, a seed that needs only to be watered and fed.

But I do not think that that is true. The God who has made my life different from what it would have been in the ordinary course of things has powers I do not, which is fortunate, because even at my best I am not very good. I am not strong enough to resist temptations, including the greatest of them, which is to use good things for evil purposes. I cannot save myself, and even when God reaches out to me, I still can resist and lose God. To keep me, and all of us, from doing that—to ensure that we can persevere in the faith and not lose God—God has given us the church.

At first glance, churches hardly seem to be up to the challenge of helping us to stay aligned with God. Churches are often no better than other institutions at staying aligned with God, and sometimes they are worse. They can be self-serving, self-righteous, politicized, judgmental, dishonest. Skeptical outsiders are not the only ones who point these things out. By the end of the church's first decade, St. Paul, who established many of the early congregations, could already see how bad church life could get: not even the pagans, he wrote, do some of the things he witnessed in churches (1 Cor. 5:1). John Calvin, who founded our Presbyterian wing of the church, insisted that no church anywhere has or ever will have an unblemished record (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV.1.14 [1559]). What the nonjoiners say is true: churches are human institutions, and they are riddled with human failings.

And yet. Churches are also God's way of providing what people of faith need and cannot get anywhere else. In *The Muppet Movie*, Ralph the Dog sings a sad ballad about women to Kermit, who is drowning his sorrows in a bar after running

afoul of Miss Piggy: “You can’t live with ‘em,” Ralph croons, but “You can’t live without ‘em.” Churches too. I want to list for you three ways, in ascending order of importance, that, for all their defects and faults, churches are indispensable for people of faith who have found a God beyond themselves whom they do not want to lose.

First, *the church makes it possible for us to believe in God without doing too much harm.* The spirituality folks will tell you that religion is cool, joyful, and fulfilling, but they fail to mention the downside. Religion also does terrible damage—it demeans, hurts, even kills. Every form of national, ethnic, racial, class and sexual prejudice has had religious backing at one time or another; every war ever fought has been blessed by religious leaders somewhere. “They preached a gospel of love,” said Martin Marty about Christians throughout the last millennium, “but they served a God of vengeance.” Not only on battlefields but also in churches, homes, and schools religion has often been used to humiliate and oppress. As I said earlier, we human beings are experts at using God’s finest gifts to us, like faith in God, to advantage ourselves, diminish others, and defy God.

How do churches help us to have faith without corrupting it? Well, not all do, and none does all the time. Whole churches as well as individual leaders have committed the crimes and offenses I just listed. All of us who belong to churches should apologize for their offenses, perhaps even make reparations for them. But some churches also build in safeguards against their own misdeeds. While firmly believing the truth that they teach, they also regularly remind themselves that no single church or religious tradition has the only truth or the whole truth, and that God loves and works in the world just as much as God loves and helps the church. Humility and self-correction can become a regular pattern and practice of church life.

Other protections are built into the very fact of being a believing community that exists for any length of time in a particular place. People form opinions about that church, and they can be asked for feedback about which of our ideas and actions strike them as Godly and which seem to be the opposite. If we really listen to what they say and change our ways when we are misusing our faith, we can have the joys and comforts of faith in God, just like the people who keep their spirituality to themselves. We also would have some protection that the spiritual individualists do not. We are protected by others against doing wrong in God’s name, and losing touch with God in the bargain.

Second, *the church keeps us bound to each other*. “Really?” you may be thinking. “Have you ever witnessed a church fight?” Lots of people who do not join churches stay away because they have seen how vicious Christians can be to each other—and not just to other brands of Christians, but also to the members of their own denominations and even congregations. Almost every other kind of organization, say the refugees from church conflicts, is warmer and more welcoming than the church.

That is often true, but God also hates walls and divisions and intends to save the world by breaking them down. If we want to stay close to God, we need to participate in this barrier-breaking project, not frustrate it. Churches, for all their awful mistakes, have a unique power to do that, because God established churches to call into God’s service everyone God cares enough about to die for, which is everyone. The community of God has no barriers to membership, not even sin. Christ died for us *while* we were sinners. He didn’t wait until we got over it. No club, no association, no nation, no multinational agency can say the same. When the church lives up to its charter, nothing divides its members. No one, no human being operating alone—even the most open, tolerant, and accepting—has the power to be as radically accepting as God when God established God’s covenant with the church. People who wouldn’t come together for any other reason, who don’t share nationality, race, opinions, who don’t even like each other, can draw close to each other here, because God chose all of them. Because God’s goal for the world is to put us all on the same footing, when we come close to each other, we come and stay close to God.

Last, *the church keeps us from losing God by keeping the faith*. The church’s reputation, however, is otherwise. The most common suspicion about organized, established churches is that they are spiritually dead—empty shells of bureaucracy and tradition where God used to hang out but no longer does. Budgets, staff, politics, programs, and all those other members are distractions, people think. It is much easier to have a vibrant faith and stay close to God in an exclusive one-on-one relationship, just me and God loving each other in private, with no institutional interruptions.

And that is correct—sometimes. As in any other romance, when things are going well, just the two of you is plenty. When the cares and troubles of life bear down, however, two is rarely enough, especially if the one you love is hurting you or failing to prevent you from being hurt. Then you need other people.

None of us is strong enough to keep loving God at the bad times, when it feels as if God does not care about our pain and may even be causing it. Such moments happen to all of us. Every believer at some time has felt abandoned and punished by God. Whoever wrote the psalms, the most joyful and magnificent songs in praise of God ever composed, also wrote this and many passages like it:

You have put me in the depths of the Pit,
in the regions dark and deep. . . .

I, O LORD, cry out to you. . . .

I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

Why do you cast me off?

Why do you hide your face from me?

(Psalm 88:6, 13a, 15b, 14)

In moments like these, when God is far away, not honeymooning with us, and when our faith is weak or nonexistent . . . in moments like these, we need the church, all those other lovers of God who, in the tough times, keep the faith for us.

As I was preparing this essay, a friend called and told me a remarkable story. She had gone to church that day, in the small New England city where she lives. The minister opened the service by expressing his horror at an incident that had made newspaper headlines that week, the brutal assault of a woman in the city's park. Then he announced that the victim, who had survived both rape and being dragged across a highway, was a deacon in that church, and in fact had been mailing cards to homebound church members when the crime occurred. He named the woman, and she came forward and spoke. She said simply that as she had endured the attack, she felt that her fellow church members were with her, bearing her up, and she thanked them and thanked God for them. At the most terrible moment of her life, when God must have seemed very far away, trust in God was possible because she knew that others, including those whose cards she had held in her hand, were believing, trusting, and loving God for her, until she was strong enough to do it again for herself, and for them.

Those nonattenders have a point: going to church may not help us to be more spiritual people in the good times. When everything is going right, we may be able to have more fun with God by ourselves. But the church does something more important: It keeps us close to God through the difficult days and nights, when spiritual pleasure is out of the question. As many of you probably know, if you stick with a congregation

for better and for worse, sharing your faith when God gives you a lot of it, you too will receive faith from others at the desperate moments when you can't find your own.

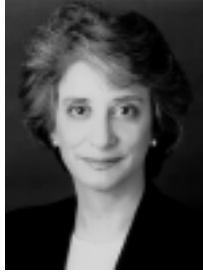
Congregations are essential. Over the long haul you cannot, I am pretty sure, remain a person of Christian faith without one. Sometimes you will also need, if you want to keep the faith, to call on the wider church. One of the graduates of my seminary once told me the story of her first days in ministry. She was not yet unpacked when the daughter of a church member asked her to sit with them as the mother lay dying. The daughter came from another city, did not know any of the members of the congregation that our graduate had come to serve, so she could not summon them, even in spirit. But she called our graduate to be part of this life-changing event, not because she knew her, but because she was a Presbyterian minister. She represented the wider church that keeps the faith that had sustained the mother. I asked our graduate what she thought was expected of her. "I think," she said, "that I was expected to bring God." Sometimes, when our congregation cannot be reached, we need the wider church to bring us God, or to witness to the presence of God who is already with us.

And then the times come when no one, in our own church or any other on the current scene, seems to be close enough to God to bring God to us. No less a role model than Jesus found himself with this problem more than once—separated from God and low on faith, with no one to minister to him. His solution may come as a surprise to people who think they can have instant Jesus without the baggage of church tradition around him. Jesus turned to tradition. When he felt weak, alone, deserted by his friends and abandoned by God, he quoted traditional Jewish texts and teachings: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test"; "Let this cup pass from me"; "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

Someone recently said that mainline churches are now really sideline churches. In one sense that is true, but this sideline is a healthy and productive one. As I have been saying, belonging to an established church is good for your soul. And churches like this are good for a world that desperately needs durable local communities, strong ties between local communities, wisdom from the past, and care for the earth and all God's creatures who live in it. You have made a good choice; in fact, a great one, one that I hope many, many more people will make in the years to come.

Notes

1. Robert Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* (January 1995).
2. C. Kirk Hadaway, Penny Long Marler, and Mark Chaves, "What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at U.S. Church Attendance," *American Sociological Review* 58, no. 6 (December 1993): 741–52.
3. Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 221.
4. Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (Basic Books, 1993) 25.



BARBARA WHEELER is president of Auburn Theological Seminary and director of its Center for the Study of Theological Education. She served on the Board of Directors of the Presbyterian Publishing Corporation from 1993 to 2002. She is currently a member of the Theological Task Force on the Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church; the Executive Committee of the Covenant Network of Presbyterians; and Peniel Presbyterian Church in Granville, New York, which she serves as elder commissioner to the Presbytery of Albany. She is coauthor of *Being There: Culture and Formation in Two Theological Schools* and coeditor of *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education* (Westminster John Knox Press).