

# Survey Yields Conflicting Responses About Churchgoers' Need for Other Christians

*The Wired Word* for the Week of September 8, 2019

## In the News

Just released results from a LifeWay Research survey conducted earlier this year seem to show conflicting results about whether churchgoers believe they need the company of other people to live their lives as followers of Jesus.

LifeWay Research is a research and polling division of LifeWay Christian Resources, the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention. The survey results are from 2,500 respondents who self-identify as Protestants who attend religious services at least once a month. [Note: This would have about a 2 percent margin of error, assuming at least 10 million adults in the United States attend church at least monthly -- a very low-ball estimate.]

The survey was sponsored by the Center for Church Revitalization at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

According to the survey sponsor's interpretation of the results, the conflict is seen in responses to two statements:

- I can walk with God without other believers.
- I need other believers to help me to grow in my walk with God.

Some 65 percent of respondents agreed with the first statement and 75 percent agreed with the second one.

According to Kenneth Priest, interim director of the Center for Church Revitalization at Southwestern, those two statements are contradictory, and churches need to help those in the pews recognize the conflict.

"I believe this is primarily a discipleship issue," Priest said, and blamed the confusion in the pews in part on "the lack of pastors and spiritual leaders equipped to effectively preach and teach a text-driven life application of God's Word."

It occurs to us at *The Wired Word*, however, that the seeming conflict may simply be the result of the wording of the statements on the survey.

We assume most respondents would understand "walk with God"-- as used in these two statements -- as church jargon for something like "living daily as a faithful Christian."

However, respondents could have understood "I can walk with God without other believers" to be asking if it's *possible* for one to live faithfully as a Christian in a situation where one is the only Christian present, as, for example, when one is traveling for an extended period in a country where the population is mostly Muslim and the traveler is not aware of any Christian believers around. If respondents took the statement to mean something like that, then the large number of those who agreed with it may have been thinking, "Yes, it's possible."

In that case, also agreeing with the second statement is not inconsistent, and the thinking may have been along the lines of "While it's possible to walk with God without other believers, I need other believers to help me to *grow* in my walk with God."

Still, it's possible that at least some who agreed with the first statement were, in fact, saying they could walk with God just fine by themselves.

Another statement on the survey also dealt with relationships with other Christians:

- I intentionally spend time with other believers in order to help them grow in their faith.

Less than half of respondents -- 47 percent -- agreed with this statement.

"Americans don't like to admit they can't do things themselves. That is true of Christians as well," said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research. "One's walk with God should include dependence on God and mutual dependence among believers."

On the other hand, the response could come from an excessive humility or an over-consideration of their own weaknesses -- people not believing that they can help others grow in faith. It also could conceivably come from selfishness: a desire to *ignore* the needs of others -- although we consider it unlikely.

There were some unambiguous findings in the survey that most would consider good news: Compared to the results from a similar survey from LifeWay in 2011, more churchgoers agreed this time with the statement, "A Christian must learn to deny himself or herself to serve Christ" (66 versus 64 percent, which is within the poll's margin of error). In 2019, 59 percent of churchgoers read the Bible every day or a few times each week, compared with 45 percent in 2011. And over three-quarters of respondents agreed with the statement, "I try to avoid situations in which I might be tempted to think or do immoral things," up from 73 percent who agreed in 2011. (This is still within the margin of error and might be affected by the publicity given to Vice President Pence following the "Billy Graham rule" on avoiding temptation to sexual sin.)

More on this story can be found at these links:

In Christ, Alone: Most Believers Say They Don't Need Others for Discipleship. *Christianity Today*

Churchgoers Hold Conflicting Views on the Need for Other Christians. *LifeWay Research*  
Need for Other Christians. *LifeWay Research*

### **Applying the News Story**

The "In the News" section above quotes Kenneth Priest, whose organization commissioned the survey, as saying that the need-other-believers/don't-need-other-believers responses the survey was "primarily a discipleship issue."

The word *discipleship* never appears in the Bible, but *disciple* does, about 260 times, almost exclusively in the Gospels and Acts. The Greek word usually translated as "disciple" is *mathētēs*, which designates "one who learns and adheres." In general usage, the disciple could learn from and adhere to the teachings and ethos of a school of thought or a particular thinker or teacher, who either lived in the past or is a contemporary of the adherent.

As applied to Christianity, of course, a disciple is one who learns from and adheres to Jesus, and in that context, discipleship refers to the *practice* of being a follower of Jesus.

And when Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20), he was indicating that following him is generally not intended only as an individual experience.

In commenting on the survey, Priest said Christians who believe they can walk with God without others are missing out on something essential to their growth as disciples of Jesus.

"Solo Christianity is an inward desire to seek after spiritual matters without the realization [that] biblical community is what will fulfill the desire they are seeking," he said.

### **The Big Questions**

1. If you were taking the survey, would you agree or disagree with these three statements? Why? What additional context, if any, would you desire?

- I can walk with God without other believers.
- I need other believers to help me to grow in my walk with God.
- I intentionally spend time with other believers in order to help them grow in their faith.

2. What Bible verses can you cite to support your responses to the statements above?

3. When have you felt other Christians helped your Christian discipleship? Why? When have you felt other Christians hindered your Christian discipleship? Why? How can it be some of both?

4. Assume you were advising a young person who was newly converted to follow Jesus, but who was not convinced that he or she needed to attend church. What would you tell that person and why?

5. Assume you were advising a person who had been following Jesus for a long time, but who was now thinking of dropping out of church because of some unpleasant incidents with some church members. What would you tell that person and why?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **Acts 2:46-47**

*Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (For context, read 2:43-47.)*

According to the opening words of the verses above, some of the first members of the early church apparently worshiped together *daily*. In addition to sharing meals and goods, their practices likely included teaching and learning, fellowship, good deeds and prayer. Each of these were concrete expressions of newness in Christ and reception of the Holy Spirit, and each practice contributed to the spiritual growth of the participants. But these activities were only sustainable because of the mutual commitment of all. It would have been too demanding to be

left in the hands of the individual believer. Thus, the initial views of conversion in Acts are those of the believing community.

**Questions:** How is your church similar to and different from the fellowship described in these verses? How might this biblical example affect how you pray for your church and how you participate there?

**Matthew 9:9**

*As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. (For context, read 9:9-13.)*

Here is discipleship defined by an example: Jesus called the tax collector Matthew to follow him, and Matthew did.

**Questions:** Was your decision to follow Jesus an all-at-once decision, something you decided gradually, or something else (and if so, what)? How and where do you practice your discipleship today?

**Hebrews 10:24-25**

*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another ... (For context, read 10:19-25.)*

These two verses are the closest biblical reference we have to a command to attend Christian worship. Notice that the writer of Hebrews says that one reason for doing so is to encourage one another. And he was right. Church isn't like school where you attend only until you graduate. The church has no alumni association. We need to continue to be part of a faith community both for what we receive and what we contribute.

**Question:** Besides upping the attendance statistics, what does *your* presence in church contribute to the faith of others who also attend those worship services?

**1 Corinthians 12:14**

*Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. (For context, read 12:12-27.)*

Paul uses the human body as a metaphor for the church, and he makes a lot of the fact that no part of the body exists in isolation from the other parts. Continuing the metaphor, he says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (v. 21). There is an energy and power in the whole body that is not present in any individual part of it.

**Questions:** Who are the "eyes" of your church, setting vision and goals? Who are the "ears" who are good listeners? Who are the "hands" doing good deeds? (Feel free to continue questions in this fashion with feet, arms, voice, knees, etc.) Would you be able to do all these things yourself? Would you want to?