

So You Grew Up in Church? Here's How to Survive

Growing up in church can be a wonderful thing. It can also be dangerous. The majority of believers would want their children to grow up in church. Even though religion has sometimes become toxic, a Christian heritage has all kinds of benefits. So how does one separate the good from the bad? If you've been raised in church, how can you not get stuck in the mess but embrace the transformation God still wants for you?

I grew up in church, but I did not know Jesus. A big part of my own transformation happened when I met Jesus as an adult and experienced the life-changing results.

But a Christian background provides important benefits. Scientific research shows that those who are more religious are more likely to have a healthier lifestyle, such as not smoking or engaging in risky sexual behaviors. They are less likely to end up in jail or addicted. The marriages and families they build are more likely to be stable. There are plenty of problems and exceptions, but by and large, the Christian lifestyle works better!

What Good Was Church?

Those of us who grew up in church may forget how blessed we are to know where the answers are. Yes, we get wounded and broken too, often deeply. Problems such as divorce, addiction, domestic violence, addiction, pornography and all kinds of dysfunction and sickness happen to believers too. But the alternative is not something you would want.

Just imagine what it would be like to have the same problems, but have no clue who had an answer. What if your only hope was your own efforts, or your government, or human society in general or fate? What if you didn't believe Jesus wins? Other

worldviews are out there; would you really want one of them?

Paul grew up a Jew, a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Phil. 3:4-8). When he became a follower of Jesus it was not his Jewish heritage he turned his back on. In fact, he was clear that a Jewish heritage was the best there was. Why? One huge advantage was having the “oracles of God”, the Bible (Rom. 3:1-2).

And how much more for Christians?! A knowledge of the Bible was one of the invaluable benefits I carried with me from my growing up. And you have likely carried some of these good things with you from growing up in church also:

- An overall Christian worldview: a belief that God exists, that this world is broken and that God has a plan to make things right.
- Some knowledge of the Bible: a belief that God has spoken in history and that Scripture is beneficial for life and faith now.
- Faith in prayer: a belief that you can communicate with the God of the universe, and that He responds.
- Salvation is possible through Jesus: a belief that Jesus dealt with sin on the cross.

Your faith may be seriously shaken. You may question those basics repeatedly. People can argue about what is or isn't sin, why evil still exists, and a whole host of other tough stuff. But the very reason you struggle with faith is because some part of you believes. You feel guilty about not praying because you believe prayer is good. You feel bad about evil in the world because you believe there's a better way.

So how do you separate the potentially toxic, or at least unhealthy, parts of growing up in church from the stuff too valuable to ignore? How do you get to the life-giving transformation Jesus wants even for you?

These things will help in surviving church.

1. Differentiate Jesus and Church

The cliché sticks because it's true; don't look to people—look to Jesus. That's often difficult. Too many Christians look nothing like Jesus. Learn to live your life before an audience of One. In eternity God won't ask what others thought of your Bible study skills or how religious your prayers sounded; He will ask whether you knew Jesus as both your Savior and Lord.

As dysfunctional and sometimes toxic as the church can be, it is God's institution. The church worldwide is the way God's kingdom on earth is expressed, and He cares about it deeply. Acknowledge your Christian wounds if necessary. Take a break or seek God about being planted in another church if need be. The institution often needs to change. But choose forgiveness and healing, and don't confuse Jesus with broken expressions of Christianity.

2. Feed and Care for Your Heart

Religious stuff is almost certain to end up empty and hurtful if your heart is not nourished. Church work and religious behaviors will not be all your soul needs. You are responsible for your emotional/spiritual nourishment just like you're responsible for your physical nourishment. God makes it available, and some tastes better or is healthier than others, but it's up to you to eat what you need.

Go to God daily for your soul's needs. Read the Bible for spiritual food, not only for study. Pray not only about others, but learn to seek and hear God's voice for yourself. Make sure you often (ideally daily) pause long enough to hear whether God has something to adjust, change, heal, correct or enlarge in your life or character.

3. Stay Connected

Being planted in a church is not enough. You need to be deeply connected to other human beings both inside and outside the

church. You need to be doing life with people who are seeking to grow, who can hold you accountable, who can encourage you and who you can also encourage. Some kind of small group is often a great place for this, but it takes being intentional.

You also need input from inspiring people—your pastor, other leaders, people ahead of you in the Christian life. That will likely include “outside” people such as speakers, authors and so on who can spur you on and offer inspiration.

And finally, you must be reaching out to help people God places in your path. That ideally will include both believers and those who have yet to know Jesus. You’re reaching out your hand and saying, “Here, let me help you take the next step.” Getting your eyes off your own stuff is healthy.

Yes, surviving church is possible. There is transformation ahead for you too.

Your turn: *If you grew up in church, have you felt stuck or stagnant? Which of these aspects of further transformation do you need to pay attention to? Leave a comment below. {eoa}*

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