



# WHY I'M NOT GOING TO CHURCH THIS CHRISTMAS

## A conversation



**Sam**

to Alex ▼

(1 day ago)

Hey Sam,

Thanks for your email and your invitation to church this Christmas. But I think you know what the answer is. 😊 You invite me every year—don't you get sick of me saying no!? We've been friends for a long time now, so I figure you'll cope if this time I explain why I'm saying no. I have a few reasons...

Hi Alex,

Thanks for your reply. I'm so glad you told me why you always say no to my Christmas invitations! What you said captures what a lot of people probably think about church, and in many ways I really can see what you're saying. But I hope you don't mind if I push back a bit. (I mean, come on... you must have known I would, right??)

It's easier if I reply under each one of your reasons, so here goes... (By the way, I do love that our friendship is strong enough to cope with our differing views.)

**1. It's not relevant: church is for religious people, and I'm not religious**

I don't think this needs much explanation... you know what I mean by this, don't you?

You're right—church *is* generally aimed more at the people who go regularly. Although most churches these days want to make what they do accessible and meaningful to visitors too—especially at Christmas services.

I'm also curious: what do you mean by 'religious people'? If all you mean is 'people who go to church', then that's a circular argument, isn't it? "Church isn't for me because I'm not a person who goes to church."

Often people use the word 'religious' to describe those who have this thing called 'faith', which some (like me) seem to magically have and some (like you) don't. But faith isn't magical; 'faith' just means 'trust', and that trust is the end result of assessing whether something or someone can be trusted. In this case, the question is whether you can trust Jesus and what he teaches. Is what he says true? Does it make sense of our world?



Does it help me to live meaningfully? Does Jesus offer any hope and comfort in the harsh realities of life?

Churches have lots of ‘regulars’ who once thought church was irrelevant—that it wasn’t for them—but who gave it a go and discovered something they found to be surprisingly true and good.

## **2. I’m different from church people, and I know I’ll feel out of place**

My life is so different from yours, and I’m guessing not many people like me go to your church. I just think I’d feel like there was a neon arrow hovering above my head, pointing at me, saying “DOES NOT BELONG”!

There may be some truth to what you say here. Honestly I’m not sure how many people exactly like you go to our church, and I can understand that when you’re the only one in a particular category, it’s hard not to feel a bit out of place.

But studies show that higher religious commitment is actually associated with a general *increase* in tolerance toward people who are different.\* Maybe that surprises you, but it makes perfect sense to me—because the foundation of the Christian message is that God welcomes us into friendship with him. So it *should* be the case that Christians are welcoming and friendly too.

In fact churches are often amongst the most diverse collections of people who meet together regularly in our community.

Sadly, I can’t guarantee a completely positive experience. You may have the misfortune of encountering some prejudiced people in church, just like you do in wider society. But on the whole that *should* be less of a problem in the church than outside it.



### 3. Church is boring and weird and they'll ask me for money

There will probably be a weird Bible reading and a boring talk, and some singing (ugh), and then some praying where everyone will kneel down... and just when I think things can't get any more awkward, someone will shove a plate in front of me and ask me for money! No thanks.

Yep, guilty as charged: church *is* often weird! But maybe I can un-weirdify it for you.

The singing: hopefully you'll know at least some of the tunes at Christmas, when we tend to sing some of the best-known Christmas carols. But seriously—sing along if you want, or just listen. Nobody minds either way.

The Bible reading and talk: yes, someone will read part of the Bible, and there will be a talk from the minister—usually just an explanation of what we've read in the Bible. And I can't promise it won't be boring for you—we're all different in what we find interesting. But the point of the talk is to help you work out whether to trust in Jesus. How can you decide if he is trustworthy when you don't know what he says?

The praying: yes, someone will say some prayers. (By the way, not many kneel these days—at least not in our church.) And, sure, talking to God is probably something you don't do very often. But when you think about it, it's pretty exhilarating: as a group of people, we're talking to our Creator together! Surely that's got to be worth experiencing?

The money thing: actually, we don't 'pass the plate' at our church (these days, quite a lot of churches don't). Most church income comes from regulars giving online. And you shouldn't put money in: you're a guest! The cost of running the church is the responsibility of the church members, not the occasional visitors. So even if we did pass a plate around, I'd be telling you not to feel embarrassed but to just let the plate go past you.





#### **4. I don't mind Jesus, but the church is full of hypocrites (present company excepted!)**

From the bits and pieces I've heard of what Jesus taught, he sounds okay to me. It's the Christians who often seem like hypocrites. They say one thing then do another.

Well, I'm glad you feel positive towards Jesus—after all, he's at the centre of what church is about. But what about his so-called 'followers'?

Again, you're partly right. We do hold up a moral standard we don't ever reach ourselves. I know I fail all the time. That's the thing, though—Christians admit that we do wrong things. If you come to church you may even hear us 'confess our sins' as a group to God in prayer.

In fact, our failures are the whole reason for Christmas. We only have a baby Jesus to celebrate at Christmas because God needed to save us from the consequences of our sin. Instead of making us suffer the punishment we deserve, he sent his own son to suffer it in our place. That's why the birth of Jesus is worth celebrating!

When you hear about or experience a church person doing bad things, I agree that's lamentable; sometimes it's worse than lamentable, it's horrible. We're really sorry it happens, and as Christians we have to work hard to put a stop to anything we do that dishonours the name of Jesus.

But it's also a bit rough, don't you think, to tar all the people in the church with the same brush... without actually getting to know them?

Besides, it's not true that the church is *full* of hypocrites. We have plenty of room for more!



## 5. Christmas is family time, so I want to spend the time with my family

These days there aren't many times during the year where we can manage to get our whole family together, so I'd really like to make the most of that time.

Same here. Christmas is a great time to spend enjoying family—so bring them to church with you! Our Christmas services are geared towards engaging kids too, not just adults.

At the very least, visiting church will give you something to talk about later over the roast turkey. But it also gives you the opportunity to enrich your family Christmas by participating in a wider community celebration. Your family might actually enjoy it.

So what do you think? I hope I've helped you to see that church might not be what you think it is, and might be worth a visit. Why don't you come along this Christmas? I'd love to see you!

Your friend,  
Sam.

\* e.g. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0150209>

