

Today I'm going to talk a little about the separation of church and state. No, this will not be a column about politics. I am not going to waste my paper debating the serious issue of whether it's appropriate or not to have a plaque with the ten commandments hanging on a government building wall.

When I talk about church and state, I'm talking about a building that many people go to every Sunday and the state of one's spiritual being. Now there should be no separation between the two, but we all certainly know that in many cases there is.

A preacher friend of mine once told me that if someone had to ask if you were a Christian, you might want to take a look at your life a little closer. The Andy Smith translation would be that if you walked up to a lamp that is shining brightly, you would not have to ask if we have electricity or not, right?"

The point being made is that we live in a world that says if you go to church, you must be a good Christian.

Not so, my friends, not so.

I love to go to a baseball game. I can think of no better way to spend a summer evening than sitting at a ballpark watching a baseball game. I love going to a baseball game, but that doesn't make me a baseball player. That would require me to actually go down to the field and get into the game ... and though my heart says yes, my mind, body and good common sense tells me to sit quietly and enjoy my bag of peanuts.

I love going to church. I enjoy going to mass on Sunday morning. I love how the mass centers around communion. But going to church doesn't make me a good Christian any more than going to a ball game makes me a good ballplayer.

I bring this up because one of my daughters recently asked me if I was disappointed that none of my three daughters are active in a church.

I didn't have to think about my response. I quickly said absolutely not. I also said that I would be very disappointed if the three went to a fancy church every week but had reputations of being difficult to work with or were willing to hurt others in order to advance their own agendas.

My girls are good people. They are kind, considerate and positive people. They are loyal friends who volunteer a lot and always give more. They are honest and when they screw up, they deal with it with a keen sense of making it right, not making excuses or blaming others.

I do think there are many good reasons for a person to get involved with a church. But going to church isn't what makes you a Christian.

We are a funny people. We do judge a book by its cover. We emphasize appearance over substance all the time. We are so quick to sell perceptions as reality. And don't kid yourself, there are so many people who honestly believe that if they dress up and go to church on Sundays, they are clearly fulfilling their obligation of what a good Christian is.

I'm thinking walking the walk should have a little more impact in our life. You can read the scripture all day and find Jesus talking about the qualities of living a life with a heart of love, passion and sincerity. Although I'm certain Jesus would encourage us all to gather together in Christian fellowship, I'm thinking there's not many instances in the bible where he made going to church the focal point of his conversations.

I enjoy going to church, but I would hope that people would think of me as a good Christian by how I live my daily life a lot more than whether I go to church or not.

When it comes to discussing church and state, it's not a matter of downplaying the importance of church, it's a matter of understanding the importance of one's state of spiritual well being that determines whether going to church is an important point in the first place.

I played in a band during the Jesus Movement. Jesus Freaks, coffee houses, Youth for Christ rallies and all that. We had a great run and were truly on the forefront as creators of a new world of music called Contemporary Christian Music. Before us, gospel music was a hymnal, and after us came a new genre in the music business called Gospel music.

One of the difficult performances for me was when we would play at a Pentecostal setting or church. These people had a very different approach to worshiping God than this good Catholic boy was used to, that's for sure.

I was not very comfortable in those settings.

But I taught myself to spend the first two songs really searching the crowd, looking for that one or two persons that I could see the sincerity in their eyes as they danced, waved their arms and simply seemed to be in heaven. I would perform for them tonight.

The point is that church - regardless of denomination - is NOT a place to be 'seen' or fulfill your obligation to prove that you are a Christian. Church is a place to connect with God.

I would have a problem connecting to God at an Assembly of God church. But I could always find a few people who connect very well with God in that setting. They need to keep going to that church.

I connect well with God at a Catholic mass. I have many friends whom I love dearly, that would never be comfortable going to mass with me.

Church is only good if it comes from a heart of sincerity, not a heart of obligation.

Being a Christian has nothing to do with how often you go to church or which church you go to. Being a Christian has everything to do with the sincerity of the love you have in your heart and how you share it with the world around you.