

Rugged, Empty Individualism

“Rather, speaking truth is love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow that it builds itself up in love” Ephesians 4:15-16

“I don’t need organized religion ! I spend time with God in the great outdoors. The woods are my sanctuary.” A man in deer camp lifted his arms in the air, looked up at the canyons surrounding our campfire, and made this declaration in response to my question, “Where do you go to church?” Others in the camp affirmed their agreement to his statement of rugged individualism.

This attitude is both true and false. On one hand, every sportsman should worship God in His creation. That is one of the primary reasons why God gave us nature – He wanted us to see His power and character in the breathtaking things He has created. “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.”(Romans 1:19-20).

For a person who follows Jesus, all of life is holy. Every place we find ourselves is a sacred space – forests, fields, living rooms, garages, and sanctuaries. We are with God in all of these places. But not all spaces inspire the same response from us. Like many people I know, I sense a special connection with my Creator when I’m surrounded by trees or when I’m on the water far from concrete, cars, and other things made from human hands. It is entirely appropriate to worship in nature.

But an attitude of rugged individualism prevents us from holding deep commitment to our local community of believers, we lose something special. And when we are absent from our spiritual community, we cause others to lose something special as well. The apostle Paul describes our choice to put our faith in Jesus as an immersion by the Spirit of God into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13) When we gain salvation, we are no longer isolated, autonomous beings; we become vital, interdependent members of a unified community. Paul said, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27)

One of the most ruggedly independent, courageous steps a sportsman can take today is to turn away from his previously isolated life and say, “I’m going to do the difficult work of committing deeply to my local church, I’m going to be a man who serves others and allows myself to be served by others. I’m going to play my role in the body.”

When a man does this, he gains not only the beauty of worshiping God by himself in creation but also the thrill of being shoulder to shoulder with his brothers and sisters in Christ. As satisfying as it is to spend time in nature, nothing can replace the adventure we embarked on when the Spirit of God baptized us into the body of Christ. We were once alone, but no more. We are now a part of the greatest community on earth.