

Why Church? #1

The recent pandemic revealed many things, even in the church. Many churches resorted to social media for “remote services”. Some states and provinces were more harsh and even tyrannical about it than others, so we don’t mean to be too critical of churches that did this (we did too, for a month or so). The problem in many instances was that people found out they liked to “go to church” in their pajamas without leaving home, and could at least pretend that they were keeping up online. After the “danger” had obviously peaked, and people were generally returning to normal, some churches were still pressing hard that their congregants should remain masked. How many people got accustomed to not attending in person, and never started up again?

These observations bring up questions on the nature of the church, and whether attendance is necessary, and what is the purpose of church. Even in the best of times (pandemic aside), some people have very spotty and lackluster attendance. Everyone needs to miss church services occasionally, but I think that for some people, the reasons can be pretty pathetic. They slept in (because they were watching TV or playing video games until 3:30). they have a runny nose, they are “too tired”, they “just don’t feel like it today”, “nobody will miss me anyway”, ...

Why do people attend church?

Here are some not very good reasons:

- Because it is the thing to do. It is what good people do. It is proper.
- They want others to see that they are a “church-going family man” (especially valuable for political campaign cards).
- They hope to find a spouse there (not all bad – where else would you want to meet a suitable person?). But will they jump churches simply because there seems to be no one that strikes an interest?
- It serves like a social club – that is where all their friends and relatives go.
- The church has a good gym and softball team, or a good daycare and school for the kids.
- It as a place for free psychological advice.
- They have a modern stage, movie seating, super sound and light show for “worship”.
- Short sermons that don’t get too close for comfort.
- They are socially “woke”.

All of this really brings us to the question of why people should go to church. More accurately, not merely “going to church”, but why we should be a real and functioning part of a local church.

What is a Church?

Although there are some places in the NT that refer to the church in very broad and general terms (the “bride of Christ”, or Heb. 12:22-24, “the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven”, etc.), we would be mistaken to think that local affiliation is unnecessary because becoming a believer gets us into the “universal church”. Some people say “I am in the church, but I don’t go anywhere in particular”. They want to go to church services (when the mood strikes), but not to commit to one particular church. They are perpetual and wandering visitors. This soothes their conscience a bit, while allowing them to avoid any real responsibilities or personal ties. This may also be popular with those who have “gotten burned” by some bad church experiences. “Yes, I am a Christian, but I don’t go to church.” or “There are too many hypocrites.”

Most of the references to “church” in the NT are referring to individual, local assemblies of believers, often meeting in houses. Sometimes the word may refer to multiple local assemblies, as “the church at” Ephesus, Jerusalem, Corinth, etc. We cannot think that there were so few believers in these localities that they would all fit in a single house, or even a larger building. Early in church history (the book of Acts), there were no dedicated buildings called “churches”. They met wherever they could, for convenience, practicality, and security. Sometimes these would be synagogues, but often there was too much opposition from the local Jews who were not believers, to be able to use those facilities.

Some think of a church as a denomination, but even then, people usually don’t consider themselves to be Methodist, or Presbyterian, or Baptist, without actually associating with a local church of that denomination.

A church is not a building. Ac. 14:27 – when Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, it says “when they were come, and had gathered the church together ...” You can’t gather a building, but the people.

The NT usually shows “church” to be a specific group of people who meet in a specific place, on a regular basis, but there is obviously more than that. Why do they meet? For what purpose? What makes a real church different from a bridge club, or even a prayer group/Bible study? What does a real church do? How do people become “members”? What does membership even mean?

What are the Valid Activities of the Church? (what do we do that makes church church?)

Instead of jumping directly to the church’s purpose, let’s come at it indirectly, by first determining from scripture what are valid activities of the church. From this it should be more obvious what its purpose should be, and allow us to compare with the actual activities of churches.

1. Regular meetings (by tradition on Sundays)

Ac. 20:7 – they met on the first day of the week, coming together to break bread

1 Cor. 16:2 – they were to take up collections for the saints, on the first day of the week

Heb. 10:25 – “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is,, but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

2. Recognized leadership (pastors, deacons, teachers, etc.)

Eph. 4:11-12 – “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ ...” *[Note: KJV is wrong to insert comma after the word saints]*

Ac. 13:1 – in the church at Antioch, there were “certain prophets and teachers”

1 Tim. 3:1-7 – gives the qualifications for a bishop (pastor). Verses 8-13 give qualifications for a deacon.

1 Tim. 5:17-18 speaks of honouring elders that rule well, laboring in the word and doctrine

Titus 1:5-9 – Paul left Titus in Crete to “set things in order” and ordain elders in every city, and then gives qualifications for elders (bishops, pastors)

3. Reading, preaching and teaching of the Word

Reading was of special importance to the Jews of the OT. Moses, Joshua, Ezra, and others would publicly read the scriptures to the people. Since scriptures were hand written, they were not generally owned by individuals. This made public readings even more important, and so it was a regular part of synagogue meetings in Jesus’ day. Lk. 4:16-17 – Jesus came to Nazareth and “as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.” He then read from the book (scroll) of Isaiah. This practice continued for many centuries because, until Gutenberg invented the printing press, copies of scripture were not commonly owned. Even now, many Reformed and other churches do public readings, even besides the quotations that often accompany preaching and teaching.

The word “preach” occurs very many times in the NT, usually referring to a proclamation and presentation of the gospel of the kingdom to unbelievers, or reminding believers of the basic message of the gospel.

Teaching is similar to preaching except it is aimed, not primarily at unbelievers, but at believers, so that they can go on to deeper things and learn as much as we can from the Word.

Heb. 5:12-6:2 – “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God ... Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.”

1 Tim. 4:13 – “Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine”

2 Tim. 2:2 tells Timothy to commit Paul’s teachings to faithful men, so they can teach others

(To be continued)