

Feature Article: JAF1366

## DOES THE BIBLE REQUIRE CHRISTIANS TO ATTEND CHURCH?

by Kevin DeYoung and Jason Helopoulos

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John Stott was not known for overstatement. In fact, the well-respected British pastor and author was famous for finding middle-of-the-road solutions and advocating the third way between two extremes. This is why Stott's strong statement about the centrality of the church is striking. Toward the end of his life, Stott wrote, "I trust that none of my readers is that grotesque anomaly, an unchurched Christian. The New Testament knows nothing of such a person. For the church lies at the very centre of the eternal purpose of God."<sup>1</sup> God does not save people from sin without also saving them into the body of Christ.

In calling unchurched Christians a "grotesque anomaly," Stott is simply joining his voice with the consistent teaching of the church throughout its history. From Cyprian's famous words that "outside the Church there is no salvation" to D. L. Moody's declaration that "church attendance is as vital to a disciple as a transfusion of rich, healthy blood to a sick man," few Christians have questioned the importance of belonging to a local church. Christians belong in the church like a fish belongs in the water: it's where they are meant to live life.

### THE CHURCH

For starters, consider the corporate nature of our faith. We are bound together. We are called the "flock" of Christ (Luke 12:32; John 10:16; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2-3), the "bride" of Christ (Eph. 5; Rev. 19:7; Rev. 21:2, 9), and are told that we are being built into a "holy temple" in the Lord (Eph. 2:21). These are all corporate expressions.

The greatest metaphor for the church in the New Testament is the language of the "body." We are the body of Christ. Yes, this speaks of our dependence on the head, Christ Jesus, but it also proclaims our dependence on one another. This is the argument Paul makes in 1 Corinthians 12: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12; all Scripture references ESV). We are "joined together," "growing into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 2:21), and "are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit" (Eph. 2:22).

Our lives are intertwined and inform one another. We are not meant to be alone. When Christians abstain from church, they are depriving themselves of all the benefits of the body (1 Cor. 12). We could say in a very real way that we have the fullness of the Spirit in all His gifts only when the church meets. The person with hospitality is able to encourage; the individual with the gift of teaching is free to exhort; the sister with the gift of mercy dispenses comfort; and the brother with the gift of faith sets an example. We are shaping one another to the glory of God. There is no Lone Ranger Christianity. There is not even a Lone Ranger and Tonto Christianity. Every Christian must participate in the communion of the saints. We belong to one another and need one another.

Moreover, consider the purpose for which we gather corporately. From the foot of Mount Sinai to the temple to the synagogue to the private dwellings in Acts, we see God's people gathering together that they might worship the true and living God. Of course, we can worship God privately and through daily obedience, but there is something unique about corporate worship. We know from Acts 2:42 that the first Christians met together regularly for teaching, fellowship (possibly the word for taking a collection), the Lord's Supper, and prayer. We know from 1 Corinthians 12–14 that public worship was an important part of the life of the church. We see in 1 Timothy 4:13 that there were regular times for the public reading of Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 11:18, we read of instructions for "when you come together as a church," indicating that there was a unique gathering "as a church" that was not the same as a few Christians hanging out and talking about Jesus. Later in 1 Corinthians 16, we read instructions for setting aside a collection "on the first day of the week," suggesting that the church at Corinth met for services of worship every Sunday.

And most relevant for this discussion, Hebrews 10:25 commands us not to neglect meeting together (literally, "do not forsake the assembly of yourselves"). The word for "meet together," *episynagogen*, refers to the formal gathering of God's people for worship, not just friends listening to sermon downloads in the same room. God's people gather weekly for worship. Our lives are lived from Lord's Day to Lord's Day, as each week we long to "journey to the house of the Lord" to meet with our God and with His people. This is the assumption found in the New Testament and should be the natural inclination and desire of every regenerate heart.

### **OH, REALLY?**

It's possible that some readers may agree with everything we've said so far about the theological underpinnings of worship and still say no to the question posed in the title of this article. "Sure, we need each other as Christians. Sure, we should worship with one another. But there is nothing that says we must go to church. That's a modern construct. The important part is that we are the church, not that we keep going through the motions with these weekly shows every Sunday." That's the attitude you'll find from any number of "revolutionaries." The rejection of "going to church" sounds appealing, even super spiritual. But is it warranted? Is church attendance really optional?

Let's try to unpack some of the most common objections to "church as we know it" and venture a response.

### **"Church Has Become Boring and Irrelevant"**

Those who would deride weekly worship services as a boring performance full of passive spectators, a dull lecture, and meaningless routines need to recapture a broader vision for what we are doing on Sunday morning. We are not coming together to sing a few songs and then passively listen to a dreary oration. Our gathering for worship is an exercise in covenant renewal, a weekly celebration of the resurrection, and a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to come. In worship we are not only meeting with the body of Christ but also with God Himself. Or, more accurately, He is meeting with us. When it gathers together, the church is communing with the living, holy, sovereign God of the universe by His word and Spirit. And meeting with God is anything but boring. This is the same God that Isaiah met and was undone by (Isa. 6), John saw and fell down as though dead (Rev. 1), and Paul encountered and was radically changed (Acts 9). Meeting with God may be humbling, humiliating, even fearful, but never boring.

### **"Worship Is All of Life"**

If all of life is worship, how important can it be to attend church services every week? After all, shouldn't we be the church, instead of going to church? It's certainly true that worship should be a way of life. Romans 12:1–2 is clear that we are to "offer our bodies as living sacrifices." There is a broad type of worship—our entire lives lived for the glory of God. This is what Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 10:31 when he says, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." All of life is to be lived in worship.

And yet there is also the specific activity of worship. Worship can be as broad as a way of life or as narrow as gathering to give God praise. When Abraham says to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you" (Gen. 22:5), he is speaking not about worship as a lifestyle of obedience, but worship as a specific event. Likewise, when the psalmist says, "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness" (Ps. 29:2), he is also speaking of the narrow sense of worship. We glorify God in both ways— with lives poured out as living sacrifices and with the specific activity of corporate worship. Both are biblical. Both are needed. Worship is all of life, and worship is what we are summoned to do with the people of God in weekly commemoration of Christ's death and resurrection.

### **"Christianity Is a Relationship, Not a Religion"**

Again, this objection sounds reasonable, even attractive, at first. Why bother with all the church mumbo-jumbo if it's the heart that really matters? God wants a relationship with me, not some manmade religion.

But before we accept this argument, we need to know what we are talking about. If we mean by "religion," legalism—appeasing God through ritual and good works—

then the objection is true. Christ certainly abolishes religion. However, if religion is shorthand for a set of beliefs, usually from a sacred book, with prescribed rituals and observances, and specific commands to obey, then Christianity is most definitely a religion. If faith is essentially a relationship without all the trappings of religion, then it's easy to see how church is construed as nothing but relationships, too. But Christian faith is not without dogma. We are, after all, putting faith in something besides faith itself. And as for ritual, what about the Lord's Supper, baptism, or praying that prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to pray? We have a sacred book, sacred teaching, sacred ordinances, and sacred offices. Like it or not, Christianity is an organized religion. And the church is what provides that organization, that shape and definition. This is why people don't like the church. Sure, the church can be old and stale and downright sinful at times, but the main reason people don't like the church—and don't want to go to church—is because the church has walls. It defines truth. It shows us the way to live. It tells us the news we must believe if we are to be saved. It means something, stands for something, and refuses to be any old thing we want it to be.

### YES, INDEED

So we actually have to go to church? If we want to be biblical, yes. If we want to be wise, yes. If we want to grow up in the faith, yes. If we want to be realistic about how faith is nurtured and sustained over the long haul, yes.

We all need Christ, His Word, His Spirit, and, not least of all, His bride. You can't have a foundation without a house. You can't have a head without a body. And you can't have a groom without a bride. The New Testament knows nothing of unchurched Christianity. There is no Christianity without Christ and no Christ without His church. We need the individuals of the church and the institution of the church. We need the church as organism and organization. We need to be the church, and yes, we also need to go to church. Christ loves His bride, and so must we. Not in theory or from a distance, but in person, in the flesh, every week, for our good, and for God's glory.

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### NOTES

1 John Stott, *The Living Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 19.