

Why Should Christians go to Church?

Jamess R. Hughes, 2023-11-21

Addressing questions related to the nature, structure, purpose, and role of the Church is a complex challenge. Entire books could be (and have been) written to address these topics. So, in this study we will focus on a simple question: Why should Christians go to church? It appears to have been the standard operating practice of Christians to assemble on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week (the Christian Sabbath), since the days of the Apostles. But someone might ask, hypothetically, why does a person who is a true believer in Jesus need to go to Church? So, let us consider some biblical reasons for why Christians should go to church. Then, we can derive possible ramifications which follow from a consideration of the reasons for going to church.

Definition

First, we need to provide a definition of 'church' to guide our answer to the specific question, Why should Christians go to church? The English word 'church' is a translation of a compound Greek word. It means, essentially, "a called-out assembly". In a non-Christian context, the word was applied to civic settings when a body of citizens assembled (e.g., to vote or to debate a tax levy). The word 'church' is never used in the Bible to apply to a building. When the OT was translated into Greek, the Greek word we translate as 'church' was applied to the assembly of the people (e.g., Dt 4.10; Dt 9.10; and about 90 other occurrences). For this study, we will assume that our definition of 'church' means, "a group of believers in Jesus who assemble together under the authority of elders for the *primary* purpose of conducting and participating in God-authorized acts of worship." This definition includes what has traditionally been called 'public worship' on a Sunday morning. But it can also include a mid-week meeting for prayer and Bible study. This definition does not include Christians getting together for a meal (e.g., at a fellowship lunch) even though an act of worship (e.g., prayer before the meal) may be performed. Even though the same people may assemble at 1:00pm, as assembled at 11:00am, the primary purpose of a fellowship lunch is not for worship.

Purpose of Assembling

So, why should Christians go to church? Why should they assemble together under the authority of elders for the purpose of conducting and participating in God-authorized acts of worship? The *primary* reasons are:

1. *To worship God.* The first and most important reason to assemble as a church is to honour God through worship:
 - "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation [Greek translation, 'church'] I will praise you" (Ps 22.22).
 - "in the great assembly I will bless the Lord." (Ps 26.12).
 - "Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he!" (Ps 99.5).
 - "Let them extol him in the congregation [Greek translation, 'church'] of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders. (Ps 107.32).
 - "I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people." (Ps 116.14).
 - "Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands to the holy place and bless the Lord!" (Ps 134.1-2).
 - "And they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God." (Lk 24.52.53).
 - "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created." (Rev 4.11).

Many churches refer to their Sunday morning assemblies for public worship as ‘services’—although some today use other terms such as ‘meeting’ or ‘gathering’. They likely do not realize that the word ‘service’ was used historically because it was understood that assembling for worship is a demonstration of *service* to God (1 Thess 1.9; Rev 7.15; Rev 22.3).

Christians serve God in worship by:

- *Talking*. The psalmists often say that they will tell of the works and wonders of God (Ps 22.2; PS 9.1-2; Ps 19.4; Ps 40.5; Ps 66.16; Ps 71.15-16; Ps 73.28; Ps 118.17; Ps 145.6-7). In worship our talk consists of offering prayers and Psalms of praise.
- *Thanking*. Thanking God is an aspect of our talk in worship which humbles us and reminds us that we are fully dependent on God for all the temporal and everlasting blessings which we receive.
- *Tributing*. Returning a tribute of our time (through Sabbath rest, attendance at worship, and service in the church) and income (through tithes and offerings) is a means for demonstrating that we ‘walk the talk’.
- *Trusting*. We also serve God when we hear and heed his prophetic voice as the Scriptures are read and his appointed messengers preach. We demonstrate a trust in God when we receive his word, believe it, and act on it.

Jesus summarized our duty to worship God when he spoke with a lawyer, who asked him which is the great commandment in the Law. He responded, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Mt 22.37-40). He summarized the two portions of the Ten Commandments as love for God and love for our neighbours. How we show our love for God is through offering him proper worship. Proper worship must be sincere and must include only the elements and modes which he has authorized—“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (Jn 4.24).

Going to church to worship God is the first, most important, and best way we can demonstrate our love toward God.

2. *Because it is a command*. Christians are commanded to assemble as a church because God requires it.
 - “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb 10.25).
 - “Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly [Greek translation, ‘church’] of the godly!” (Ps 149.1).
 - “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” (Eccl 12.13).
 - “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (Jn 14.15).
3. *It honors the Lord’s Day*. By going to church on the first day of the week (Acts 20.7; 1 Cor 16.2; Rev 1.10) we demonstrate that the Lord’s Day (the Christian Sabbath) is a holy day—a day in which we remember the death and resurrection of Jesus. The fourth Commandment was not first introduced by Moses but was a creation ordinance (Gen 2.2-3; Ex 16.23) which God incorporated into the Ten Commandments with the word ‘remember’ (Ex 20.8). The one-day-in-seven, weekly Sabbath is to be observed (Dt 5.12) as a holy day, reserved for God’s worship, through all time.
4. *To participate in the Sacraments*. We can only participate in the sacraments when we come together as a church (1 Cor 11.17-34). We worship God through our covenant vows in baptism and when we join with Jesus and fellow believers at his table and “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Cor 11.26).

5. *To learn about God and his works of creation and providence.* Jesus stated that the Church is to teach all that he commanded (Mt 28.20). Paul told Timothy and Titus that they were to preach and teach their congregations (1 Tim 4.6; 2 Tim 4.2; Titus 1.13; Titus 2.15). Elders are to be selected in congregations only if they are able to teach (1 Tim 3.2; 2 Tim 2.2, 24), implying that a key aspect of their role is to teach. God's people are to be taught in church so that they:
- Grow in knowledge about the faith they have received and believed (Col 1.10; 2 Pt 3.18).
 - Learn how they are to grow in their personal faith and to live it out (1 Pt 2.2; Eph 4.14).
- Of course, we can learn about these things by reading the Bible, and believers should study it on their own. But personal (private or group) Bible study is not a substitute for attending church.

If there were no other reasons for why Christians should go to church, the five reasons given above should be sufficient. However, in addition, Christians should go to church:

6. *To apply their spiritual gifts.* The church is a key forum in which believers should exercise their God-given spiritual gifts for building up the Church (Rom 12.3-8; 1 Cor 12.4-11). Going to church should not be attendance at a 'spectator event' performed by a professional staff of teachers and performers. Since gifts given by the Holy Spirit vary, some believers may be called to ministry and service activities within the congregation and others to ministry and service opportunities which engage with outsiders (Mt 28.19-20).
7. *For mutual encouragement.* This is accomplished through praising God together in Psalms (Eph 5.19), prayer for one another (James 5.16), and fellowship with other believers (Rom 14.19; Eph 4.29; 1 Thess 4.18; 1 Thess 5.11; 1 Jn 1.7). One of the psalmists expressed doubts about God's providences. However, when he went into the sanctuary of God (spiritually, the church; 1 Cor 3.16-17), his doubts were addressed, and his outlook became positive (Ps 73.16-17).

Ramifications

Ramifications which flow from the reasons given above, include the following:

- *Biblical worship must take priority.* Since the first and most important reason for assembling as a church is to worship God, the congregation with which we assemble should be one where only proper worship is offered up to God. No other reason for attending a particular church should supersede this reason. Most Christians today do not take seriously the fact that we should attend a church only where proper worship is being offered to God, because they:
 - Cannot define true worship¹. A sad commentary on the modern church is illustrated by the following example. If someone said to a Christian, "I want you to embezzle money from your boss." the Christian would likely respond and say, "No way!" However, the same Christian gives little thought to egregious breaches of the second Commandment in the Church today. Most Christians place their duty to man (including to themselves) above their duty to God, contrary to what Jesus taught (Mt 22.37-40). False worship is a significant issue in churches today. Ideally, Christians should not attend a church where false worship is offered up. For example, most Christians do not understand that singing mere-human compositions (often called 'hymns') in the worship assembly of a church is a form of idolatry—breaking the second Commandment—because the use of these compositions honours human authors, and the compositions are offered as substitutes for the God-breathed Psalms (2 Tim 3.16). We should attend a church which sings the Psalms exclusively if one is available within our municipality.
 - Place pragmatic considerations such as convenience (e.g., an unwillingness to drive for half-an-

¹ See, *In Spirit and Truth: Worship as God Requires - Understanding and Applying the Regulative Principle of Worship*; publications.epctoronto.org/In_Spirit_and_Truth.pdf.

hour to attend church when most people wouldn't think twice about commuting for half-an-hour to go to a work location), subjective feelings (e.g., the people appear to be more loving in another congregation), or rationalizations (e.g., we should attend a neighbourhood church so we can interact with our neighbours) above obedience to God (Ex 20.4-5; Jn 4.24).

Sadly, the Church has been infected with a spirit of rebellion in which everyone does what is right in his own eyes (Judges 17.6; Judges 21.25).

- *Church is for believers.* Church worship services should not be designed to be appealing to unbelievers (e.g., with theatrics and musical entertainment, state-of-the-art technology and special effects, avoiding 'objectional' teaching about sin and Christ's sacrifice, minimal reading of the Scriptures, and dispensing with 'boring' sermons). Going to church is to be primarily an activity for believers who are meeting with God. If someone who is an unbeliever is present at a church worship service such as a child or a family member, by invitation of a friend, or by 'chance' (e.g., he entered the meeting place out of curiosity) he should experience a church meeting, where he:
 - Sees that it is directed "decently and in order" (1 Cor 14.40).
 - Observes Christians who are in awe of the majesty of God (Ps 99.1-3; 1 Tim 1.17; Rev 4.11).
 - Hears a solid, biblical message being proclaimed (1 Cor 14.24).

While the primary purpose for assembling at church is to worship God, a call to the unconverted to repent and believe should be regularly offered in church services.

- "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (Rom 10.14; see also, Mk 16.15-16; Lk 24.46-47).
- *Watching a streamed service is not a substitute for attending church.* Everyone in a congregation should be assembling in person, and using streaming only when truly necessary (e.g., due to serious illness or injury).
- *Assembling for Lord's Day worship is paramount.* Neighbourhood home-based Bible studies and cell groups (organized during the week or on Sundays) are not a substitute for attending the gathered church on the Lord's Day.
- *Christians are to be subject to spiritual overseers.* Individuals who don't attend one church regularly cannot submit to the spiritual oversight of elders who are responsible for the protection of Christ's flock. Submission requires commitment through a relationship with a local church.
 - "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work." (1 Thess 5.12-13).
 - "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." (Heb 13.17).
- *We are called to serve others.* A question we should not ask is, "What can I get out of a church?" Rather, a question we must ask is, "How can I serve Jesus in the church?" Christians are to give, not just to receive. Within any congregation, the Pareto Principle seems to apply—80% of the work is done by 20% of the members of the congregation. Service may include serving in an office (Elder or Deacon). But for most people it will include other forms of service including teaching Sunday School classes, running a children's club, operating an after-worship coffee service, visiting the infirm, doing clerical tasks, acting as a social event coordinator, maintaining the facility where the church assembles, blogging on behalf of the congregation, and engaging in evangelism and outreach activities.
 - "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in

proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” (Rom 12.6-8).

- “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace:” (1 Pt 4.10).

- *We should attend the designated services of worship.* As stated above, attending church is not optional for Christians. Every professing believer should be present at the services of worship designated by the elders—including the morning and evening services. Sunday is not to be a ‘family day’ (Ex 20.8; Is 58.13-14). The first day of the week was designated by Christ and his apostles as the Lord’s Day—the Christian Sabbath. Reasons for attending the designated morning and evening worship services include:
 - Under the old economy, sacrifices were offered in the morning and the evening (Lev 6.20). The NT Church should offer sacrifices of praise (Heb 13.15) and prayer (Ps 141.2) in the assembly morning and evening on the Lord’s Day.
 - Morning and evening public worship serves as bookends to the Lord’s Day and helps us to remember that the entire day is dedicated to the Lord.
 - The Psalmists rejoiced at having an opportunity to assemble for worship (Ps 42.4; Ps 122.1-2). We should likewise rejoice and avail ourselves of each opportunity.
 - We should be thankful for every opportunity which we can have to be together with our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. In our highly fragmented and individualistic society, it is an opportunity to be with like-minded believers.
 - Blessings are derived from hearing the word preached, praising together in the assembly of the saints, and participating in the Lord’s Supper. It is spiritual food (Job 23.12; 1 Thess 2.13). Missing a worship service is like skipping a meal.

There are valid reasons for missing a Sunday worship service such as serious illness, but the valid reasons are far fewer than modern churchgoers appear to assume.

- *Christians should not separate from a true church.* As a response to the uncertainty about which congregations are part of the true Church, the 16th and 17th century Reformers developed the concept of the marks of a true church—pure doctrine (which includes the doctrine of worship), faithful preaching of the Gospel, right administration of the sacraments, and exercise of proper discipline.^{2, 3} They held the belief that where these marks are present, we are to treat a congregation as part of Christ’s true Church. Thus, Christians should not separate from a church which displays the marks of a true church. We should not have a supermarket mentality—shopping around for a church where we *feel* comfortable. If we have disagreements with how things are being done in a church displaying the marks of a true church, our response should not be to fall into parochial disassociation or to stand aloof in schismatic haughtiness. Rather, our response to blemishes in a particular church should be to:
 - Confess our own sins (Mt 6.15).
 - Maintain a loving, forgiving attitude toward other believers (Mt 6.16; 1 Jn 2.9-10).
 - Maintain peace with other believers (Rom 12.18).
 - Pray that Christ will purify his Church (Eph 1.16-17; Eph 3.14-17; Col 1.9-10; 2 Thess 1.11).

² Article 29 of the *Belgic Confession*.

³ “Of the Church,” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chapter 25, para. 4.