

QUESTION #10: “WHY DO WE DO CHURCH?” (Hebrews 10: 23-25; Acts 2:42-47)

7.14.19

INTRODUCTION

Solo moon. There are just some things that are meant to be done along with somebody else.

Church is kind of one of those things. Now, unlike many other destinations that may be a regular part of our week, church is a place where we bring the entire family, plus some extras that we don't normally bring someplace with us — things like Bibles and testaments, and often checks or envelopes with money in them; some of us bring music stuff. We sing songs, we pray, we sometimes share about something going on in our lives, we listen to some kind of message from somebody who stands up in front of us, and then we leave. We spend a lot of time talking with the people we do this with before and after our gathering time together and then, eventually, we part company — fully planning to do the same thing next week.

Now we're certainly not alone in this. The population of the United States is just under 330 million people; of that number, it is thought that somewhere around 38% — a little over 125 million — attend church regularly; in other words, attending church pretty much every week is an accepted part of their routine.

Now many of us have been doing this since we were kids. Now we're married with our own kids and we keep doing it. And, if we're honest, we hope and pray that our kids would keep doing it, too. Obviously it has touched our lives deep enough and long enough that we keep on going with it.

But the question today, and it is a great one, is: Why? Why do we do church? Real appropriate for us right now. I mean, once upon a pretty recent time, a whole bunch of people donated a whole lot of time, money, resources, effort and who knows what all else to create an amazing space for E-Free of Redwood Falls to worship in. Then we got flooded out, and we're in mid-process of putting that amazing space back together again. A whole lot of effort part 2. But why? Why do all this? I mean, I can pray on my own. I can worship God on my own — communing with nature, taking a walk, watching some wildlife, feeling the breeze, enjoying the sunshine, and frankly taking up a whole lot less time and space than what our church family has used. And let's face it: beyond the occasional building issue, sometimes this “church” thing, maybe better said, this church family thing, can get kinda bumpy. Why do I need to join a group of people to worship God? Well, like all our other questions, let's see what God's word says about this.

TEXT (Hebrews 10:23-25)

Let us hold (KATECHO [kat-ekh^-o] — to hold fast, retain; figuratively, to hold fast in one's mind and heart) **unswervingly** (AKLINES [ak-lee-nace^] — without wavering or yielding, literally, not leaning) **to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful** (PISTOS [pis-tos^] — worthy of belief, trust, or confidence [a direct reference to God because he has proven himself worthy to be trusted]). **And let us consider how we may spur one another on** (PAROXUSMOS [par-ox-oos-mos^] — to incite, to stimulate) **toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching — Hebrews 10:23-25.**

Five (5) Reasons Why We Do Church:

First: We do church because the church is a central part of God's strategy for growing us spiritually, of our becoming more and more each day, as Paul wrote, **conformed to the image of**

his Son — Paul, Romans 8:29a. Matthew 16 tells us that the church is God’s plan as an outcome of the work of Christ; it is not the plan of mankind: religion — yes, a plan of mankind; relationship — a plan of God. We have this exchange between Christ and his disciples (one we’ve talked about before): ***When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it — Matthew 16:13-18.*** Did you hear that last part of what Jesus was saying regarding church? “I will build it; not even Satan can defeat it.” Obviously Jesus takes church very seriously — serious enough to give it his personal attention and protection. We need to acknowledge that. When somebody says that they don’t need church or that they can worship God without it, they are departing from God’s plan, God’s blessing, and Jesus’ idea of how to be ministering to the world.

We also need to understand the meaning of the word that Jesus uses in this exchange: “church.” In the Greek, the word is EKKLESIA (ek-klay-see^ah) — assembly, church, literally “called out ONES.” It is the only Greek word used for church in the entire New Testament. It always refers to an assembly or congregation of people, as in plural individuals, called and gathered together. God’s intentions are ALWAYS that his children be together. Jesus underscored this during his ministry, a great example being when he referred to himself as the Good Shepherd. As he said in that context: ***“The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. . . . I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. . . . I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me” — Jesus Christ, John 10:2-4, 9, 14.*** Paul understood this when he famously wrote: ***[J]ust as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others — Paul, Romans 12:4-5.*** This must have been an incredibly important concept to the future prosperity of the family of God, because Paul reiterated the same idea in his first letter to the Christians in Corinth: ***Just as one body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it — Paul, I Corinthians 12:12-13a, 27.*** So first, we do church because it is a core part of God’s plan for growing us more and more into the image of his Son.

Second: We do church because we need to expose ourselves as much as possible to other followers of Christ who will draw us nearer to God. As the author of Hebrews wrote: ***See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ — Hebrews 3:12-14a.*** Simply put, we need each other to minister to each other — praying for each other, encouraging each other, showing compassion and empathy for each other, when necessary, correcting each other, and always walking life’s many journeys with each other — to help keep us mindful of our constant need of the Father, and to be a part of our journey of growing stronger in

our faith in Christ. The whole point of the body of believers is, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, *to equip [Christ's] people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ — Paul, Ephesians 4:12-13*. So second, we do church to expose ourselves to fellow followers of Christ whose ministry will draw us closer to God.

Third: We do church because we need the voice of the church to counter all the voices of the culture. As Paul wrote to the Colossian church: *See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ — Paul, Colossians 2:8*. Why is Christ so important to remember? Paul tells us: *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness (ye are complete in him — KJV) — Paul, Colossians 2:9-10a*.

So what is Paul saying when he warns us about being taken “captive” by the philosophies we find in the world? The Greek word is SULAGOGEO (soo-lag-ogue-eh^-o) — literally, “to be kidnapped,” to be carried off like items plundered by a victorious army after the battlefield defeat of an enemy. The idea of “human tradition” references teaching. Think about it: How many ways does our culture have to teach us, to try to capture us in its ways, to influence how we think and how we respond? The internet, news media, Hollywood, music, co-workers, family and friends. With that much available to attack our minds and our hearts, it is incredibly important that we literally “drown” ourselves with God’s word, meaning that we want to spend as much time as possible in church to be filled with the wisdom of God from the word of God as we seek discernment to navigate the culture in which we live. Christ’s life offers us everything we need — so claim it. Wrap yourselves up in his wondrous self! So third, we do church to listen to something contrary to the cultural voices we hear all around us.

Fourth: We do church so that, by ministering in our local church, we build our spiritual muscles. Paul seems to suggest in Ephesians 4 that, as we minister, we become more grounded and solid in our own beliefs when we exercise our spiritual lives through ministry in the power of God: *Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work — Paul, Ephesians 4:11-12, 14-16*. We will experience him as we minister, which will help mature and strengthen us as we continue to live for him. It’s harder to be deceived by something ungodly when we are experiencing God’s strength to minister to others. And why not? As a minister, we are seeing the proof of God’s power and purpose by him simply using us for his body of believers. We grow in our faith, we grow in our theology, and we grow in our ability to stand strong in the midst of temptation or spiritual attack.

Fifth: We do church as a platform from which we impact the world. As Jesus told his disciples: *“[R]epentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in [my] name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. . . . “[Y]ou will be my witnesses in*

Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” — Jesus Christ, Luke 24:47-48; Acts 1:8b. And we qualify to be his witnesses because we have experienced Christ — intimately, personally — in our own lives. Who better to talk about the love and grace of God, the forgiveness of sins, the hope of eternity, than somebody who has realized all those things themselves? Who better to bear witness of the life-changing reality of Christ in our lives? As Paul said so well: ***[R]emember that at [one] time you were separate from Christ . . . without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ — Paul, Ephesians 2:12, 13.*** We encourage each other with our testimonies, our sharing and our prayer support to prepare us to be fully enabled as we go out into whatever part of the world God has planted us to be his ambassadors for his kingdom. So fifth, we do church as a platform from which to impact the world.

BOTTOM LINE: Christianity is not a solo business.

Now that is what why we do church looks like in theory — ideas on a whiteboard. Now let’s see what those ideas look like when they’re fleshed out in the real world:

TEXT — Acts 2:42-47

They (believers) devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

I love this section of Scripture because it presents “unadorned” church. In other words, this was how the church came together in its infancy. This is like the first moments of a baby’s life: No one has to tell the baby to cry or flex its arms and legs; it just comes naturally. What came naturally to the church that Luke describes was birthed by the Holy Spirit; it was God’s Holy Spirit that gave them direction. So despite the fact that there were no bookstores, no seminaries, no “how-to” brochures, no Sunday School materials or growth consultants, they grew. Oh boy, did they grow — 3,000 new Christians right out of the bucket, right out of Peter’s Pentecost Day sermon. And at the end of Acts 2, we see how they functioned. And what did that look like?

- 1) They were devoted to God’s word in the form of the apostles’ teaching — likely teachings and stories from their time with Christ. That’s what Paul would say to the Colossian Christians: ***Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts — Paul, Colossians 3:15-16.***
 - a) BRABEUO (brab-yoo-o)—to act as an umpire, hence, generally, to arbitrate, decide; representing “the peace of Christ” as deciding all matters in the hearts of believers.
 - b) ENOIKEO (en-oy-keh^-o)—dwell in, literally, “to inhabit, to feel at home.”
 - c) PLOUSIOS (plo-see^-oce)—abundantly, richly.
 - d) NOUTHETEO (noo-thet-eh^-o)—to put in mind, to put in one’s heart; hence to warn, admonish, exhort.

- 2) They were devoted to fellowship, meaning they were sharing time together, communing with each other, based on a common interest founded in a common life — the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ — and pursuing a common goal. As Paul would say so appropriately to the Ephesian Christians: *[Y]ou are no longer foreigners or strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit — Paul, Ephesians 2:19-22.*
- 3) They were devoted to the breaking of bread — sharing a fellowship meal together along with the probable inclusion of the Lord’s Supper.
- 4) They were devoted to prayer — from the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit first exploded in their midst to these first moments when the church was born. Certainly these Christians, virtually all of whom were coming from Jewish backgrounds, would have remembered the words of David written some ten centuries before their time: *The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry — David, Psalm 34:15a.*

The common denominator: “They were devoted.” The Greek tells us that they were “continuing steadfastly,” in other words, to be continually persevering in a work. These four things were pursued with a constant passion to being a part of their lives.

What else do we see?

- 5) They were filled with awe — being in the presence of the working of God.
- 6) They were together, sharing their lives and their possessions. They were with people who understood their situation — their newness in Christ — and their shared need to learn more. It was new for ALL of them, which gave them a great commonality for being knit together as a body.
- 7) They gave to whoever had need. The basis for what they were doing was written about by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthian church: *For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body . . . there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it — Paul, I Corinthians 12:11a, 25-26.* Their giving as each had need was because they felt each other’s needs as if they were their own.
- 8) They stayed connected — meeting everyday in fellowship and worship to God. They understood that, if the church was truly the body of Christ, then they simply had to remain connected with the Father in order to reflect the Son.

WHILE WE DO CHURCH, WHOSE CHURCH IS IT?

In Acts 28, as Paul is bidding farewell to the elders of the Ephesian church, he reminds them, among other things, to *“[k]eep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” — Paul, Acts 20:28a*, going on to say that they are to *“[b]e shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” — Paul, Acts 20:28b*. God is the one for which they work, essentially the one who hired them, and the owner of the flock over which they tend. God owns the church in the same way that he has purchased us: *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price — Paul, I Corinthians 6:19-20a.*

And as we were bought at a price, as Paul said, then that means that God is our Master. He is the Shepherd, we are the sheep; He is the leader, we are the followers. We are here to do his will, in every way possible, to fulfill what Paul called us to do in his second letter to the Corinthian Christians, that we are to function as ***Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us*** — ***Paul, II Corinthians 5:20a***. That's what we're here for; that's what our church is here for. Through how we talk, how we act, how we treat people (especially each other), in short, in everything we do, we represent our Master — period.

I did a lot of research in prepping for this sermon on looking at why people say they don't go to church, or have left the church. Three reasons were common to a number of surveys:

- 1) They did not see a church full of authentic Christians (hypocrisy).
- 2) They did not see a church full of transparent Christians (fear of judgment).
- 3) They did not see a church with which they could connect.

Let's look at those a minute, especially in light of the life of Christ:

- 1) Christ was authentic. In other words, he always was who he was — whether teaching in the temple, out in a boat with the guys, hanging out in somebody's home, laughing with the kids sitting in his lap. You always knew then, and always know now, exactly what you're going to get from him. He didn't morph into somebody else because of his surroundings — either the crowd or the place or the expectations or whatever. As the writer of Hebrews noted: ***Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*** — ***Hebrews 13:8***.
- 2) Christ was transparent. He was fearless in telling others exactly what was on his mind at any given moment. He didn't spare his words to make things easier for him. He told it how it was, including how it was going for him. In fact, a great picture of his transparency occurs in the Garden of Gethsamane, where he told the disciples Peter, James and John: ***"My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 26:38***. Later he would confide to Peter: ***"The Spirit is willing but the flesh is weak"*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 26:41b***.
- 3) Christ was absolutely all about connecting with those who crossed his path. He famously said to people gathered around him: ***Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest*** — ***Jesus Christ, Matthew 11:28***. And if we look at the life of Christ as told in the gospels, he sought connection with all kinds of people, among them being:
 - a) A Samaritan woman
 - b) A crippled beggar
 - c) A rich, young ruler
 - d) A demon-possessed man
 - e) A synagogue ruler
 - f) A woman with a bleeding condition
 - g) Tax collectors and other "sinners"
 - h) An adulterous woman
 - i) A Pharisee
 - j) Moms with little kids

No one was beyond him; he shut no one out from him. As he said so appropriately: ***"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. . . . For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"*** —

Jesus Christ, Luke 5:31-32, 19:10. And this wasn't happening in the temple or synagogue. Most of the people Jesus met crossed his path simply in the course of their day. In other words, he met them where they were. He often used questions to connect with people, to get them to open up about their feelings, frustrations, fears — whatever it might be. The stories he told — what we call “parables” — were meant to share some of himself in an everyday context that his audience would understand. He talked to them from a standpoint of getting to know them — what we call “relationship.” And folks, our culture craves relationship. What social science is telling us that, despite all the opportunities we have to connect with Facebook and Instagram and e-mails and texts and all the rest of it, our society is increasingly DISconnected. The church has an opportunity like seldom before in our history, through the context of relationship, to be a part of a life-changing experience for people — not for our sake, but for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of the Kingdom, and for the honor and glory of our Master.

At the end of the day, we do church to reflect Jesus Christ. That's what being “the body of Christ” means. When people watch us, see us, listen to us, the idea is that they are reminded of Jesus. That's why it is so incredibly important how we are with each other. Anything that hints at any other foundation other than Jesus Christ totally destroys what the “body of Christ” is meant to be. So division is wrong because it is so contrary to Christ. Anger is wrong because it is so contrary to Christ. Grudges, gossips, jealousies, judgments — all of these things are so very wrong because they are so blatantly contrary to Christ. “What would Jesus do” is so appropriate because, if we aren't doing what Jesus would do, then we are defeating everything the body of Christ is meant to stand for.

Paul said it so well, writing under the influence of the Holy Spirit Jesus deposited in him following his conversion in Damascus: ***The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself in love — Paul, Galatians 5:6b.*** We do church to represent Christ; his love is the bar that measures our efforts — and our hearts. And that, folks, has to look like something.

So what does that look like? It looks like choosing to come alongside somebody in their struggles, not judging them, not “kicking them to the curb,” but joining them, ministering to them, praying with and for them, encouraging them by reminding them of their permanent home in this body of believers. Easy? No — God stuff usually isn't; God stuff is tough. But pleasing to God, blessed by God? Absolutely! You see, Jesus Christ acted like nothing anybody on earth had ever seen. Why should our church be any different? Every time we act or respond in a way that reflects Jesus instead of our culture, God stuff happens — growth, maturing, joy, excitement, relationship, forgiveness, reconciliation, new life in Christ. That means showing love, showing grace, showing understanding — ensuring people that, whatever their sin or struggle, they cannot lose God's love — because that's what Jesus did. It means assertively connecting with people, visiting people, who may have been hurt in our church's past. It doesn't matter who's at fault or who's to blame or any of that stuff. What matters is, at the end of the day, is God pleased with our hearts? Is God pleased with my heart? Do our hearts match Jesus' heart? Anything that smacks of “un-Jesus” — un-Jesus in attitudes, in holding onto judgments or grudges — should make us so convicted by God's Holy Spirit that we can't wait any longer to make that situation right.

And why is that important? Because, as the body of Christ, we want people with baggage, we want people who are struggling, we want people for whom life is one great big fail. If Jesus came

all the way from heaven, essentially saying, “I’m looking for sinners, I’m looking for dumpster fires, I’m looking for people who can’t get out of their own way,” then that’s our mission, too. It doesn’t matter the sin — we want sinners. Jesus is in the salvation, “all things become new” business. That’s our business, too. And there is no more critical time to reflect Christ when people are coming through our doors who need Christ. We want them, warts and all, because Christ came for us, and called us, and saved us, warts and all. We want to come alongside these people, no matter their struggles, because Jesus came alongside us, no matter our struggles — which means that we also SEEK to come alongside the brothers and sisters that are already here in this church family — all their warts, all their struggles, without limit — and I need everybody to come alongside me in exactly the same way. As the body of Christ, we need to want for others exactly what Jesus Christ did for us. And for them to come, the changed lives that show that “Jesus is here” needs to be what they see.

We have so much opportunity to reach our town and our region for Jesus Christ. But first we need to make sure that there is nothing that God sees (as only he can) that is anything less than to his Son’s standard. Is anyone here holding onto to something — a grudge, an attitude, a hurt, a jealousy — that makes us anything less than the body of Christ should be? Be warned — God already knows what that is. If we say that our lives are here to please him, why in the world would we want to hold onto something that so obviously doesn’t? We need to cleanse ourselves of that. We can’t be ambassadors for Christ if we’re holding out on Christ. None of us are the exception to that rule. If, as Peter pointed out, ***Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps, . . . [if] [w]hen they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; [if] when he suffered, he made no threats. [But] [i]nstead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly — I Peter 2:21b, 23***, if that was Christ’s response to the greatest miscarriage of justice in human history, if that is how his perfect life responded to the greatest display of human cruelty ever shown, how can we think our insults, our hurts, are in any way even remotely comparable? God doesn’t want our opinions on what we think about what may have happened to us in the past; he couldn’t care less about what we think somebody else should do first. God just wants it confessed and made right. God’s expectation and standard is that his Son’s “body” acts like his Son. So, if that means there is something you need to surrender, do it now — or in our prayer time following the service. If that means there is something you need to do, to reach out to somebody, to begin a process of reconciliation and restoration, then start it now. Don’t worry; God will be with you. God will give you the heart; God will give you the words; God will give you the opportunity — and, on top of that, God will be right there with you. Do you believe that? If we want this church to truly belong to God, we don’t hold off on something just because it is tough or awkward or whatever. We surrender ourselves — our rights, our hurts, our opinions, our fears — we claim the power of almighty God — and then we get it done. ***The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself in love — Paul, Galatians 5:6b***. Remember?

CONCLUSION

The raindrops were always there. They just needed the sunshine to make the rainbow.

Folks, all the ingredients for an amazing church are here. We just need God’s “sunshine” — his Son, Jesus Christ, to be what lights us up. To make the difference in the world God brought us into the world to be, we need to reflect the Son God brought into the world. The church that fiercely determines to love God and serve him only will be the church with which God is pleased — and which God will bless. Let’s pray!