

What's the Big Deal About Church?
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I'm going to be preaching a short series called What's the Big Deal? And today I'm speaking on What's the Big Deal About Church?

The fact that people even ask that question shows how far we've come from New Testament Christianity. I understand when unbelievers don't think church is a big deal, but we've come so far that many people who call themselves believers even ask – what's the big deal about church?

There are many people who believe that they can be mature Christians and follow Jesus apart from the church all by themselves. But that is impossible!

Most New Testament books were written to churches – like the churches in Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, Galatia and Rome. Those books were written to show how the Christian life was meant to be lived in community, not in isolation! In fact, there are many biblical commands you cannot obey without being part of a church.

I know we hear a lot about what's wrong with the church, but I want to start by talking about what's right with the church. You see, church is God's idea and anything that is a God idea is a good idea!

A Gallup Poll called "Just Why Do Americans Attend Church" revealed the reasons people do and don't attend church. We'll talk about why people don't attend church later, but first, research shows that people attend church for spiritual growth and guidance, to worship God, and to fellowship with other people.

It's interesting to note that those are the main functions of the church. Acts 2:42-47 tells us what the first church was like in the book of Acts.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he 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.

This is what church is supposed to be like. It's a group of people who live life together.

They don't just go to church once a week – they've committed to BE the church all through the week. They're not there just for themselves, but for others. They love and accept each other and meet each other's needs.

Notice that when church is happening as God intends for it to happen, people get in line to join up. If you've tried church, but felt it wasn't for you, maybe what you experienced was something less than what God wants the church to be. So, I want you to know why church matters. And I want you to know why you need the church.

I could talk about how the church has been responsible for many advances in science, government, business, education, medicine and the arts. In fact, the Christian church has made more changes on earth for good than any other movement or people group in history! And all people – even unbelievers and atheists – enjoy the blessing of those advancements.

As Rick Warren said, "The church provides people with things they cannot find anywhere else in the world." But I want to make it more personal today.

I've been in church all my life. And I wasn't always a pastor. But the church has always been there for me.

It was at church that I learned how to succeed in life.

It was at church that I learned how to have a marriage that has lasted over 42 years.

It was at church I learned how to manage my finances.

People in the church have been there for me when I needed them.

When I've been down, they've lifted me up.

When I've sinned, they've shown me grace and love and acceptance.

The church has helped me when I've had financial needs.

The church has counseled me when I needed advice.

The church has rejoiced with us when we were happy.

The church has grieved with us when we were sad.

God has blessed me and my family through His family – the church.

But – you might say that's okay for me, but not for you. So, I want to give you some little known facts that research had shown about the benefits of church.

For instance, research conducted at three universities shows that those who attend church regularly live an average of 7 years longer than those who do not attend church. This gap is as great as that between non-smokers and those who smoke a pack of cigarettes a day. That's amazing! That's why we've decided to change our church slogan from "Touching heaven-Changing earth" to "Join or die! (Just kidding!)"

By the way - let me define regular attendance for you since the average Christian only attends church once or twice a month. According to this study – the benefit of longer life occurs in those who attend church more than once a week.

That's because they are more connected to people. I'll be talking about that next week in my sermon What's the Big Deal About Small Groups!

And longer life is not the only benefit of church. I found an article that summarized the results of over 100 studies on the impact of church on people's lives. The article is called "Why Religion Matters Even More" and it can be found at heritage.org. The research show that – in addition to longer life - religious faith and church attendance lead to:

- Higher levels of marital happiness and stability;
- Stronger parent–child relationships;
- Greater educational aspirations and attainment;
- Higher levels of good work habits;
- Higher levels of well-being and happiness;
- Higher levels of self-control, self-esteem, and coping skills; and
- Higher levels of community support for those in need.

The evidence further demonstrates that religious belief and church attendance are also associated with:

- Lower divorce rates and out-of-wedlock births;
- Less abuse of alcohol and drugs;
- Lower rates of depression and suicide;
- Lower levels of violent crime; and less domestic violence.

Here was the conclusion of the article – and I quote - “No other dimension of life in America—with the exception of stable marriages and families, which in turn are strongly tied to religious practice—does more to promote the well-being and soundness of the nation's civil society than citizens' religious observance. As George Washington asserted, the success of the Republic depends on the practice of religion by its citizens. These findings from 21st century social science support his observation.”

And it supports what the Bible said all along: life is better when you're part of a church.

One of the big benefits of church is that it provides a place to meet people and make friends. There is an epidemic of loneliness in our society. People are disconnected and they need a place to connect. Church is all about connecting with God and other people.

A Christian who is disconnected from church is like:
 a football player without a team;
 a soldier without an army;
 a tuba player without an orchestra.
 a child without a family.

God does not want his children growing up in isolation from each other, so He created a spiritual family on earth for us. That family is the church. You need the church because you need God and the family of God.

Now – I want to look at the main reasons people don't attend church. A big portion either doesn't believe in God or organized religion. Other people have been hurt by church.

So – if you've ever been hurt by a church, neglected by a church, rejected by a church, judged by a church, not loved by a church – as a representative of the church – I want to ask for your forgiveness. We are people who try to do right, but we don't always get it right, but when we don't get it right – we want to make it right. So please forgive us and show us mercy as we are growing in the faith.

There are also people who do believe in God, but still don't go to church – here's the main reasons they gave for not going to church:

- They're too busy or too lazy

I can't do much about that other than to say, "Get your priorities right!"

- Can't find a church they connect with – they don't fit in
- Churches ask for too much money
- Church members were hypocritical or judgmental
- Church is boring
- Church is unnecessary because you can worship God on your own

I want to address these issues and bring a biblical perspective to them.

Reason #1 – Church is boring

My answer to that is that some churches are boring. But there are many different kinds of churches, with different styles of music and preaching. So – if the church you've attended has bored you – try different kinds of churches until you find one you like.

I've been in boring churches before. But I kept looking until I found a church that is not boring to me. Obviously, I don't think GFC is boring – but some people might. I go to both services every week – and I can tell you no 2 services are ever the same. We expect God to show up and God is never boring! When God shows up – even unbelievers know it! 1 Corinthians 14:24-25 says

If an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!"

That's what we expect to happen here. But if you're bored here, keep searching until you find a church that doesn't bore you. We've help lots of people find the right church for them – and we'd love to help you find the church that is just right for you.

Reason #2 – People in Church are hypocrites or judgmental

The truth is – there are hypocrites in the church. There are people attending who are only pretending – but we are intending for them to start mending and then start transcending their life of pretending.

One of the things GFC is known for is the fact that we are real. We don't hide reality. We are open and honest.

I like to point out on a regular basis that none of us are perfect. We all have problems, issues and sins we still need to overcome. The church is not for perfect people. Why? Because there are none!

If the church claimed to be full of perfect people, then we would indeed be hypocritical. But this church makes no such claim. We all realize our sinfulness. That's why we came to Jesus - to be forgiven and to ask for help to live a more holy, non-hypocritical life.

But most people outside of the church don't know this. They assume that a Christian claims to not sin. So if a Christian does sin, they accuse him of hypocrisy. It is important not to confuse hypocrisy with sin. Christians are sinners, but not all Christians are hypocrites. A Christian is a sinner who has been forgiven by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. A hypocrite pretends to be a Christian, but is usually something else. So – at this church – we strive to be real and open and honest.

Reason # 3 – All the church wants is my money

I hate to be pressured to give. In fact, if I feel pressured, I usually don't give. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

I think that to have balance – you must teach both of these verses. You must teach people to give what the Lord leads them to give. But secondly – we would be out of balance if we did not teach the truth of sowing and reaping.

The truth is that Jesus taught about money more than He taught about almost anything else – including prayer and faith.

So what we do at GFC is teach the truth and present opportunities to give. We do not pressure. We just ask people to pray and do what God tells them to do.

Reason # 4 – I don't fit at church because church people are different from me.

One of the great things about GFC is that we are a diverse church. We are made up of people of all ages, from different ethnic groups, different education levels, and different economic backgrounds. We believe churches should be a reflection of their community and a reflection of heaven. And the Bible says in Revelation 5:9 that the people in heaven sing a song to Jesus that says

You have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Heaven is composed of people of all types and so is GFC. Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in His sight.

Reason # 5 - Church is unnecessary because I can worship on my own.

Many people say, "I don't need to go to church to worship. I can worship alone. I can worship when I'm in the woods hunting or on the golf course golfing. Yes – that's true – you can. Now, I'm not a golfer, but I've been a few times and I've never seen a single person worshipping. I have seen people taking the Lord's name in vain rather than praising His Name!

I've been hunting many times and I've never seen a single person break out into a sacrifice of praise. So, my conclusion is that most people on the golf course are actually golfing and most people in the woods are actually hunting. Most of those who say they worship doing these things are simply justifying themselves.

But even if people are worshipping at home or on the golf course, they are missing out on the greater power of worshipping together. The truth is you can pray, worship and read your Bible on your own – AND YOU SHOULD! But you should also pray, worship and read the Bible with other believers. They are different and they are both necessary.

We need personal quiet times or devotional times, but we also need corporate worship. Yes, we can meet with God alone at home or at the lake – but there is something different about meeting with Him with other believers.

You see, Jesus lives in every single believer. We have His presence in our lives all the time. But He said in Matthew 18:20

For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.

Evidently - God shows up one way in personal quiet times and in a different way in the church service.

You see, one believer has power, but there is greater power in unity. That's why Ecclesiastes 4:9 says

Two are better than one.

You can pray alone – and you should - but there is power in the prayer of agreement. Jesus said in Matthew 18:19:

If two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

There are some things we only receive when we pray together. Two are better than one!

You can do spiritual warfare alone – and you should - but there is greater power when we war together. Leviticus 26:8 says

Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you.

We have greater victories when we fight together. When I'm in a spiritual battle – I need you to fight with me! Two are better than one!

It's the same way with worship. God tells us He wants us to worship when we're alone, but also He wants us to worship together with others. Psalm 35:18 says

I will give You thanks in the great assembly; I will praise You among many people.

In Hebrews 2:12 – Jesus said to the Father –

I will declare Your name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto You.

I want to encourage you to keep on worshipping at home or at the lake or at the golf course. But don't give up worshipping with God's family. Hebrews 10:25 says

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Reason # 6 – I wouldn't be welcome at church because of the bad things I've done.

Nothing could be further from the truth! Satan uses that lie to keep people from coming to church.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 gives a long list of sins like adultery, idolatry, sexual sins, greed, and theft. Then it says:

Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

We are not deceived. We know what we were before we met Jesus and we know what we would be without Him.

We could tell you countless stories of how Jesus has changed our lives.
We really believe Christ is the answer for the problems we all face.
We really believe the church has what you are looking for.
We are really sorry if the church has hurt you or let you down in any way.

We want to invite you back. What's the big deal about church?

Church is a place where you belong.
A place where you can be loved and accepted for who you are.
A place where you can experience God and grow in your faith.
A place where you can use your gifts to serve God and others.

But, before you join a church, you need to join Christ.
If you've never given your life to Him, you can do that right now.
Or if you've gotten away from God, you can get back right now.