

Why go to Church?

George Verwer

I woke up in the middle of the night and all I could think of was this question: *“Why Go to Church?”*



I knew I should write an article about it. Then I realized that I have been in church almost every Sunday for about 75 years. My mind went back to the influence of my mother when I was 7, about 75 years ago. She sent me to Sunday school and to church that met afterward. I did not have a choice in the matter.

I remember that a visiting minister stayed in our home overnight. It didn't happen often in our rather small house. I have stronger memories when I was a bit older and I was part of Fred Gnade's Sunday school class which I enjoyed. I found out later that he was in the process of having a personal relationship with Jesus which was not at all common in our liberal church. Even the pastor in my church, who became my friend, did not believe the Bible was fully the Word of God. The pastor before him was also liberal in theology, but I cannot say to what degree.

Going to church each Sunday, and on some other occasions, was part of our DNA, even though we did not have a real relationship with Christ. That came later and I think everyone knows that side of my story.

My father, who was the son of a Dutch atheist, did not go to church, but my mom persuaded him to attend. He quickly became very active in church, especially as a skilled electrician, helping with the new educational building. This was a small denomination, part of the Reformed Church of America, and was in a community with a large Dutch background.

So I have decided to celebrate my 75th anniversary of going to church almost every Sunday in the UK and in thousands of churches around the world on the land and on ships. That is a total of 3,900 times.

It's a great mistake!

I was still lying in bed trying to sleep. I felt I must write something on this subject — especially now that in our society, and especially in Europe, church attendance has so greatly dropped. All kinds of articles and books have been written about the reasons for this, but I simply say that to turn our back on the church is “**a great mistake**” — and even more so when it is impacting true believers.

We do not have to use the expression “going to church”, which is so common in many languages. This expression is not found in the New Testament. We are basically talking about any gathering together to worship God. There are many hundreds of different church movements teaching different ways of meeting for worship. They could fill another book.

I have spoken in thousands of churches, and this has given me a great window into seeing the church in action in many different cultures and situations. In places like Singapore I sometimes take three different meetings in three different churches, and each one is quite different from the other, just on one Sunday.

It is a great mistake to abandon church-going, worship and prayer

Vital lessons from history

There are some basic practices you find in most meetings. Number one is **worship** with hymns and singing. Number two: the **reading and preaching** of the Bible and prayer. Thirdly, the **breaking of bread**, also called Communion or the Eucharist. The Salvation Army movement does not have that, which is hard for many to understand. Reading *Messiology* might help. How the breaking of bread as described in the Bible led to the Mass, as practised by the Catholic and Orthodox churches, is the theme of another book.

Church History was one of my favourite subjects at Moody Bible Institute and I have continued my studies. I touch on this in my book *Messiology* and my newer book *Confessions of a Toxic Perfectionist*. The point I am trying to drive home is that gathering together to worship, pray and feed on the Word of God has never stopped among God's people for more than 2,000 years.



Are we — so-called modern man — to abandon the great and Biblical practice of meeting together with other believers for worship, prayer and fellowship? I think not. I believe it would be **a serious and dangerous mistake** to do so. It is often linked with our own lostness, selfishness, sinfulness and what I call the “toxic factor”, which is sometimes closely linked to destructive idealism.

Learning to value variety

As a young and somewhat radical disciple my motive for going to church was not always 100% pure. I did not think enough about just worshipping the living God (which I did to some degree), but I wanted to see Revival and Revolution, because I felt the church was dead and needed repentance and revival. Without this vision and passion I would never have started those prayer meetings way back in my high school and home town as a baby believer — and OM would have never been born.

I remember well the first church in the South that let me preach — Cherokee Heights Baptist Church. I developed a life-time link with the pastor and his family (and with his widow right to this day). His name was Hermon Hilton. Little did I dream back then that I would have such a heart link with many hundreds of churches and pastors over the years.

I realize that those who lead a church or church movement have to choose a particular way of doing church. Of course people are greatly influenced by their denomination and where they have studied theology. Many of us on the more inter-denominational road change as we move on or do more study. God must have a sense of humour. He sees it all work out but does not seem to have a problem doing great things in a wide range of churches.

This is one reason why OM work has always been tied to local churches and why most of our 200,000 OMs are prayed for and sent out by their local church.

Back to church — because we love people



If we have the right view of God and how He works, then we will want to go to church (to use the old expression). There are so many ways we can now do that. We can meet in people's homes, or go to one of the huge churches where there is a more friendly ethos, especially attractive to younger people. For the last 50 years there has been a revival of young people going to church due to that.

For me in many ways the bottom line is loving people, together with the work of the Holy Spirit. We may not feel we are the church-going type but, if we love people and allow the Holy Spirit to work in us, we will want to meet. In this time of pandemic, due to God's gift of technology, we probably meet via the internet. It is not the same but still part of the same work of the Holy Spirit we see in the book of Acts.

One of the hardest things for us humans to admit is that we are self-centred. I know this is true of myself. If as a young Christian I had not experienced the reality of the Cross and Galatians 2:20 I surely would not be typing this. The second command is to "**love your neighbour as yourself**". How can we do that if we never meet them?

Your heart may be broken

In our world, whether it's the pub, the church or some organization or club, it is easy to experience rejection, and that can really hurt. As C.S. Lewis points out in *The Four Loves*: "Love anything (even a pet) and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken." I have had some of that for sure.



Sadly, many people stop going to church because they were offended or hurt by the leaders. They justify it by saying the church is full of hypocrites. Others say they did not get anything out of the church. For me (as you will note in my book on Toxic Perfectionism) these decisions are often linked to *toxic unrealistic expectations...* Hey! God has sometimes used that to birth whole new movements — even to bring huge numbers to Himself. I believe with all my heart we can learn through such experiences and in obedience to our Lord and His Word keep forgiving and pressing on in active fellowship with our brothers and sisters In Christ **and His Church**.

Grace, obedience — and discipleship

In the past 50 years there has been a huge reaction against what we call legalism — quite complex as there are different definitions of legalism. I have been a strong voice for **GRACE** and *Grace Awakening*. There is a fine line between what is called legalism and what others call basic obedience to the Word of God. Randy Alcorn's book, *The Grace and Truth Paradox*, can be a huge help. Clearly basic discipleship includes obedience to God's Word, worked out in different people in different ways. I urge you to read Peter Maiden's book *Discipleship Matters*. Almost all my books touch on this. I am still a pilgrim, working it out in my daily life.

And finally ...

It is so important to remember that going to church does not make you a true believer. Even if you carry the name 'Christian', it is often linked with culture more than with the living Christ. Also, when we meet believers who are not going to church, we should not be harsh or judgmental but rather listen to them. Some have been deeply wounded in local churches and emotionally cannot handle going to a church, at least for a time. I know true believers who love and serve Jesus who don't go to church. I wonder if they will ever read this.

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