

Good Question! Why do people quit going to church?

Nov. 17, 2019

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I must confess that when I first read the question that we're answering today (Why do people quit going to church?) I thought: well, that's what I want to know? I'm not sure if I'm the best person to ask why people quit going to church; I'm in the belly of the beast. And I'm a little biased; I wonder myself, "Why would anybody, ever quit going to church?" I'm all-in on the church; I'm a homer. I can't live without it; I think you'll see why this morning.

If you are like me, you're all-in on the church, you might be tempted to think poorly of anyone who leaves or quits. As a person who obviously thinks everyone should be a part of a church community, I want to caution you to be careful about how you think of others if and when they leave. There are reasons that I think we could all understand and can even sympathize with. I have a pastor-buddy of mine who told me about his son leaving the church after he graduated from HS. It was a pretty painful thing for a dad to watch; for years this son struggled as he wandered away from God, the faith, and Christ's church. But he came back and this is what he told his dad: I needed to leave the church to see for myself that I needed it. Sadly, we've learned over the years that every kind of church has been caught up in the scandals that have victimized children. Why wouldn't a family, a child, leave and never come back when they experienced the darkness of hell instead of the light of heaven in the church? When the church fails its Master, Jesus, and acts more like the Devil people are going to leave and that's probably the right thing to do.

But there are many bad reasons to quit going to church. And to possibly understand those reasons, it might be better to start by talking about why it's so important to come and remain a part of the people of God - the church. When we see why the church is important we can pinpoint more accurately some of the wrong thinking that goes into quitting the church or marginalizing its place in our lives.

The first passage I want to take you to is Matthew 18, so turn there with me now. The teaching actually begins in Matthew 16, but let me just tell you what's there and how it applies to Matthew 18. Matthew 16 is the famous passage where Jesus asks Peter, "who do you say that I am?" And Peter answers, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus follows up Peter's correct answer by saying, "Yes! And on this statement, that I am the Christ, the Son of God, I will build my church." That's who the church is; the church is comprised of people who confess that Jesus is the Lord and Christ. Everyone who looks upon and trusts Jesus as God's provision for sins is a part of the church. And then Jesus entrusts Peter and the other disciples with an amazing responsibility when he says, "I'm giving you the keys of the kingdom. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth (or let go) will be loosed in heaven." It's not so obvious as to what Jesus means by that statement at this moment; what responsibility did Jesus actually give to Peter and the other disciples? We get a pretty big clue from Matthew 18 (READ 15-20).

As I'm sure some of you have heard before, this is Jesus' instructions to us as to what we do if we have our Christian friend stuck in sin and walking away from Jesus. We're supposed to lovingly go get them and lead them back to Christ. And if they even refuse the church's call to

come home to Jesus, we're supposed to think and relate to them differently, no longer as brothers and sisters, but as people who need to be born again and saved.

Did you notice what Jesus calls this act of the church in trying to correct a wayward brother or sister? Binding and loosing, just like in Matthew 16. Matthew 18 spells out more specifically what it means for the church to be entrusted with the keys of the kingdom of God. Jesus is telling the church they have the responsibility of either affirming a person's place within the family of God or to help clarify for a person that they are not a part of God's church, his people, yet, and how to become a part of it.

So, let me summarize that: Christ's church is given the responsibility to affirm Christians of their faith in Christ. What an awesome responsibility. If you're a part of this church, you play a role in affirming others of their faith in Jesus and they play a role in affirming you of your faith. Now, to get to our question, "why do people quit going to church?" flip this question around. Let me ask it this way: do you think a person who knows they need to be affirmed in their faith by the church is going to quit coming? Not likely, right? If you know you need the church's affirmation to encourage you that you have faith and to keep going in the faith, you're not likely to quit. One of the reasons why people quit coming to church is because they don't think they need this in their life. They too assured of their faith and being too assured they don't see a need for the church to affirm them.

I've come to believe that the idea that we need our faith affirmed by others, by the church no less, rubs our pride the wrong way. We just don't think we need it. Nobody is going to tell me what my faith is like. My faith is personal; it's between me and Jesus - I hear that all the time. So the thought that I need the church to tell me what my faith with Jesus is like is almost insulting.

One of the reasons for this is because we think we're the final authority if we are Christians are not. I'm a Christian because I say so. Do you know what that makes you? The final authority. Now, let me ask you more bluntly: are you the final authority of your faith? Are you the one who decides who you are and where you belong and how you grow in Christ and where you'll go when you die? I hope you don't answer "yes" to those questions. Hebrews 12 says Jesus is the author of faith; he is the perfecter of faith. He's the final authority. He says who's in; he decides who's out. He determines how we grow; he is the one we will stand before on that Final Day. God is the final authority. And guess who he gave the keys to the kingdom to? His church.

When my teenage boys got to be driving age, Korby and I bought a third car. Teenagers being able to drive themselves around is great. I don't have to pick them up any more or drop them off. I don't have to sit and wait for the bus to arrive at 11pm on a Thursday night after a ball game. The last time I felt such parental joy was when they got out of diapers. But it's my car. I decide who drives it, who rides in it, where it goes... everything. And I give my boys the keys with all of those expectations clearly laid out. I don't hand out my keys to just anybody; I don't keep the keys in the ignition for anyone to pass by and drive it. I give them to my sons and my sons alone. Jesus didn't give the keys of the kingdom to anyone and everyone. He gave them to his church with very specific instructions. Not just anybody can bind and loosen; the church does that together under Christ's specific instructions. And one of the reasons some people quit going to church is because they just don't think they need the church to do any of

that. They don't need to be affirmed. They are they're own authority; they don't need the authority of the church.

I'm well aware that this teaching can be misapplied and abused. Maybe some of you have left the church precisely because these teachings and principles were abusively turned against you rather than used to help you. I'm sorry about that. But the response to those abusing scripture isn't to ignore it all together; it's to faithfully apply it. We all need this kind of affirmation. We just talked about last week that we really don't know what kind of faith we have until the trials come. Well, that's part of the responsibility of the church; to help its members understand what kind of faith they have in Christ.

Let's look at that second passage; it's Hebrews 10. Let me tell you what's going on here. The author of Hebrews is wrapping up just how sure, just how powerful, the sacrifice of Jesus is to save us and forgive us of our sins. If you ever wonder if Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead is really enough to satisfy God's anger for your sins, if you ever doubt that God would accept you only by the work of Jesus, read Hebrews. Hebrews is meant to convince us that the work Jesus performed on our behalf is more than we could ever possibly need. So, with Jesus' amazing love and powerful work on our behalf, we can have confidence that all of our steps of faith will make a difference. That's what we see in chapter 10. Since we are so confident in Jesus, we can (and even must) draw near to God; it's worth it. And we need to make every effort to hold fast and cling to Jesus because he will hold fast and cling to us. And then look at vs. 24-26 to read the last thing that the writer says we should be doing because Jesus saves us (READ vs. 24-26).

Because we have a sure confidence in Jesus, we are to stir one another up to love and good works. Our home is secure with Jesus; Christians don't need to worry and work for themselves, we can live sacrificially in serve to others. And to do this well, we need to be regularly be encouraging one another.

Did you notice how the writer tells us what's required for us to be this encouragement to each other. Look at vs. 25, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some" (people quitting the church was a problem 2000 years ago, too). Meeting together, having a habit of gathering together as brothers and sisters in Christ is how we encourage, motivate, and inspire one another to keep up doing the good works Christ has called us to do for others.

Doesn't that happen for you? I know it happens for me. When I see you worshiping God I'm stirred up to worshiping God, too. When I see you make sacrifices in service to others, I'm encouraged to do the same thing. Sometimes I'm tempted to be discouraged, wondering if what I'm doing or what we're doing is working. Then one of you gives me some affirming words to keep going and I'm stirred up. God so perfectly designed us that when we gather, when we do life together and encourage one another, we are more ready, more enthused to keep obeying our Master, Jesus. But when we quit coming we can't stir one another up like Hebrews 10 tells us to.

With this teaching from scripture in mind, here are some reasons why we might quit coming to church. First of all, we might not see the connection between coming to church and being motivated to keep on doing the good works Christ has called me to. Maybe this is new

information for you; you never realized that God's strategy for you to keep making a difference for Jesus is for you to keep gathering with your brothers and sisters.

Secondly, some of us might think we don't need the church's help to do this. That's our pride getting in the way; we need one another more than we often admit or understand. But also, you don't keep gathering just to be encouraged and motivated to live for Jesus, you keep gathering to encourage others to live for Jesus. When you've debated and battled in your mind whether you were going to come to church have you've ever said to yourself, "You know, my absence might discourage my brothers and sisters?" Did you know that happens. It's not terribly uncommon for someone to ask me, "Brian, where's so-n-so? I haven't seen them for so long." Sometimes, I know; other times, I don't. But usually the response I get back is one of discouragement. Not discouragement like they're mad or even disappointed, but just sad. They miss their brother or sister; their absence is felt and it certainly does not stir anyone up to love and good works. Some people stop coming because they don't think kind of encouragement is needed.

Lastly, some people don't care about doing good works. Obviously, nobody would actually say it that way. But unless you prioritize good works, unless you see them as the reason God saved you (check out Eph. 2:10 - created in Christ Jesus for good works) and you make plans, priorities, and strategies for that to happen, you're going to put *gathering together* underneath the Packer game, school shopping, and spending all summer at the cabin on your priority list. I know many of us parents face the dilemma of sports on Sundays. If you have young children and you haven't had to make the decision to either go to church or play basketball, volleyball, or hockey on Sundays decide right now what your plan is going to be. Ask yourself, "What do my kids need the most: do they need to be stirred up to love and good works or do they need more time on the court?" You should also ask, "What message will my son or daughter receive if we make ball games the norm and not gathering with God's people?" Please know that your kids will be impacted and influenced more by what you do than what you say. If your plan is to say to your kids, "Church and God are really more important" while you're driving to the ball games, forget it, friends. It doesn't work that way. Your kids aren't dumb; they know what it looks like to give something your best. I can't say "I love your mom more than any woman alive" while I go on dates with other people. Look, I know there are hard decisions to make and I'm not trying to say that there's never a time to have some recreation on Sunday mornings, but I will say this (because I love you and your kids): if kid sports replaces your Sunday morning habit (even if it's the habit for a season), you are absolutely making the wrong decision. I like to put it this way: if church becomes the thing we do when we don't have other things going on, our habits our wrong, we're sending a terrible message to our children about the place of God and his people in our lives, and we're clearly failing to appreciate the central role the church must play in our life and faith.

There's a kind of independence that's good. The scriptures itself tell us that there is a kind of dependence on others that's unbecoming for a follower of Jesus. Yet, there's also a kind of independence that's nothing but pride. And that pride shows itself when it comes to gathering together with God's people. Pride says, "I don't need the church," when God says, "You need the church to affirm you, to stir you to love and good works, and to hold you accountable." So, if

I can channel Hebrews 10 again for all of us: don't neglect gathering together, which is the habit of some.