

*Two issues go after – the first, HOW did church attendance get to be something that we need to discuss in the first place – and then secondly, crux of the issue - why do we attend church?*

*1 - HOW did we get here?*

It is amazing to me when I talk to people how many people, including me for many years, think that **church attendance** is something that is scripturally mandated or at least commanded by God. I think that is the assumption that most people embrace.

I want to make sure that we are clear on what I'm addressing here...not talking about gathering together and building relationships with other followers of Jesus (which is something that is a given in the NT) nor am I talking about and one or more of the commandments of God from the Old Testament about a "built in" rhythm of life that God hard wired into us.

What I AM talking about is the idea that once a week, religious people go to religious buildings where other religious people go once a week to sing, hear a sermon, pray, take an offering, perhaps participate in the Lord's Supper/communion, and of course, have coffee and cookies/donuts.

What I am talking about is the habit of imagining that God is more present in a sacred building and during church services than at other places and times.

As common as those conceptions are, it's important to note that early Christ followers never dreamed of associating church or their growing relationship with Jesus with a building until after the fourth century.

I want to be very clear in this – Jesus never said "go to church on Sundays"...the New Testament never said anything about church attendance in the manner in which we assume it does

There is ONE verse in the book of Hebrews where the author encourages people to not neglect gathering together...but the context is never to be seen institutionally. That's simply not what the early Jesus followers were thinking when they heard the exhortation of "gathering." In fact, Jesus, in John 4, was perfectly clear - worship won't be in a place but in Spirit and in truth – maybe that's helpful to some, but most don't get that – and even if we did, doesn't speak to what we're talking about today.

And when God DOES talk about the Sabbath in the commandments – it is not about a place...it is rather about a pattern of living that seeks to honor God through the intentional setting aside of one whole DAY as "unto the Lord."

So, let me put it this way/share this with you – in attempting to answer the question, "*How did we get here?*"

Christians before the time of Constantine (4<sup>th</sup> century mind you) didn't go to church: they rather understood that they were called to be the church.

The Greek word for church (ecclesia) means "gathering or community" of "called out ones"

So the word "church" in the New Testament refers to the body or gathering of people who have been called out of the world by virtue of their faith in Christ.

Jesus Matthew 18 – defined “church” – 2 or 3 gathered in my name – in other words, “church” (a word Jesus used only 3 times) says pretty clearly – mainly about relationships.

In fact, in that context Matthew 18 – “church” or gathering of 2 or 3 in relationship is known for the very transparent, grace-filled quality to it – marked by forgiveness, openness.

Jesus never talked about church in a religious manner – even when he explored the mysteries of God’s love being made real – bread/wine, word of God, magnificence of grace – all relational.

That’s Jesus – early Jesus followers, kept on with that pattern of relationship...remember, the early church was not on a calendared schedule.

They were fringe groups trying to survive the burdens of the Roman Empire and the corruption of alternate religious influences.

In fact, they were underground, and they weren't an established and socially-acceptable religion at the time.

They did not necessarily "meet" as we do today because they were actually a community, not just strangers gathering together out of religious obligation. They were friends, family, neighbors, lovers, colleagues, etc. They met the way you and your friends meet.

This understanding of church changed rapidly and dramatically after Constantine.

Constantine determined that since pagan gods had temples dedicated to them, Constantine and many of the pagans that started flooding into the church felt Christ should have temples dedicated to him.

So, beginning in the early fourth century, Christians began constructing separate religious buildings for Christians to gather in, worship and receive instruction.

And because there were now buildings it was with and after Constantine that Christ followers began to imitate pagan religions by creating a class of specially trained professionals who were identified as “priests” or “reverends” (literally, revered ones).

These people were viewed as holier than others and their job was to mediate God’s presence, power and will to others, just as pagan priests had always done.

Over time it was determined that these professionals were the only ones who could serve communion and baptize people.

In fact, the ministry, which the New Testament calls all Christians to, shifted to become the ministry of the religious professionals.

And thus the only job of the “lay people” (again, not biblical term) was to attend church, learn from the professionals and give financial support to them.

With that move - the vast majority of the church became pew-sitters...which is contrary to that early Jesus following movement when all Jesus followers understood that they had direct access to God through Christ in the power of the Spirit (Eph. 2:18).

And no one was thought to be “closer to God” than any others. Instead, everyone had an important gift to offer and role to play within the body of Christ (e.g. 1 Cor. 12-14).

In early Jesus following movement – we call, “early church” there were no passive pew-sitters.

As you can guess, over time, this identification of the church with a religious building and the creation of a special class of religious professionals had a profoundly negative effect on the Kingdom, which still impacts us today.

*Now – that’s a bit of background of HOW we got here – now, let’s move to the why YOU are here...or better yet, is there a sound, biblical and spiritual rationale for church attendance...*

*Just so that you know ahead of time – I believe there most definitely is!*

I’ll be the first to admit what most of you probably experience - while you love being at church once you actually get there, let’s have a mass confession - you don’t always love the process of getting yourself, your spouse, maybe the whole family out the door every Sunday morning.

There are too many weekends where you’d rather stay cuddled up in bed with a favorite book or binge-watching Netflix...

There are probably many Sunday mornings where you are thinking...well, put it this way...we live in one of the most beautiful recreational communities in world -kayaking, skiing, snowmobiling, golf, hiking...you name it...isn’t it tempting to blow this whole thing off?

On the surface, I admit it, church attendance, is a tough sell - we all have our weekday routine is pretty set, but our weekend schedule is far more relaxed...

And it is reasonable to believe what most of us believe that the weekend is our time to kick back and recuperate, without always having to DO something.

For many people and families, scheduling and making time for church in the middle of a jam-packed week can feel like a test in itself.

Whether you go on Saturday evenings, Sunday mornings or even weekday afternoons, it can be hard to part with what we see as “free” time, especially when it conflicts with other things we really want to do.

So, why do we do it?

Like I said earlier, I think it’s a pretty honest, straightforward question.

But even among the most astute Christian leaders, writers, and pundits who make a living commenting on such things—there are no simple answers

Start with the research – here’s a Gallup study

## Reasons for Attending Church or Other Place of Worship

Is each of the following a major factor, a minor factor or not a factor in why you attend church or a place of worship?

	<b>Major factor</b>	<b>Minor factor</b>	<b>Not a factor</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Sermons or talks that teach you more about scripture	76	16	8
Sermons or lectures that help you connect religion to your own life	75	16	8
Spiritual programs geared toward children and teenagers	64	21	15
Lots of community outreach and volunteer opportunities	59	27	13
Dynamic religious leaders who are interesting and inspiring	54	28	17
Social activities that allow you to get to know people in your community	49	36	14
A good choir, praise band, cantors or other spiritual music	38	36	25

Based on adults who attend church, synagogue or mosque monthly or more often. % No opinion not shown

GALLUP, MARCH 9-29, 2017

Now, this chart is helpful but only to a point

The problem with ANY survey as such is that it happens with the backdrop of consumerism.

The truth is, some people go to church as consumers i.e. consuming whatever the church can offer on their menu of religious goods and services – things like enjoying the worship through singing, consolation through sermon, togetherness with church mates, getting free foods & drinks etc.

Remember what Consumerism is, “a self-focused drive to get as much as I can with the least amount of effort”...that, for many people, is what their church attendance has become...consumables.

And all that has a HUGE impact – for don't forget what Consumerism can do - “consumerism coercively shifts the church away from its true call, from valuing giving to getting...it motivates spiritual leaders to provide goods and services” for people's consumption.

In other words, do you like the product and why?

Let me explain – if it is true that About 76 percent of respondents said “sermons or talks that teach you more about scripture” was a major factor in church attendance – then you would have to come to the conclusion that if that was happening, our seats would be constantly full.

Right? Tremendous curiosity about the Bible across all sorts of believing/non-believing lines.

But tucked into the survey is the caveat - Almost as many people—75 percent—said “sermons or talks that help you connect religion to your own life” that was a major factor.

In other words, if it DOESN'T make a connection with real life, forget it – remember, for many people, sermons are consumables – you like them or you don't...and if you don't, if you feel that they are irrelevant or not applicable to your life, you are apt to either go where you do like them or find reasons not to hear sermons at all.

Do you see how consumerism makes an impact on these facts?

So, you got to be a bit suspicious about those reasons being the REAL or even sufficient or GOOD reasons.

So, what are good reasons to for why you are here?

1. Start with the absolute right reason – the briefest reason – and at least the right biblical reason:

God has showered his creation with His unconditional love – we are made by His own hand – we are his masterpiece (Ephesians 2:10) and because of that truth, you and I want to respond to that gift by praising Him, learning more about Him, and by surrounding myself with people who will encourage one another in our walk with Him.

Sounds good huh? If that's true for you, and I imagine it is at least in part, that's a great reason!

Reason 1 – response of worship (that is what our response is, acknowledgment that what we have in life, all of it, is a gift! God is WORTHY to be praised!

Worthy to be praised because of the gift of mercy, grace, forgiveness, breath, health, family, friends...list goes on and on.

In addition, we all have the opportunity to engage the Lord Jesus through what we call the “means of grace” – the Word of God, the Sacraments – we do that together!

2. Second reason you are here...has to do with a journey – because you realize in the depth of your gut somehow that how you are believing is not complete...and that you are on journey; you are not perfect and you need to be here so that God can remind you of that fact.

Friends – this is how it is:

We are journey through life...daily life...24 hours....we live, work, sleep, eat, do our jobs around the house...we discuss, we relax, we do our daily stuff and we do it day after day after day

The everyday reality of life is what we all share in common.

When we operate in this world we tacitly agree not to question its reality...because of course, it is reality

We just go about our daily work...we live in the dog eat dog world we do...with growing dis-ease and unhappiness and loneliness and stress

Yet overtime, the truly honest and reflective start to wonder, there has got to be MORE to life than anxiety, doing stuff, making money, etc.

Sooner or later every person comes face to face with a question – “is that all there is?”

Some refuse to go there or flippantly blow past that question in their pursuit to master reality or at least be the master of their OWN reality (which they will never do).

But most of us would intuitively say NO – there’s got to be more.

For most, if not all of us, we know that there’s got to be more because when we’re doing other activities – resting, dreaming, painting, making music, telling stories or simply playing, something inside of us comes alive.

I bet you don’t know this but Scientists are even telling us these days that there are inexplicable realities of human existence that are hard wired into our sense of being, that there is meaning beyond the mundane and daily existence that we all live.

Could it be that God has hard wired for a spiritual journey? I believe so!

That something inside of us, what Bible calls our spirit/heart betrays our narcissism and our belief in a “reality only” world.

Our spirit, our heart gives us another world to investigate, explore and to live in because there is more to life than just what we see on a daily existence level.

What is kind of amazing is that my guess is that most of our neighbors think that we go to church because we believe in something...and for many of us that is true...

I believe in things – you do too – say the Creed here in a minute – we believe things.

BUT what many of our neighbors DON’T know is that in our church gatherings, we stand on and rely most of the time on just the opposite – we adhere to and hold on to the fact that being together, praying, reading, singing, opening ourselves up to the Mystery of God’s presence and love **shapes what we believe.**

Participating in church **leads to believing;** practicing our faith **bolsters our faith;** the rituals of our faith **change what the world means and how we live in it.**

Our trust in Jesus creates new worlds and those worlds alter the everyday world.

Although we share everyday life with many people whose story is mostly based on fear, limitation and scarcity...Jesus reminds us that a person living fully in God has few fears.

To be in Christ means to experience a kind of freedom from the tyranny of our ego or other's egos.

To be in Christ means more fully becoming the children of God that we were created to be.

To be in Christ affirms our baby steps through life as a journey of discovery of more and more of who God is and can be in this life – providing us each and together with a sense of security in insecure times...giving us a sense of freedom that can't be given to us by any other means but Jesus.

What are we doing in worship? We are sorting through our mixed motives and mysterious desires.

We are learning God's story again.

We admit we are on a journey together and that we need each other, we need community in order to experience the world the way that God created it to be experienced.

We are returning home so that we can go with power into the everyday world.

*So, why are we here – responding to the grace of God – exploring the journey into another world...and finally...*

3 – We go to church because it is our CHOICE – we are proactively shaping our lives by acting on a God-sized vision of who God is creating us to be.

Let me unpack that for you – OK? Very significant.

When I was going through some hard times – story of *Rapid Relief for Emotional Distress*.

Everyone wants quick and easy answers – well, healing isn't like that – for some, healing is a miraculous moment – for most of us, it is a desperate journey of trusting the Lord with who He is making us to be every single moment of every single day.

The book – ACT strategy – Awareness, Create a vision, Take Action on that vision.

Every week at church – that's exactly what we do.

Biblically – our confession is our awareness – we are broken – need healing – need love – need Jesus.

Vision – given to us by God – love God, love others, live like Jesus – we make life complicated, Jesus doesn't – vision of grace – forgiveness offered freely for the receiving – we do that regularly.

But then ... we challenge each other, God empowers us through His Spirit to act on that vision.

You see friends, faith is a gift given to us by the Holy Spirit so that we can take steps of belief – Peter and walking on water – we take our steps out of the boat.

Friends because it is an act of the will to believe – it is an act of the will to attend church so that we can continue to have that faith explored, nurtured, strengthened.

We believe - Faith is a gift – but if it is a gift, then why aren't ALL people getting it and responding to it?

If WE are drawn to Jesus by the Holy Spirit, why isn't everybody? You ever ask yourself that?

Well, I believe it has to do with something called, Intellectual ascent. The gift of God (faith) isn't at fault – the gift is rather rejected for other reasoning.

Many people don't feel like they can belong to or even attend church because they don't intellectually believe everything that Christians are said to believe – in other words, because they can't intellectually ascend to Christian ideas they can't be or shouldn't be part of Christian community.

Add to that the perception that many Christians and even churches are anti-intellectual - they won't let you think, they can't let you debate or question your faith – all this cements what many people actually believe that the church is full of weak-kneed, intellectually inferior or inept people .

Unfortunately, friends, if that is true – then ALL churches are cults – cults are defined as those movements where you are not allowed to question, and because of that you are able to manipulated because of that – fear – this is how you do this or that, you are out.

Community – being in a faith community - has to do with Belonging.

Does Belonging demand absolute adherence? Nope, not if you look at the gospels.

The closest friends that Jesus had were the most doubtful, fallen, confused bunch of dudes that you could ever imagine...absolute adherence is not the gospel way.

Faith working itself out in love – faith and action – taking steps out of the boat side by side – sinking and being raised again...growing in our trust of Jesus with each other...learning His will, His truth and His ways...that's what we do.

Faith – there is a cognitive aspect to it but it is not PURELY or dependent upon the intellect.

That is why we have things we call the Sacraments – the mysteries of God pull us into another reality.

Jesus is present? How...well, we really don't know...but we know by virtue of His promises that He is...because of that, we know he is calling us, just as he did with Peter, to take steps together out of the boat and into the swirling seas of life – depending on nothing more than His presence and promises.

4 – Here's where I want to end – because I don't want you to EVER DOUBT what I am all about when it comes to why I do what I do

I want to do life in Jesus with people.

I want to do what I just have been talking about – taking steps of faith, responding to God’s amazing grace and love.

And I especially want to act on that last bunch of stuff I just said - I want to create with you a space for ALL people to contemplate God and their lives, to explore the love of God and the need they have for love in their hearts, to consider God and their pain in a space of freedom and acceptance and then to journey together to encourage others to do the same.

We need to be building rooms for people to explore the journey of faith.

We need to be building a faith community where we give people space to NOT be certain but to figure things out in the presence and grace of Jesus Christ and in the company of the Holy Spirit.

Telling the old, old story – of Jesus and His love.

To confront any Christian construct that tends toward exclusivity and tribalism.

And to join Jesus in loving, encouraging and cheering each other on into full meaning in life and full participation in the mission that God has given us.

Build a community that is Non-judgmental – not fault-finding – but living out God’s gracious Generosity of love.

You may not be able to fully articulate it – but I know why you are here!

Yeah, you could download a sermon, listen to podcast, get together with people and share life.

But you know, deep in your heart that of which the spirit of God has been convincing you - true living and true meaning and true belonging is not passive

True belonging isn’t about fitting in or selling out but rather it is a practice that is open, vulnerable, at times uncomfortable, where you are learning how to be present with Jesus and other people.

Church attendance isn’t about cowardliness – it is rather a HUGE act of courage.

Courage – where you are choosing what is right and meaningful over what is easy or convenient or that which only brings pleasure to your senses.

You want to be in a place regularly and enthusiastically where you are a partner in creating safe spaces for people to explore abundant life in Jesus and to do life together in Jesus.

That’s why I pray you are here...that’s why I pray we will be encouragers of people to join our journey – not to convert them, that’s Jesus’ job – but to walk with them in discovering more and more of the life that God created and intends for us to experience.