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Thoughts on the Importance of Attending Church
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Two thousand years ago, the Apostle Paul's letter to the Hebrews gave voice to a lament that some Christians, perhaps fearing persecution at Roman hands, had neglected gathering for worship as was the custom of both Jews and Christians. Hebrews 10:24-25 reads:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. *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.

It was this scripture C.S. Lewis had in mind when he wrote, “the New Testament knows nothing of solitary religion. We are forbidden to neglect the assembling of ourselves together. Christianity is already institutional (communal as opposed individualistic) in the earliest of its documents. The Church is the Bride of Christ. We are members of one another.”¹

Today, many Christians have given up consistent attendance of worship services. This tendency is particularly pronounced among young adults. The reasons are numerous and varied. Among the complaints: the worship service is boring; it is impossible to find a church with both a style of worship and theology that is acceptable, and our lives are just too busy. There are surely more reasons for skipping church but these few will suffice to provide helpful and hopeful comment.

Perhaps most importantly in our modern entertainment culture, Christians must recognize that the purpose of worship is not entertainment. It is true that before the invention of electronic entertainment devices, Sunday services included a social aspect that may be broadly described as entertainment. Human beings have always sought contact with other human beings; and for the past two millennia, a logical place for that interaction was church. As other forms of entertainment became available in the twentieth century, church attendance declined. Most churches recognized this new form of competition and have attempted to counter it in many ways. None of these responses have completely overcome the problem. Thus it is absolutely essential that churches teach their congregants that while worship services may be entertaining, their purpose is not entertainment. The purpose of a worship service is worship; and worship requires some effort and some knowledge on the part of the worshipper. Moreover, worshipping the Living God on a regular basis with other Christians is scripturally mandated as noted above. We are not to think we have a choice. In short, whether or not worship is boring ought not be part of the Christian's thought process regarding church attendance.

The style of worship service has been a major stumbling block for many Christians. A multitude of Christians have quit attending church because the style of the worship service changed in their church; and an equal, perhaps even greater number, quit

attending church because the style of worship did not change! If one may permit an historian's momentary reflection, two thousand years of church history and study of both Old and New Testaments reveal that Jews and Christians have worshipped God in beauty and truth in countless different ways. As Christians we truly are free to create a worship service that encourages our deepest praise of God. Many churches offer different styles of worship. May I suggest Christians should attend the service that allows them to worship most effectively. If the church you try to attend, but usually fail, does not meet that need, don't be lazy. Most of us live close to a multitude of churches each with a different style of worship. Go find one. Again, Christians are not given the option of just staying home.

Theology, of course, matters. The Church of Jesus Christ is a church that teaches and preaches his divine nature as the Son of God; eternal life by his grace which we obtain through faith and repentance; and living out the Christian faith in a positive contribution to the church and community. Finding a church that teaches these points of theology, and features a style of worship that inspires faith, is not too hard for most of us. Keep in mind that there is no perfect church. If one insists on worshipping with only perfect Christians and in a perfect manner, one will worship alone, or more likely, not at all. It may be helpful to recall that through thousands of years of human history most people, living in rural areas as farmers or farm workers, had to travel significant distances with great effort to worship with brothers and sisters in Christ on a Sunday morning. If you find the right church is a thirty minute drive from home that is nothing new. I would praise God if, on any given Sunday morning, the roads were clogged with cars of Christians headed for church. Sadly, we all know this is not the world we live in.

Some Christians excuse missing church on the grounds that their lives are just too busy. If this is truly the case, then their lives are indeed too busy and some reallocation of our most precious asset – time – is in order. One cannot be “too busy” to attend to the things of God, to do as the Lord has directed. If one works on a Sunday (my excuse for many years) then find a church with alternative day or time services. If that is not possible, a solid Bible study that meets consistently would also suffice. The point is to worship, serve one's fellow Christians, and have fellowship with them. In this way all are edified (taught in the faith) and inspired.

Why does the Lord require worship? Is this not unseemly vanity on his part? Briefly, worshipping the Living God, the Maker of us all and the Sustainer of the universe, helps us keep a proper perspective of our place in the universe – we are important but not central. In other words, it helps us avoid becoming self-centered, prideful, which is the worst of sins. Secondly, worshipping with others is a testimony to the importance of the Church of Jesus Christ to a world that does not know him. Imagine if all Christians had worshipped alone through the centuries. There would be no churches, no church buildings, no obvious manifestation to the world that there is a God and that He cares about human beings. Indeed, if Christians had adopted this methodology, there would probably be no Christianity. But this was not God's plan, and Christians throughout the centuries have been obedient in gathering together on a weekly basis. These gatherings, and the subsequent building of houses of worship, whether they were modest wooden

buildings, or magnificent stone cathedrals, were themselves witness to the power and truth of God.

One of the great saints of the Church, Benedict of Nursia, isolated himself in the wilderness in order to discover God. When he went into the wilderness he did not think of coming out. But after three years of this John the Baptist type of contemplation, Benedict realized that isolation, while it had its purpose, had to be set aside so that he could serve mankind, preach the gospel, and minister to the poor. In short, he had work to do for God amongst God's people.² In the same way, all Christians are called to contribute in some way to God's kingdom on earth. We begin this work by simply attending church.

Then too, we may not be aware that our presence in church bolsters our faith in powerful but often subtle ways. Our spirits are moved toward God in the music, our souls moved toward him in the readings of Scripture, our minds directed His way in the sermon. The presence of our brothers and sisters magnifies our confidence – we are not alone. In my particular church, I am always impressed by the number of men in the congregation. The idea that men don't go to church is proven a lie in the church I attend.

One more thought from C.S. Lewis. In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis advises Christians both young and old, and new and long-time believers, to hold the essential beliefs of Christianity consciously in their thoughts on a daily basis. How best to do this he asks? By "daily prayers, religious reading" (Bible and other Christian literature), and, of course, going to church. Lewis worries that those who do not do these things will most likely drift away from the Christian faith.³

I do not want anyone to think I have perfect church attendance. Moreover, if one decides to make a better effort to attend church, don't hold yourself to the "every Sunday" standard right away. Few Christians go to church every Sunday. Miss a Sunday thinking you must go every Sunday and the evil one (yes, there is a Satan) will no doubt ridicule your hypocrisy, and persuade you that in this one case it is better to avoid hypocrisy and not go to church at all. He is very clever; and he has had a much practice. Finally, pray to find the right church and the discipline to attend it.

I hope and pray that these thoughts on church attendance are helpful. Much more could be written, and many others have written books on the topic. I have kept my contribution short in the hope that this essay is more easily read and understood. May God Bless your reading of it.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Harper One, 2001), 158.

² Carmen Butcher, *A Life of St. Benedict: Man of Blessings* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006), 59-67.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Westwood, New Jersey: Barbour & Company, 1952), 119, 120.