

WHY BOTHER WITH CHURCH?

Hebrews 10:19-25

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(Text only, Service cancelled due to COVID-19 Epidemic)

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During these last 2 + months that we have been staying home to “flatten the curve” of this terrible COVID-19 Epidemic, I know people are saying “Why bother with Church?” After all, the church is the people, not the building. We have watched more sermons on YouTube, Facebook, and T.V. than we would ever listened to while attending church. You may have even read every one of my weekly sermons and got more information than listening inside the church on Sunday mornings. All of that may be true but the letter to the Hebrews has some different advice.

I have a story for you. Two fellows are out fishing on a Sunday morning. As they sit quietly in their boat in the middle of the lake, in the distance the sound of church bells can be heard. One fellow says to the other, "I feel a little bit guilty about being out here instead of being in church, don't you?"

His friend replied, "Naw, I don't feel guilty. My wife wasn't feeling well this morning, so I wouldn't have been able to go to church anyway."

Another story. A young lad was late getting to worship. After the service the pastor greeted him and inquired as to why he had been late. With little hesitation the boy said that he was going to go fishing until his dad told him no. Although disappointed that the boy would even consider going fishing instead of coming to church, the minister affirmed the father's wise choice. Then he asked, "Where's dad?"

The lad answered quickly, "He said there wasn't enough bait for both of us to go fishing so he went alone."

If absence makes the heart grow fonder, some people must dearly LOVE their church.

"And what denomination are you?"

"I'm a Seventh Day ABSENTIST!"

What is the big deal about coming to church from week to week anyway? It was not all that long ago that the former Minnesota's Governor Jesse Ventura declared "Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers." Why bother with church? There are lots of reasons to stay away. Church is not very entertaining; preachers can be pretty boring; the music is not exactly Hit Parade; it takes time out of one of the few chances during the week when folks can just sit back and relax; there is every likelihood that you will be asked to take on some chore if you show up; and worst of all, they figure you should actually pay money for the privilege. The NERVE of an outfit like that! "I ain't coming if I have to wear a mask!"

A mother once asked her young son what was the highest number he had ever counted to. He replied, "537." She asked, "Why did you stop there?" He replied, "Church was over." Hmmm.

Some people do not bother with church because they think they are too good for it. They look at the folks who DO come from week to week and see petty, back-biting gossips; they see business people who worship every Sunday but whose ethics on Monday are no different from those who never darken the door; they read and hear of the excesses of the televangelists. They put all this together and then claim that the church is just a bunch of hypocrites - and they do not want to be accused of being the same thing by joining in with them - Thank you!

At the other end of the spectrum are those who think they are not good ENOUGH for the church. They have gotten the message that unless they meet a certain social standard, unless they wear certain kinds of clothes, unless they drive certain kinds of cars, unless they live in a certain kind of home, unless they make a certain amount of money, we do not want them. If they have ever had any kind of marital difficulties or problems with the

law, we would prefer they stay away. And for that matter, if they are ALREADY a member of the fellowship and some problem comes to light, we would just as soon throw them out. It has been said, "The church is the only organization in history that shoots its wounded." Churches sometimes can be exceedingly cold and that is sad.

Jesse Ventura's challenge comes thundering once more: "Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers." Why SHOULD someone bother with church? I will grant the church is NOT all that it ought to be. But it is tremendously MORE than any other organization has ever been.

Millions of lives have been changed by the message preached and taught in the church through the years. People have been challenged to reach new heights in their relationships to both God and neighbor. Christian missionaries have gone to the far reaches of the globe sharing the gospel as they healed the sick, taught people how to read and write, and brought new and better tools for the improvement of life.

In our own nation, how many great institutions of learning were founded by the church? How many hospitals bear names like "Good Samaritan," "Baptist," "Methodist," "Presbyterian?" How many day care centers, soup kitchens, and retirement homes are operated by churches? How many millions have been raised for disaster relief? How many hours of private counseling have been sought? To whom do people finally come when they realize the bankruptcy of their lives before a holy and righteous God? There is no question that more could have been and can be done, that there have been occasional horrible aberrations but no other organization, anywhere, at anytime, has done NEARLY as much as the church!

A Gallup poll sometime back found four things concerning people who are highly committed to a church:

1. First, they are far more satisfied with life than most - 68% rated themselves as very happy.

2. Second, their family life was stronger - the divorce rate was noticeably lower than the national average.
3. Third, the highly committed group tends to be far more tolerant of people of other races and religions than the general population.
4. And fourth, they are far more involved in working with the community than the uncommitted or nominally committed group; 46% were working with the poor, the homeless, the elderly, or those who were in some way rejected by society.

Add to all that the fact that hundreds of studies published in mainstream medical journals show that people who attend religious services, who pray and read scriptures:

- live longer;
- are less prone to depression, suicide, alcoholism and other addictions;
- have lower rates of cancer, heart disease and other major illnesses;
- recover better from sickness or surgery;
- and cope better with chronic illness.

Church is quite literally GOOD for you!

But there is an even MORE important reason to bother with church: God's Word tells us to. Here is what our lesson says again:

“Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

I wish the translators had chosen some other word than "provoke" - there is already enough of the wrong kind of provocation in churches. A better choice might be "to spur one another on...to love and good deeds." We gather together to remind each other what God has done for us in Christ; we can have our attention called to the things that need doing in our world, things in which we can make a difference; we can challenge ourselves to make the improvements in our own lives that we know would be pleasing to

God. "There is no substitute for living around other Christians. The primary way of learning to be disciples is by being in contact with others who are disciples."

To those who complain about the hypocrites in the church, we say IT IS TRUE! There ARE hypocrites...along with all sorts of other miserable sinners. But then, that IS why we go to church - because we KNOW we need help. We need to be spurred on. Jesus said, "I came NOT to call the righteous but sinners." The church is not a collection of saints.; Saints-in-the-making, perhaps, but not yet. We need the spurs.

We are not to "neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some." True Christian worship is the gathering of the faithful to re-enact and call to mind the great truths of the gospel; it is a hearing again of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ; it is an opportunity for affirming our commitment to him PUBLICLY with all that we have and all that we are. It shows the world whose side we are on! THAT is worship.

Regardless of what some might claim, worship does not happen in a fishing boat or on a golf course. No question that the beauty of creation lends itself to reverie...but, as a practical matter, fishermen are not praising God when the big one gets away; golfers are not offering any hallelujahs when they take triple bogey on a hole. To say that any real worship goes on out there is just not true. Believe me, I know...and I could quote you the language to prove it...but I won't.

Scripture says we can use our weekly gathering together for "encouraging one another." Life can be tough. There are times when we feel like giving up. We NEED the fellowship of caring people to get us through difficult moments. What Jesse said about "strength in numbers" is true.

In years past, people turned to the church for that fellowship, but today, less and less are doing so. Despite the fact that polls consistently show that Americans are exceedingly religious (some 95% claiming a belief in God), recent statistics on the number of un-churched people in this nation make us the fifth largest mission field in the world. Folks

still need help but they are not looking for it in the church.

This is no trivial matter. In my files I have a survey of 1,093 high school seniors taken ten years ago by an international public relations corporation which concerned how far these youngsters would stretch ethical standards to get ahead in the business world.

- When asked if they would be willing to face six months probation on an illegal deal in which they made \$10-million, 59% responded "Definitely yes" or "maybe;"
- 36% would plagiarize to pass a certification test;
- 67% said they would inflate their business expense reports;
- 50% of the students said they would exaggerate on an insurance damage report;
- 66% said they would lie to achieve a business objective.

That was ten years ago. What do you think the results would be today? If the mainline church, the church that provided the moral compass for this nation during our first 200 years, continues to decline as it has over the past generation, who will shape our nation's values as we move into the future? "Do not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some..."

Finally, come together...bother with church...because "the Day [is] approaching." For more than 2,000 years the church has been waiting for the Lord's return. In every generation since his ascension, many have been convinced that the last days are either here now or just around the corner, and ours is no exception. But, when you think about it, whether the second coming is near or not, our meeting with Christ IS. Our faith is firm that when a Christian dies, we go to be with our Lord. That means the time is short under any circumstance. And that means we need preparation...the preparation we get in meeting together from week to week.

Two little boys were walking down the street and turned in the driveway toward one lad's home. On the porch was the boy's grandmother - it was a nice day, and she was sitting in a rocking chair reading the Bible. The one lad asked the other, "What's your grandmother doing?"

The boy responded, "I think she's cramming for finals."

I realize that I have been preaching to the converted this morning; after all, YOU ARE READING THIS AND YOU WILL RETURN when it is safe from this Epidemic. But it will be you and you and you and you who will help to get friends and family to worship from week to week - people come to church because they are INVITED and because they feel WELCOME! That will be up to you.

Perhaps, as an added incentive, we can do what one church is purported to have done and offer a "No Excuse Sunday." on "No Excuse Sunday,"

- We can have cots in the back of the church for those who say, "Sunday is the only day I can sleep in."
- We can have steel helmets for the congregation to relieve the fears of those who say, "The roof would cave in if I ever went to church."
- We might provide blankets for those who say "The church is too cold," and fans for those who say it is "too hot."
- We can make score cards available for those who wish to list names of all hypocrites present.
- We could provide TV dinners for those who cannot get to church and cook at the same time.
- We will set aside one section with trees and grass for those who like to find God in nature, and have a putting green in the Narthex for those who cannot imagine Sunday without golf.
- We will let folks know that some relatives will be in attendance for those who like to go visiting on Sunday.

- Finally, we can decorate the sanctuary with both poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who have never seen the church without them.

History offers no parallel to the church. There is no question that what goes on in parliaments and legislatures, in Congress halls and Senate chambers, is always of importance to humanity. But when the world is out of joint, AS IT IS NOW, when people's minds are disordered and their hearts are failing them for fear, then the thing of supreme importance is the living church, with all of her sanctuaries of worship and her avenues of service, where men and women come to have their faith strengthened, their thoughts clarified, their ideas uplifted, their convictions born, and their characters created. You see the church has introduced the world to a vision of perfection. The church has introduced the world to Jesus Christ.

Over 170 years ago, the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville came to these shores to study this fledgling democracy. He studied the cities and towns, factories and farms, rivers and harbors. He wrote, "I sought for the greatness and genius of America in [all these places, but] it was not there. Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness, did I understand the secret of her genius and power."

Why bother with church? There are lots of reasons to stay away. But they pale in comparison to the reasons we have to come. It is the LORD'S church, the Lord's WORK, it is the Lord's WORD that calls us to fellowship. Our future...as individuals, as a nation, as a world...depends on it. And where will you be on Sunday mornings when it is safe to meet again? In church, I pray: Amen!

Let us Pray: Holy God, You have protected us from the Epidemic, we have continued to be your disciples, but we need to come together in Worship. Bless our preparations that all will be healthy and responsible. Bring us together for it is in you that we trust. Amen!