

Why Church Attendance Matters
September 21, 2014
Hebrews 10:19-25

Introduction – Is Regular Church Attendance That Important?

I don't know what Sunday mornings were like for you when you grew up as a kid. For our family, it was a time of high drama. It was guaranteed that one of us five kids was gonna get spanked. Every week. The worst spanking I ever got was on a Sunday morning. Thin church slacks just don't absorb as well as blue jeans! I didn't mind going to church so much. In fact, I always liked it. But my older brother, Dave, always felt this way:



And little wonder. They always made him dress like this:



As elementary-aged kids, we were in church every Sunday for every service. (Play Stuart Hamblen's "Don't Send Those Kids to Sunday School.")

But such families are a rarity these days. Across the country and across the Christian spectrum, church attendance is in decline. It has been for many years. The competition with sports, visiting relatives and the over-extended busyness of most families has increasingly bumped Sunday morning church attendance down the list of priorities. Some pollsters have recorded that as much as 40% of American families attend church on Sundays, but others who track those kinds of statistics say that number is highly inflated. People tend to respond to surveys according to what they believe they should be doing rather than what they actually do. The number of people who attend church on Sunday in America is probably closer to 20%. But that statistic, as sad as it is, doesn't answer the question of how often a person attends church. I read somewhere (but can't recall where) that people who attend twice a month consider themselves very committed to attending church.

What's the big deal? Is regular church attendance really that important? Is this message just for my own benefit in order to prop up church attendance up so that I can have job security? Am I, out of my own insecurities, laying a guilt trip on you with this message? (I ask those questions to purge my own motivations.) I don't think so. The church and our culture are in conflict and we need to face the issues squarely according to God's Word and expectations.

Text – Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Prayer

Since – Then

Hebrews is a wonderfully rich book whose main theme is the superiority of Christ over the Old Hebrew Covenant. The writer makes clear that Jesus has replaced the old sacrificial system of

the Old Testament which could never fully atone for our sin. It was merely a shadow, pointing the way to Christ who has completed the work of salvation for us. That is the context for our passage this morning.

In logic and in mathematics, we are often confronted with “if-then” statements. The Book of Hebrews, however, does not speak in ambiguities, but rather in things that are made sure by faith. There are no “if-then” statements in Hebrews; only “since-then” statements. Our passage under consideration has two assertions of truth leading to three conclusions.

First, **“we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh”** (19-20).

We do not have to come timidly to God because we do not come on the basis of our own righteousness. We come to the Father because Jesus has opened the door. The language and image here is profound. We are not coming into the courtroom of an austere king to present our request. The holy of holies is the place of intimate engagement with God, who is holy and transcendent beyond our imagination. An approach to such a God should be naturally intimidating, to say the least! But the Father invites us into the most intimate of engagement with him – and more than that – we can come with confidence! Who has an open door to come into the Oval Office at any time to speak with the President of the United States? Such a privilege is nearly beyond our comprehension. Realistically, none of us could ever hope to obtain such an honor. But our access to Almighty God is infinitely greater than an open door to the President of the United States.

Secondly, **“we have a great priest over the house of God”** (21). Only one man in the Old Testament – the high priest - could approach God in the holy of holies, and then he could only do it one day out of the year. Anyone else or at any other time would mean certain death. But now, you and I don’t need a human priest to have direct access to God. Jesus is our great high priest and we have direct access to God the Father because of our faith and trust in him. You don’t need an appointment. You don’t have to go through a receptionist. You don’t have to be announced. If you have placed your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, you have direct access to God the Father at any time.

These two statements, that we can come boldly into the Father's presence and that Jesus Christ is our way of access are profound and worthy of deep consideration. To the Jews who lived under the old sacrificial system for thousands of years, such concepts were mind-blowing. They lead to three important conclusions.

First, **“let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water”** (22). This is profound! It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter how guilty you feel. You have an open door and an open invitation to come with confidence before the Father because of what Christ has done for you. Time doesn't allow us to unpack all that is here. But Christ's sacrifice covers all our sin and the reference to water obviously refers to the important action and reality of baptism of which we speak of every time someone is baptized here.

Second, **“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful”** (23). The Book of Hebrews was written during a time where there were many false teachers who would try to dissuade new Christians from their faith. For Jewish believers, it would take strong faith, perseverance and courage to hold to their new beliefs. The author of the book is encouraging them to persevere in the face of doubts arising from the way that they had always worshipped as Jews. Read the verses following this passage and you will understand the urgency of holding fast to the faith.

Finally, because of the incredible grace of direct access to God, the author of the book encourages the believers to **“consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near”** (25). This third encouragement is related to the second of “holding fast their confession.” In the New Testament there were no lone rangers. They needed each other to stay the course. I love the way that Eugene Peterson, author of *The Message* translates the first part of this verse: “Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out.” Hmm. That almost sounds like fun! Let's use our imagination to figure out how we can encourage and help each other! And, of course, the logical conclusion is that we

can't encourage each other unless we meet together. Evidently, some of the early believers had been avoiding worship and the author is warning them, especially in light of the urgency of Christ's immanent return.

The Regular Pattern of the Early Church

The New Testament and church history shows a quick evolution to weekly worship gatherings within the first hundred years. Right after Passover, the Book of Acts describes the church as meeting daily:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...and day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts...

Acts 2:42, 46

That, of course, is a description of the church in Jerusalem. As the gospel spread out to the further reaches of the Roman Empire, the implication that we find in the New Testament epistles is that they gathered once a week, on Sunday, the first day of the week. By the time we get to the second century, we know through reliable historical sources that the church had established a regular pattern of worshipping weekly on Sunday. That pattern has held true now for over 2,000 years.

So what are the biblical reasons for going to church on a regular basis? I can give you at least seven, and each one is important.

1. It is where we worship God together. We've been over this territory before. A few months ago, popular Christian author, Donald Miller, the author of *Blue Like Jazz*, wrote that he doesn't attend church very often because he doesn't connect with God through singing and he isn't an auditory learner, so sermons (lectures, he calls them) bore him. Even worse, he claimed that many well-known Christian leaders who aren't pastors don't attend church regularly either. How incredibly sad! There is way too much to say about his statements here, but it is quite disturbing that Miller, along with many other influential Christian leaders just can't seem to make time in the week to attend corporate worship. In corporate worship we encounter God together, and even if we are as self-absorbed as Donald Miller, worship is where we "do God's story together." We sing

God's praises and the story salvation in our songs. We declare it in the reading and preaching of the Word. We claim his Lordship over all things as we pray his kingdom and will be done "on earth as it is in heaven." Ultimately, we participate in God's redemptive story at the Lord's Table and through baptism. Corporate worship is not just an obligatory habit that nice Christian people do on a Sunday morning. No. It is an indispensable ingredient in the discipleship process for those who follow Jesus.

2. Second, it is with the gathered local church that we discover and use the spiritual gifts that God has given to us. Scripture tells us that every believer has a spiritual gift and we are responsible to use them, as the Bible says, "for the building up of one another."
3. Third, we are encouraged in our discipleship journey by each other. That is exactly what this text is telling us to do – to use our creativity to stimulate each other to love and good deeds!
4. Fourth, where else can we bring our deep burdens and have people pray for us? Sure, you can call it in to a ministry and be put on a prayer list. But that can't compare with brothers and sisters laying hands on you, weeping with you and praying for your burdens. The gathered church is where we lend our efforts together in prayer. We all have the invitation to come directly to God in prayer, but the greatest power is found when God's people pray together. *Church is where we do life together on the deepest level.* You can't get that anywhere else but with the gathered church.
5. Fifth, when we worship on Sunday, we are living Christ's resurrection story. Many of you know that the prescribed day for Jewish worship was Saturday. But the church worshipped on Sunday because it was the day on which Jesus rose from the dead. (I love this!) In fact, the early church sometimes called Sunday "the Eighth Day" because Resurrection Sunday was the first day of the New Creation. I know there are many churches that have services on other days besides Sundays. But when we worship on the first day of the week – the day of the Resurrection – we are actively putting ourselves into Christ's renewing Story.
6. A sixth reason for attending church regularly is that it provides accountability. The same Book of Hebrews encourages us, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Hebrews

13:17). I suspect you're like me. I don't like accountability. I like to call my own shots. But I also know that, left to my own devices, I'm going to mess up big time. Think about it. What would your life be like if you weren't accountable to anyone? We're all prone to wander. Why do we resist, then, accountability in spiritual matters? Without it, there will be no spiritual growth. Period. Being connected to the church through regular attendance is where you will find it.

7. This is not an exhaustive list. I suspect you can find other biblical reasons to worship regularly on Sunday in church. But finally, for this list, coming together each Sunday is simply a matter of obedience. Regular worship and fellowship is the prescription and treatment for what ails us as sinners. Modern medicine is a wonderful thing. If you have a chronic and life-threatening condition, in many cases, there are medications that will address your problem and provide a pathway to good health and a long life. Say, for example, a person, through no fault of their own is bi-polar manic depressant. There is medication available to stabilize such a person in order to lead a normal life. But if the medication isn't taken regularly, the patient will certainly experience an episode that is destructive and disturbing to him and to those who love him. In a sense, all believers are bi-polar. We have Christ living inside us through the Holy Spirit, but we are also enticed by our fleshly desires as well. The discipline of regular church attendance is the biblical prescription to keep us healthy and persevering in our spiritual journey.

I like the way Dave Olson, Director of Church Planting for the Evangelical Covenant Church put it:

"Christ spoke the words of life, and a church service is the most common place that people hear those words. When fewer people attend church, fewer people hear the words of life. Fewer people hear the gospel for the first time. Fewer take the sacraments. Fewer children hear of God's love for them. Fewer teenagers find a listening ear. Fewer broken lives are put back together. It's a matter that should concern all Christians."¹

What is Your Intention?

¹ < <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/april/32.85.html> > September 17, 2014.

What is that you want in this life? Do you really want to follow Jesus and be his disciple? Jesus said that on Judgment Day there will be many who thought they were his followers but weren't. Let's not kid ourselves. There is a cost to following Jesus. He said, "Take up your cross and follow me." Being a Christian is not a matter of convenience; it is a matter of commitment. Do you want to follow Jesus? That means you'll be his disciple and you'll be stretched and growing spiritually. Don't be deceived. If you want to harvest beans you don't plant corn. If you want a certain outcome, you have to put in the proper ingredients. If you want to grow spiritually, you have to be in church on a regular basis, not just when it is convenient.

I'm obviously not a wonderful specimen of a middle-aged man. I don't work out. I really would like to feel better and lose about thirty pounds. But I don't discipline my eating habits. I have a treadmill at home that hasn't been used in nearly a year. I'm not disciplined so it's not surprising that I'm not where I'd really like to be. It's the same way with spiritual things. If you want to be spiritually healthy – you know, feel really alive (and those of you who do exercise know what I mean) then you've got to engage in spiritual discipline. Going to church on a regular basis is the most basic of spiritual disciplines. Let me put it plainly: you can't be a growing Christian if you are only here half the time. It's not what you say you want to do but what you actually do that makes a difference in your life.

Parents, let me just say a word to you. I hope you'll hear me. It's one of the most important things that I'll ever say to you. My family isn't perfect. Each of my siblings wrestle with life, including having their own significant spiritual struggles. But I'm very grateful for the discipline of regular church attendance that my parents instilled in me. Even with all our personal issues, I can say with certainty that all of my four siblings know Christ and their faith is central to the make-up of their soul and the way that they approach life. The same is true of my two children, in large part, I believe, because they were required to attend church every Sunday. Even when I had an adult child living in my home, the expectation was that she would go to church. Didn't have to be my church. But the rule was, if you live under my roof, you will go to church. I learned that from my parents and I commend it to every parent of an older child. The stakes are high. What kind of heritage are you building into the lives of your children? When they get on their own, they will make their own decisions. If they view church attendance as an option of

convenience, I guarantee you: they will find other options for a Sunday morning when they are on their own. Is it really love in the long-term, when you give them the option to attend church as long as they live under your roof? I don't think so.

I know. I'm meddling. But I hope you will consider my encouragement. It is a voice of both negative and positive experience.

So what is the sum of all this? God is working here at First Baptist. If you want your life to be changed; if you consider yourself to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, do not make regular church attendance just another Sunday morning option. Put it at the top of your list of priorities. For some of you, it may mean making hard choices to cut something out of your life or rearranging your schedule. But it is your decisions and your actions that will determine the kind of person you will be. If you want to harvest spiritual growth and maturity, you will need to plant the discipline of regular church attendance.