

Title: “#7 – Believing is one thing, but why bother with church?”

Purpose: To consider whether church is optional for a Christian believer. To understand its place from what the NT says.

INTRODUCTION

Well good morning AND IT IS A GOOD MORNING!!

I wonder:

- **Q. ARE YOU EXCITED ABOUT CHURCH?**
- **Q. ARE YOU GLAD TO BE HERE THIS MORNING - I MEAN REALLY DELIGHTED TO BE ONCE AGAIN IN THE HOUSE OF GOD?**

Colin Smith

Today our question is: “Believing is one thing, but why bother with church?”

I want to kick off with a brief clip from someone who is UPBEAT about the Church and he is going to give us just a taster in regard to our issue. Just a taster.

***** PLAY VIDEO – Why is it important for me to go to church? Colin Smith*****

Some people – Church a chequered experience

Now for some people here today and for many people outside of this place - I would not be entirely off the mark if I said that SOME PEOPLE have had a rather CHEQUERED EXPERIENCE when it comes to the Church.

Perhaps you have heard the little ditty that goes like this:

“To dwell in love with **saints above**, why that will be **glory**.
To dwell below with **saints I know**, why that’s a **different story!**”

For me, when I think of the church, an old nursery rhyme comes to mind:

"There was a little girl who had a little curl right in the middle of her **forehead**.
And when she was good she was good and when she was bad she was **horrid!**"

The truth is: there are times when the Christian church is good, when the people that make them up are:

"Warm, caring, accepting, growing, changing, loving Jesus and importantly loving each other."

BUT – along with that, there are also times, **when people in churches can be truly HORRID**.

Demonstration

Many years ago there was a demonstration in which a lone student carried a banner which said:

"YES TO JESUS! NO TO CHURCH!"

and it is *not* too hard to understand what that student was trying to say.

Friedrich Nietzsche (an atheist philosopher), was once asked what made him so negative towards Christians - he replied "I would believe in their salvation **IF** they looked a little more like people who have been saved."

Annie Dillard (winner of the American literary Pulitzer prize) wrote about her own church experience (and I'm not for a moment suggesting that this is representative of the church everywhere **OR** the church in general):

"Week after week I was moved by the pitiableness of the bare linoleum-floored sacristy which no flowers could cheer or soften, by the terrible singing I so loved, by the fatigued Bible readings, the lagging emptiness and dilution of the liturgy, the horrifying vacuity of the sermon, and by the fog of dreary senselessness pervading the whole, which existed alongside, and probably caused, the wonder of the fact that we came; we returned; we showed up; week after week, we went through it."

CS Lewis, reflecting back after his conversion (first to belief in God and then 2 years later to full belief in Christianity) says this:

"When I first became a Christian, about fourteen years ago, I thought that I could do it on my own, by retiring to my rooms and reading theology, and I wouldn't go to the churches and Gospel Halls;

... I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be **fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music**. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth-rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize that you aren't fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit."

What the Bible says about the Church

Despite all the bad press that has gone out in relation to the Church of Jesus Christ - whatever the practical plusses and minuses, at the end of the day, **what really matters is what the Bible and especially the NT has to say.**

My feeling is that:

the simple attitude expressed in this saying, is the approach we should adopt:

"The Bible says it;

I believe it;

& that settles it!"

So thus far, we are aware that for many, whether sub-consciously or otherwise, people ask the question:

Q Why bother with church?

And so what I want to do is to try and answer that by looking at another question:

#2 Why does church matter?

And for this, **what I want to do is point out TEN THINGS that our NT clearly tells us and which ought to mould &**

shape our thinking (and the first few points are just clearing a few obvious things out of the way):

- **FIRST – when we say Church – we do *not* mean a physical building.**

The NT, although the word church or churches comes up over 100 times, there is **no occasion where this word is referring to a PHYSICAL BUILDING.**

The truth is that it's just a bit unfortunate that we use the same word to describe the believing people of God as we do the physical premises in which they meet.

And this is, one of a number of reasons, why the true meaning of the church is not as immediately apparent as it ought to be.

So if I say to someone: "Q. Have you heard of Thatcham Community Church?" – they may well scratch their heads and say: "Isn't that the green building – you know the one with the iron roof near Waitrose."

- **SECOND – when we say church – we do not mean club.**

Many people feel that the church is just another organisation just like a golf club or a gym or perhaps the Rotary club.

William Temple (Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War) had this to say about the church: "The church is the only institution that exists primarily for the benefit of those who are not its members"

Yes it is true that the church at one level is an organisation – but that does not make it identical with any other club.

- **THIRD - Jesus is the Head of the Church - Ephesians 1 verse 22** "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be **head over everything for the church...**"

So clearly Jesus is the one who holds sway in the church, he is the undisputed leader of the church.

However that said, being the head means a lot more than just that and the verse that follows reveals that, it goes on: "...to be head over everything for the church, **which is his body**, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way."

You see here we come to understand that Christ and the Church are inseparable, they are con-joined and any attempt at separation is ALWAYS FATAL, it is Christ's heartbeat that resounds in everyone who is truly a member of Jesus' body (known as this thing called the Church).

If you want that put another way - Colossians 1 verse 18 puts it like this: "And he is **the head of the body, the church; ...**"

Ephesians 5 verse 23 says: "For the husband is the head of the wife as **Christ is the head of the church, his body**, of which he is Saviour."

To cut yourself off from the Church is to be cut off from the body, to be amputated. The amputated hand is not only cut off from the arm but also from the head, who is Christ. Just so we are clear - the amputated body part dies and in like fashion we should not be surprised at an equivalent outcome for the "amputated Christian".

- **FOURTH** - we need to realise that **God is very INTENTIONAL when it comes to His Church.**

So for example let us look at **Matthew 16**: here we read Jesus saying in **Verse 18** "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Q. How keen or passionate is Jesus in relation to this thing called the church?

Well in **Acts 20** we find the apostle Paul giving final words to the elders from the Ephesus church and there we read in **Verse 28**: "...Be shepherds of the church of God, which he (that is Christ) bought with his own blood."

Ephesians 5 Verse 25 puts it like this: "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her..."

- **FIFTH** - we should see that **Christ's love for the Church is a matter of very deep affection:**

In the book of Revelation, in pictorial and symbolic form we read of a wedding and a bride prepared for the lamb (who is Jesus, the one who was slain) **Revelation 19 verse 7** "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready."

Revelation 19 verse 9-10 "...Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God."

The apostle Paul also picks up this reality when he says in **2 Corinthians 11 verse 2** "I am jealous for you (so here he's talking of the believers in the church at Corinth) with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him."

- **SIXTH - the Church is seen as that place where God is glorified** - recall that great doxology right at the mid-point of the book of Ephesians (**Ephesians 3 verses 20-21**) "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, **to him be glory in the church** and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."
- **SEVENTH – the Church is that place where we are assured the very presence of Christ –** **Matthew 18 Verse 20** gives us that verse that you will often hear people quoting at church "For where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them."

Now, I know that the original context there in [Matthew 18](#), is *not* actually that of a church service, however that said, I do not think that we are therefore invalid to extend the principle.

So if you are a lone-ranger Christian, living in splendid isolation, then I do not think that God will in the same way honour you by way of his Holy Spirit presence.

- **EIGHT – the Church is spoken about in terms of a Spiritual building** (and just to be clear, *NOT* a physical building as we said earlier on).

A moment back we were talking of Christ's church under the image of a head and a body, something entirely organic and united, something entirely inseparable.

Well, I want to go on to another word picture that Scripture uses of the Church that conveys a similar unity.

There is a great passage there at the climax of [Chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus](#):

"Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him **the whole building** is joined together and rises to become **a holy temple** in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become **a dwelling** in which God lives by his Spirit."

We are being built together into a building. Jesus is the Chief Stone – the cornerstone and the Apostle Peter adds further to this word picture of the Church:

(1 Peter 2 verses 4&5) "As you come to him, the **living Stone**—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him— **you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house** to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

- **NINTH – the Church witnesses to the heavenly powers** – let me read you a couple of verses from [Ephesians chapter 3](#) which speak to this:

[\(Ephesians 3 verses 8-10\)](#) "Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. **His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms...**"

The church has an audience that it does not often factor into its thinking. Not only does the amazing community of rich & poor, black & white, young & old witness to the transforming power of the gospel of Redemption in Jesus, BUT ALSO this amazing sight is beheld by supernatural beings in the heavenly realms.

Q. Who exactly are these "authorities in the heavenly realms"? Well, I think that they are certainly angels in heaven, however, if Ephesians chapter 6 is anything to go by in all its talk of spiritual warfare, then I think there is no reason to necessarily exclude the demons who also watch on as well.

The church, from what these verses tell us – is surely “**THE GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH**” – it is “**THE ONLY TRULY COSMIC SHOW THERE IS**” – **Broadway** or **the West End** have nothing on God’s CHURCH!!

In his book the Screwtape letters, CS Lewis has the senior devil **Screwtape** advise junior devil **Wormwood** regarding a new convert he is trying to tempt (it is very revealing about how the church itself can be used as an effective barrier).

I should point out that he makes a distinction between what we call the UNIVERSAL CHURCH and the LOCAL CHURCH – so let me just explain that so things don’t get lost in translation

The **LOCAL CHURCH**, that is a visible group of people that meet in a specific geographic place on a regular basis – so we here, as The Community Church, would be one example of a local church. The church of Corinth (for which we have 2 letters in the NT written to it) would be another example.

The **UNIVERSAL CHURCH** on the other hand (sometimes called the **Invisible Church**) is that worldwide company of true believers covering all ages. The Universal Church comprises all those who are known by God and there is no mixture of believer and unbeliever.

Ok – now for the quote:

“One of our great allies at present is the Church itself (so that is the Local Church). Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the Church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners (so that is the Universal or Invisible Church). That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans.

All your patient sees is the half-finished, sham Gothic erection on the new building estate. When he goes inside, he sees the local grocer with rather an oily expression on his face bustling up to offer him one shiny little book containing a liturgy which neither of them understands, and one shabby little book containing corrupt texts of a number of religious lyrics, mostly bad, and in very small print.

When he gets to his pew and looks round him he sees just that selection of his neighbours whom he has hitherto avoided. You want to lean pretty heavily on those neighbours. Make his mind flit to and fro between an expression like “the body of Christ” and the actual faces in the next pew. It matters very little, of course, what kind of people that next pew really contains. You may know one of them to be a great warrior on the Enemy’s side. No matter. Your patient, thanks to Our Father Below, is a fool. Provided that any of those neighbours sing out of tune, or have boots that squeak, or double chins, or odd clothes, the patient will quite easily believe that their religion must therefore be somehow ridiculous. At his present stage, you see, he has an idea of “Christians” in his mind which he supposes to be spiritual but which, in fact, is largely pictorial...

Work hard, then on the **disappointment** or **anti-climax** which is certainly coming to the patient during his first few weeks as a **CHURCHMAN.**”

- **TENTH – the Church is a wonderful FAMILY, a remarkable HOUSEHOLD.**

Again and again in the NT we come across the terms: brothers, sisters, dear children, fathers etc. The language is one that speaks of a lovely family.

It was **Ephesians 2** which we read earlier which said that we are “...members of God’s household...”.

Being part of a church family – doesn’t mean that we drop our blood families, but it does mean we have another family, and every single member of that family has the very same “ADOPTED STATUS”. The strength of the bond is even stronger than that of our blood ties.

The blood we are tied by is the very blood of Christ shed for us on the cross of Calvary.

OK – I want to, by way of conclusion, briefly dip into one last question:

- 1) Q. Why bother with church?
- 2) Q. Why does church matter? (that is as far as the NT is concerned)

#3 Q. What should the church do?

I want to **share a challenging excerpt** from a book by Christian author **Philip Yancey** called “**Church: Why bother?**”.

It has to do with **Yancey’s** experience of observing how the AA works– that is Alcoholics Anonymous (not the Automobile Association) and why it seems to very successfully fill a gap that Christ’s church does not:

I’m going to read two segments of around 3 or 4 paragraphs each:

“I once visited a “**church**” that manages, with no denominational headquarters or paid staff, to attract millions of devoted members each week. It goes by the name **Alcoholics Anonymous**. I went at the invitation of a friend who had just confessed to me his problem with drinking. “*Come along,*” he said, “*and I think you’ll catch a glimpse of what the early church must have been like.*”

At twelve o’clock on a Monday night I entered a ramshackle house that had been used for six other sessions already that day. Acrid clouds of cigarette smoke hung like tear gas in the air, stinging my eyes. It did not take long, however, to understand what my friend had meant with his comparison to the early church.

A well-known politician and several prominent millionaires were mixing freely with unemployed dropouts and kids with needle marks on their arms. Introductions went like this: “*Hi, I’m Tom, and I’m an alcoholic and a drug addict.*” Instantly everyone shouted out warmly, “*Hi, Tom!*”

The “**sharing time**” worked like the textbook description of a small group, marked by compassionate listening, warm responses, and many hugs. Each person attending gave a personal progress report on his or her battle with addiction. We laughed a lot, and we cried a lot. Mostly, the members seemed to enjoy being around people who could see right through their facades. There was no reason not to be honest; everyone was in the same boat.”

Yancey continues:

“For my friend, immersion into **Alcoholics Anonymous** has meant salvation in the most literal sense. He knows that one slip could- no, will- send him to an early grave. More than once his AA partner has responded to his calls at 4:00 A.M., only to find him slouched in the eerie brightness of an all-night restaurant where he is filling a notebook, like a punished schoolchild, with the single sentence, “*God help me make it through the next five minutes.*” I came away from the “**midnight church**” **impressed, yet also troubled that AA meets needs in a way that the local church does not- or at least did not, for my friend.** I asked him to name the one quality missing in the local church that AA had somehow provided. He stared at his cup of coffee for a long time, watching it go cold. I expected to hear a word like love or acceptance or, knowing him, perhaps anti-institutionalism. Instead, he said softly this one word: **DEPENDENCY.**

“None of us can make it on our own; isn’t that why Jesus came?” he explained. *“Yet most church people give off a self-satisfied air of piety or superiority. I don’t sense them consciously leaning on God or on each other. Their lives appear to be in order. An alcoholic who goes to church feels inferior and incomplete.”* He sat in silence for a while, until a smile began to crease his face. *“It’s a funny thing,”* he said at last. *“What I hate most about myself, my alcoholism, was the one thing God used to bring me back to him. Because of it, I know I can’t survive without God. I have to depend on him to make it through each and every day. Maybe that’s the redeeming value of alcoholism.*

Maybe God is calling us alcoholics to teach the saints what it means to be dependent on him and on his community on earth.”

It is quite a challenge isn’t it.

DEPENDENCY

Q. So where do we see this word OR concept in God’s make-up of what He calls His Church?

60 times “One another/Each other”

A couple of years back at one of our church away-days (this was the one we did in Cheltenham), we spent a few productive hours looking at a series of statements from the NT which all contain the phrase “**One another**” OR “**Each other**”.

And it is these 60 or so statements that form the **ESSENTIAL GLUE** of the Church at a relational level – so, for example:

- **love** one another
- **be at peace** with one another
- **be devoted** to one another in brotherly love
- **stop passing judgment** on one another
- **accept** one another, then, just as Christ accepted you
- **serve** one another
- **carry** each other’s **burdens**
- **submit** to one another
- **clothe yourselves with humility** toward one another
- **admonish** one another
- **confess your sins** to one another

- **encourage** one another **daily**
- **pray** for each other.....and the list goes on and on

The Messenger, the Message and the Community (Roland Müller)

I read a book a while back by Roland Müller called “The Messenger, the Message and the Community” and it was all about how people from other religious or cultural worldviews come (or do not come) to faith in Christ.

And the basic premise of the book was that you need essentially 3 things:

- FIRST – you need a Messenger
- SECOND – you need a clear Message
- but THIRDLY – and most importantly (and this is where we often fall down) you need a functioning COMMUNITY

Many Muslims find the prospect of transitioning into a Christian church difficult, *NOT* necessarily due to a different message that they must believe, BUT because they are not able to sufficiently see the Church acting as a TRUE COMMUNITY.

So this is one great challenge for us here in the Western church – that we do not replace DEPENDENCY & COMMUNITY with INDEPENDENCY & INDIVIDUALITY.

Well there is a lot more that could be said – but I have said enough.

Let me leave you in the way we began with:

an upbeat view of CHURCH and SUNDAY (one that is also quite light hearted)

Just so you have the context of the clip, what is being talked about is **the annual preaching competition** that went on in this particular church:

*****PLAY VIDEO CLIP – Sunday’s a comin – Tony Campolo*****