

Would I Be Gathering if I Were Not a Pastor?

Most churches across the country which are open are running anywhere from 35-50% of the Sabbath morning attendance that they were a year ago. They've been gutted. What has surprised us pastors the most, I think, are not the pockets of elderly and vulnerable who have not returned. What has caught us off-guard is that for every person who hasn't yet returned there is likely a unique reason for not yet returning. So, I have to ask a question for myself.

If I were not a pastor, would I be attending an in-person service Sabbath morning? Why would I come?

- To hear the preaching of the Word? I can do that online.
- To join in corporate worship? I sing and pray anyways with my family. Does that count?
- To be around other believers? 6 ft of social distancing makes it difficult to do much more than a wave and a "how you doing?" mumble. I can just as easily engage through a text message.
- To exercise my spiritual gift? I can join a Sabbath school class on Zoom. I can send encouraging messages through Facebook (I'm doing it anyways). Do I need the Sabbath morning hour(s) to drive back and forth to exercise that gift? Can't I serve and support the mission without being physically present in that church?

What is there at the physical gathering that I cannot do at home? On-site Church worship isn't the same, I agree. But why do I need to show up whenever it's a hotbed of controversy?

For some people, wearing a mask is a symbol of being a leftist or a fraidy-cat who doesn't have faith. For others, not wearing a mask is a symbol of being a right-wing conspiracy theorist who cares more about themselves than other people. I'd argue few people fit either description, but still, the question remains. Why bother coming when your mere presence will offend somebody?

Because there is no such thing as mere presence. There is something which the generations preceding me understood that I believe has been almost lost today. And that is the power of being there part of the live happening (I didn't find a better word). There are two areas here where our generation has swung the pendulum too far in an opposite direction.

1. First, in regards to the importance of a gathered body. I think there was an overemphasis in the past on the church building itself. One of my greatest pet peeves was when someone would here a teen say one of those banned words and the response

would be, “hey, you cannot say that here in God’s house”. (By the way, I think that’s a misunderstanding, mixing up the temple – the real one is in heaven acc to Hebrews 9 - and the synagogue, which is the template for the NT Church services). BUT, we responded with a complete deemphasis of the sacred gathering. Now I understand that there is something special about the local gathering of the body of Christ. There is something to sacred space where God’s Word is opened and the Good News is preached.

2. Secondly, there were families wrecked years ago by patriarchs/ matriarchs who felt them and eventually their entire family had to be physically in the church building every time the doors were opened. There developed a somewhat legalistic checking of boxes on church attendance. BUT, we responded with a complete deemphasis of the power of personal presence. There is something powerful about you being there.

I can’t seem to keep Bonhoeffer’s “Life Together” on my shelves during this season. I keep pulling it down and reading it. The longer we find ourselves with our communities ever transforming due to COVID-19, the more I’m finding depth in his words. Consider this:

“The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile sees in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. Visitor and visited in loneliness recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body; they receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility, and joy. They receive each other’s benedictions as the benediction of the Lord Jesus Christ”. (Page 10)

What Bonhoeffer is alluding to here is the fact that each believer is in union with Christ and has the Spirit of God residing within. You are blessed and you are a blessing for others when you are attending.

So... So this is my answer as to why, even if I weren’t a pastor and didn’t have any particular job to do as elder, deacon, Sabbath School teacher etc., I would still show up on Sabbath morning as long as I was able. It is because I believe the Bible promise from Colossians 1:27 – *Christ in you (PLURAL) the hope of glory*, and I believe the only together we can experience it.

And so, and please hear me well, I want to show up because to not do so would be to diminish Christ and rob Him from the worship He is entitled to. I know some could read that and say, “what about those who cannot attend?! You are making them feel horrible for something which they cannot control.” This is my response.

Whether it be because of a personal problem or health concerns, my aim here is to give words to the very pain which you feel. I'm sharing why we mourn with you that you cannot gather with us. Fellowship with other believers is a precious gift. You know this deeply and it's why you ache, and toss and turn, and feel as if something deeply important is missing in your life. It's because it is.

COVID-19 has given all of us an opportunity to mourn with our shut-ins. It has widened that number and opened our eyes to the value of in-person gathering. And the deep mourning which accompanies no longer being able to gather.

But this is also why I feel a deep conviction, as long as I am able, to gather with the body of Christ no matter what. To not gather, to consider it optional, would be like valuing the comfort of drinking my hot tea dressed in my Teddy Bears jammies from TJ Maxx, over the blood-bought community of the living God. Oh Pastor, it's not 100% safe! I hear you. Talk to Jesus about it. And while reading the Great Commission from Matthew 28, read one more time Jesus' promise granted to those who "Go ye" in contrast to those "Don't go ye yet", And the promise is this: "*For I am with you always, to the very end of the age*". Which in God's prophetic time **is tomorrow**.

Happy Sabbath! 🕯️