

Are You a COVID Church Dropout? Read This

All my life I've heard many creative excuses for missing church. Long before memes were invented for social media, absentee churchgoers joked about attending "Bedside Baptist," "Church of the Holy Comforter" or "Church of the Inner Springs" to imply that they were sleeping in on Sunday morning.

But during the last two years we've had even more convenient reasons to stay away from church. The pandemic ushered in the era of "Zoom worship," and I'm grateful we had the technology for virtual meetings. But now, as mask mandates are relaxed and COVID cases drop, many Christians are still watching church online in their pajamas.

I won't chastise anyone for taking a week off from church if they are going on vacation or hosting company. But there has always been a subset of Christians who preach a theology of church delinquency. They usually rattle off their list of complaints ("The pastor preaches too long," "The music is too loud," "Nobody reaches out to me," etc.) and then they claim it's perfectly fine to practice faith solo style. After all, they say, we are "not under the law."

We now have a new list of excuses, thanks to the coronavirus: "I don't want to put anyone's health at risk," "There are unvaccinated people there" and "Some people at church don't wear masks." Or, on the flip side, "I'm tired of masks," "The pastor should never have stopped having in-person services," or "The pastor should have preached against the vaccine."

Which means we allowed a virus to separate us into political camps. We burned bridges, built walls and held grudges. Meanwhile church growth experts say between 20% and 30% of

believers have never returned to in-person worship services.

If you or someone you love has given up on church, I understand your pain. I've had my share of disappointments in church over the years. But I want to offer six reasons why you shouldn't let a bad experience end your connection to God's people.

1. The church is Christ's body. With all its flaws, the church is still God's Plan A. Jesus announced before He went to the cross: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18, MEV). Jesus intends to use the church – even with its weakness – as His primary tool to reach the world with the gospel. Heaven doesn't have a Plan B. Jesus is the head of His church (see Colossians 1:18), and we are His hands and feet. To reject the church is to reject God's ultimate strategy.

2. The Holy Spirit has called us to work together. When we were born again and baptized, the Bible says we were mystically unified with all other born-again believers and connected to each other by the Holy Spirit. The Lord also connects people in local congregations. This connection is holy, and we should never make light of it or damage it. Paul told the Ephesians to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" by being in close fellowship with each other (Eph. 4:3, NASB). To reject this union of believers is to dishonor the work of the Spirit.

3. God accomplishes more through His corporate body than through isolated individuals. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit worked primarily through the nation of Israel, and through individuals who had special callings and remarkable courage. But in the New Covenant era, the Spirit dwells in every Christian believer, and the corporate church makes a much bigger impact. This is why Jesus told His disciples after He went to the cross that we would do "greater works" than He

did on earth. (See John 14:12.) And because healthy churches pool resources and organize volunteers, they can offer ministry to children, youth, families, singles, the needy and the lost overseas in a way you could never do while sitting home alone.

4. God's authority flows through His church, not through "lone ranger" Christians. Some people who've been hurt by church leaders feel they can never submit to another pastor again, nor will they honor a person who is called by God to carry the authority of a minister. Yet God has delegated to certain people the task of building up the church. (See Ephesians 4:11-12.) It's totally acceptable for you to leave an unhealthy church with poor leadership, but you should quickly find a new church where you can be equipped to fulfill your ministry. It was never intended for a Christian to live with a my-way-or-the-highway attitude.

5. We learn to love and serve by living in Christian community. The Book of Hebrews was written to a group of Jewish Christians who were thinking of abandoning their Christian faith because of persecution. Some of them even stopped attending church, but Paul addressed their disillusionment by saying: "And let us consider how to spur one another to love and to good works. Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but let us exhort one another, especially as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:24-25, MEV). People who live in isolation find it difficult to develop character, and they often get discouraged; those who walk together in close fellowship improve each other just as iron sharpens iron.

6. If you leave the church because of hurt or resentment, you make it more difficult to find healing and reconciliation. It sounds spiritual to say you are "pulling away from people to focus on God." But the New Testament says your relationship with God is directly related to how you relate to others. John wrote: "Anyone who claims to live in God's light and hates a

brother or sister is still in the dark” (1 John 2:9, MSG). People may have hurt you, but God will also use people to heal you. Don’t let offenses trap you in a lonely corner. Choose to forgive.

Please don’t check out of church or give up on God’s flawed saints. There is no perfect church – and if there were, it would not be perfect after you joined! As this pandemic ends, take a risk and reconnect with your spiritual family. {eo}

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