

Don't Stay Disconnected From Church When the Pandemic Is Over

Churches have been on lockdown for months. COVID-19 forced us to go virtual, and the pandemic has turned pastors into awkward television evangelists who preach to empty auditoriums using smartphones.

Now, more than eight months after the shutdown, some congregations are reopening—with masks, social distancing and temperature checks. Instead of hearing a worship leader say, “Turn to the person next to you and give them a hug,” we have learned to bump elbows. We also have noticed that many church members haven't returned.

In August, church growth coach Thom Rainer predicted that 20-30% of people who attended church before the pandemic will never come back, including 1) those who never joined small groups 2) the “church critics,” 3) cultural Christians and 4) those who already went to church infrequently before the quarantine began.

I was a bit perturbed when I first read Rainer's article. Why wouldn't anybody be excited about going back to church after this painful season? The truth is many Christians don't see church as essential. And some Christians are nursing grudges against fellow church members. COVID-19 has become an easy excuse to stay home.

I'm not advocating that people return to church if their health is at risk or they don't feel comfortable being around crowds yet. We need to protect each other, especially our most vulnerable members. But if you or someone you love is feeling tempted to never go back to church—I offer these reasons why you need to be connected to God's people.

The church is still God's plan A. Heaven doesn't have a plan B. Jesus is the head of His church (see Col. 1:18), and we are His hands and feet. Jesus intends to use the church as His primary tool to reach the world with the gospel. To reject the church is to reject God's ultimate strategy to bring heaven's kingdom on earth.

The Holy Spirit has called us to be together. The Bible says we have been mystically joined with all other born-again believers. The Lord also connects people in local congregations. Paul told the Ephesians to "be eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" by being in close fellowship with each other (Eph. 4:3). To reject this union of believers is to dishonor the work of the Spirit.

God accomplishes more through His corporate people than through individuals. The corporate church makes a much bigger impact than one person does. Healthy churches can pool resources and organize volunteers. They are able to offer ministry to children, youth, families, singles, the needy and the lost overseas—in a way you could never do while sitting home alone.

God's authority flows through His church, not through "Lone Ranger" Christians. Some people I know who have been hurt by church leaders say they can never submit to another pastor again. It's totally acceptable for you to leave an unhealthy church with poor leadership, but you should find a new church where you can be equipped to fulfill your ministry. You can't grow in your faith if you are flying solo—or carrying a grudge.

It's by living in Christian community that we learn to love and serve. Paul wrote: "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. 10:25). People who live in isolation get discouraged and are easy prey for the enemy; those who walk in close

fellowship inspire and improve each other just as iron sharpens iron (see Prov. 27:17).

If you leave the church because of resentment, you make it more difficult to find healing. It might sound spiritual to say you are pulling away from people to focus on God. But the New Testament says your relationship with God is directly tied to how you relate to others. People may have hurt you, but God will use people to heal you. Don't let the hurts of the past paint you into a lonely corner. Choose to forgive.

Please don't give up on God's flawed saints. Even if you stay home until this pandemic is over, make a decision now to return to church when the threat has passed. There is a place for you in God's eternal family. {eoa}

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