

## WHY JOIN A CHURCH?

Acts 2:42-47

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At the tender age of 18, I accepted my first appointment as pastor of a local church. Almost every Sunday for the past 38 years, I have stepped into some pulpit to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. For a lifetime, the local Church has captured my heart, my mind, my strength, and my deepest devotion. Today, I believe in her mission more than ever before. The local Church, in my opinion, is still God's best hope for humanity.

What makes a church great is not its building and not its steeple. What makes a church great is its people, people joined together as the body of Christ bringing hope and healing to a hurting world. It is to this high and holy calling that I invite you today. I would like to talk today and next Sunday about what it means to be a member of a church. I form it in the phrase of a question—why would anybody in the beginning of the twenty-first century want to be a member of a church? Why join the Church, any church? Let me count some ways.

### WE NEED TO BELONG

In the first place, we ought to join a church because we need to belong. In several opinion polls over the last ten years, George Gallop has repeatedly said, "Americans are more religious than ever, they just don't care much for churches and religious organizations." They are believers but not joiners.

"I believe in God but I'm not into organized religion." Somebody in this community says that to me every week as I move from place to place.

Maybe there was a time when we could practice our faith privately, get our religion electronically, pursue our beliefs individually. After all, rugged individualism is the American way. For nearly half a century, the mass media has told us we could "have it our way." So why bother with people in a church when we can build our own sacred spaces and have the money to escape to some paradise island? Well, maybe there was a time when that would do. But things are different now.

When the world stopped turning that September day, we discovered we did not want to be alone; we needed to belong. We needed a faith to carry on. So we went to church and held hands with a stranger and said a prayer in the midst of danger. We discovered something a year or so ago that I think will be healthy for us in the long run. We discovered that Barbara Streisand was right 25 years ago when she sang, "People who need people are the luckiest people in the world."

There is a phrase in the New Testament that has captured my imagination for a number of years. You can find it particularly in the epistles, those letters that describe the theology and community of the early church. There are two simple

little words that show up again and again in the letters and those words are these — *one another*. If you want a challenge, read the letters of the New Testament and underline how often they say *one another*. Let me give just a few. Love *one another*, encourage *one another*, be kind to *one another*, comfort *one another*, edify *one another*, fellowship with *one another*, confess your faults to *one another*, forgive *one another*, pray for *one another*, minister to *one another*, bear *one another's* burdens.

We will never achieve Christian maturity apart from Christian community. We need more resources than our interior lives can supply and more influences than our few like-minded friends will give us. We need the support of a community of people who are both like us and different from us.

I was playing golf recently. I always look up too much when I am golfing. I happened to be looking up and I saw a flock of geese flying right over the golf course. I just stopped and watched them for a few moments, flying in that familiar “V” formation. I thought how geese are much smarter than people. They always fly together heading south or north. By flying in the uplifting wake of the goose in front, the whole flock adds at least 71% to its total flying range. Geese have learned some other things that the rest of us need to learn. Leadership is shared. The head goose is only there for a little while, then comes back into the flock in order to be restored in energy. All of that honking is the encouragement of one goose to another to keep going, to keep going, to keep at it. When one goose falls, is wounded or becomes ill, at least two others will fly to the ground, swoop down and stay with it until it is restored to the flock.

Why join a church? We join a church because deep in the human soul is a hunger and a need to belong. It is inherent in creation, and a church provides the community for it.

Why join a church? WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND

In the second place, I think people join a church because there is a deep need to understand. I had been in that first congregation at the age of 18 for ten days when its most prominent member, one of the few members I had, was killed in a tragic farming accident. Without having a course in pastoral care, without having an opportunity to read a single book in pastoral counseling, I was thrust into the responsibility of trying to care for a widow and several children as they walked through the valleys of the shadows of death. Through the years, I have walked with two mothers who accidentally ran over their own babies. I have led the funeral processions of far too many teenagers. I have listened to spouses despair over being left for another person. I have watched parents age over wayward children. I have picked up the pieces of communities being wiped out by tornadoes and floods. My life is not any different than yours. “It’s life,” we say.

The questions are always the same:

Why do bad things happen to good people?

Where is God when it hurts?  
Where is the answer to the riddle of suffering?  
Why is hate so strong?  
How come good people go astray?

Frank was over 80 years old when he came to see me. A friend brought him there. When they sat down in my office, I asked what I might possibly do to help them. She said matter-of-factly, "Frank needs to make peace with God before it's too late." I began to ask Frank about his life. "Did you ever believe in God?" I asked him. Feeble now, he said, "Once I did. My mother was a believing person and she used to take me to church and her prayers followed me all the days of her life. But I grew up and the big war came and I entered that war. I became an officer in the Army. On one awful day of battle, I watched all of those for whom I was responsible killed on a hillside. In that awful horror of war, I looked up to the sky and I cursed God and I walked away, never to believe in God again."

Well, my friends, it's not easy to unpack 50 years of hate, brokenness, sorrow, and anger. But piece-by-piece, slowly we chipped away at it. I will never forget the day. It was a Sunday morning at the 11 o'clock worship service. In his feeble way, Frank walked down the center aisle of the church to profess his faith in Jesus Christ, to affirm once more that he believed in God, and he came to be a member of a Christian community.

You see, it is my conviction that everybody ought to know that God is love. Everybody ought to know that Jesus can save. Everybody ought to know that forgiveness is possible. Everybody ought to know that no trouble enjoys everlasting life. Everybody ought to know that things are not always what they sometime seem to be.

How can they know unless there is a community of faith that is not afraid of the questions nor timid about pointing the way to the Christ who has the answer? Oh, I know, the Church can become "Mickey Mouse," spending its life on trivial things that do not matter in the light of eternity. But it doesn't have to be. The Church can be a mighty force for good moving people toward faith, hope, and love. It can sound the trumpet for peace above the rumblings of war. It can call attention to the least, when everybody is wanting more. It can challenge us to understand even as we long to be understood. Why join a church? Because there are moments and times in a person's life when you just need to know the deep questions of faith.

#### WE NEED TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Why join a church? Because we need to make a difference. That's why. A friend of mine said to me the other day, "Would it be alright if I withdraw my membership and just become a guest at Brentwood?" That way," he said teasingly, "I can get a better parking place because you give nice parking places to guests and you tell members to park off campus. Furthermore, once a year you expect me to make a financial pledge to the church and now you are hitting me

with building campaigns. When I miss church for four weeks, somebody calls and asks, 'Where've you been and how come you haven't been in your pew?' In fact, it seems to me we treat guests a lot better than members."

I said to him, "Of course we do. Isn't that what we are supposed to do?" The Church is not a country club. Whosoever will may participate in all our ministries with no particular pressure to join. There is no charge at the door. Our services are free. So why not enjoy the benefits without assuming the commitments and responsibilities that come with it? I have only one answer to that question. It is because I want to participate in a partnership that will make a difference in the world.

Bill Hybels says, "I was sitting in an airport in San Juan, Puerto Rico, waiting for an airplane to take me home when these two little kids, one about eight and one about six got into a fight with one another. They were squabbling back and forth. At first I tried not to notice them, but when the skirmish became a slugfest, I began asking out loud 'Where are the parents of these kids?' Nobody seemed to know. As the bigger boy finally got the little one and began to beat his head into the tile floor, I stepped out of the boarding line and went over, pulled them apart, and settled the fight."

"A little later on the plane," says Bill, "I began to ask questions about that experience. Doesn't the government have any laws against child neglect? Couldn't schools teach children to behave? Would some counseling eventually help that kid work through his unresolved anger? Isn't there some business that would finally provide him a job?"

"I was going down my litany and then it dawned on me. All that is good and wonderful but can anybody transform a human being, except God? It would take a miracle for that kid to have a chance. It would take the love of Jesus to heal his wounds. It would take the power of the Holy Spirit for him to have a future. Only God can mend a heart. Only God can make us new again." "And then," says Bill, "the question became obvious. Why is the Church waiting for somebody else to do its work?"

One year ago, we rolled out a new vision for this church under the banner of *touching hearts and transforming lives*. Let me just say it again today.

We are in the disciple-making business, that's the job we have to do.

We believe that persons in Christ are new creations.  
We believe that children reared in Jesus' name will never forget it.

We believe that transformation of a life is possible.  
We are in the people serving business.  
We find a need and try to fill it.  
We see a hurt and try to heal it.

*Give us your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.* We need to put those words of Lady Liberty on our front door and then put our feet behind them in action. That is what the Church is about. Why be a part of a church except that somewhere down in the depths of your heart you want to make a difference in a hurting world.

Why join a church? WE NEED TO KEEP HOPE ALIVE.

A national poll, taken by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research in the fall of 2001, discovered that only one in five Americans feel hopeful about the future. Back in 1990, seven out of ten people answered the same survey as being hopeful. What has happened?

After one of our September 11 remembrance services last week, a public official came up to me and said, "I have been going to special events all day. I have cried until my eyes are dry. But I do have to say, here in your Sanctuary I heard the most hopeful words spoken in this entire national observance." *Surely it is God who saves us, let us trust in Him and not be afraid.*

John Ortberg reports on a study of 122 men who suffered their first heart attack. They were evaluated on their degree of hopefulness and pessimism following their attack. Of the 25 most pessimistic, 21 of them died within eight years. Of the 25 most optimistic, only six had died in eight years. Loss of hope increased the odds of death by more than 300% leading John Ortberg to say, "It's better to eat *Twinkies* in hope than broccoli in despair."

Hope is the Church's business. You see, we are people of hope because we know the final score. We know who finally wins in this riddle of life. And so, whatever the circumstances, we live as people of faith and hope. That is who we are and I want to be around people like that.

My favorite church member of all these years was a little guy by the name of Charlie Hitt. Charlie wore extremely thick glasses and a hearing aid in each ear. He didn't own a car, so he hitchhiked six miles to church every Sunday morning. He sat on the front row near the center aisle. He always sang about three measures behind everybody else when we sang the hymn. On his way out every Sunday he would tell me a whole sermon related to the title of the sermon in the bulletin. He had not heard a single word I said, he just made up his own sermon. I wish he had called me on Saturday. It would have helped my sermons a lot. One day somebody asked Charlie, "Why do you bother to come to church? You can't see, you can't hear, you don't have a way to get here. Why don't you just stay home?" Little, short Charlie Hitt, with a twinkle in his eye said, "Oh, but come Sunday, I want my neighbors to know whose side I'm on so I'm always in church."

My friends, I want to tell you, come Sunday I want the world to know whose side I'm on. I continue to believe in the depths of my heart and with all of my soul and with more energy than ever before in all of my life, that the Church, the local

Church, is God's best hope for humanity. And I ask you, will you join in that effort to make a difference in the world? Amen.











