

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 23

Six functions of the church

Why do we meet together each week for worship and instruction? Couldn't we, with a lot less bother, worship at home, read the Bible and listen to a sermon on the radio?

In the first century, people gathered weekly to hear the Scriptures — but today we have our own copies of the Bible to read. Then why not stay at home to read the Bible on our own? It certainly would be easier — cheaper, too. Through modern technology, everyone in the world could listen to the best preachers in the world, every week! Or we could have a menu of options, and listen only to the sermons that apply to us, or only to subjects we like. Wouldn't it be lovely?

Well, not really. I believe that stay-at-home Christians are missing out on many important aspects of Christianity. I hope to address these in this article, both to encourage faithful attendees to get more out of our meetings, and to encourage others to return to weekly attendance. To understand why we gather each week, it is helpful to ask, Why did God create the church? What purposes does it have? By learning the functions of the church, we can then see how *our weekly meetings serve various purposes in God's desire for his children*.

You see, God's commands are not arbitrary things just to see if we will jump when he says *jump*. No, his commands are given for our own good. Of course, when we are young Christians, we may not understand *why* he commands certain things, and we need to obey even before we know all the reasons why. We simply trust God, that he knows best, and we do what he says. So, a young Christian may attend church simply because that's what Christians are expected to do. A young Christian may attend simply because Hebrews 10:25 says, "Let us not give up meeting together."

So far, so good. But as we mature in the faith, we should come to a deeper understanding of *why* God

tells his people to meet together.

Many commands

Let's begin exploring this subject by noting that Hebrews is not the only book that commands Christians to assemble with one another. "Love one another," Jesus tells his disciples (John 13:34). When Jesus says "one another," he is not referring to our duty to love all human beings. Rather, he is referring specifically to the need for disciples to love other disciples — it must be a mutual love. And this love is an identifying characteristic of Jesus' disciples (v. 35).

Mutual love does not express itself in accidental meetings at the grocery store and sporting events. Jesus' command presupposes that his disciples are meeting with one another on a regular basis. Christians should have regular fellowship with other Christians. "Do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers," Paul wrote (Galatians 6:10). To obey this command, it is essential that we know who the family of believers is. We need to see them, and we need to see their needs.

"Serve one another," Paul wrote to the church in Galatia (Galatians 5:13). Although we should serve unbelievers in certain ways, Paul is not using this verse to tell us that. In this verse, he is not commanding us to serve the world, and he is not commanding the world to serve us. Rather, he is commanding *mutual service among those who follow Jesus Christ*. "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Paul is talking to people who want to obey Jesus Christ, telling them about a responsibility they have toward other believers. But how can we carry each other's burdens unless we know what those burdens are — and how can we know unless we meet each other regularly?

“If we walk in the light...we have fellowship with one another,” John wrote (1 John 1:7). John is talking about those who walk in the light. He is talking about spiritual fellowship, not casual acquaintances with unbelievers. If we walk in the light, we seek out other believers with whom to have fellowship. Similarly, Paul wrote, “Accept one another” (Romans 15:7). “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other” (Ephesians 4:32). Christians have special responsibilities toward one another.

Throughout the New Testament, the early Christians met with one another to worship together, to learn together, to share their lives with one another (for example, Acts 2:41-47). Everywhere Paul went, he raised up churches, rather than leaving scattered believers. They were eager to share their faith and zeal with one another. This is the biblical pattern.

But some people today complain that they don’t get anything out of the sermons. That may be true, but it’s really not an excuse to stop attending the meetings. Such people need to change their perspective from “get” to “give.” We attend worship services not just to get, but also to *give* — to give worship to God with our whole heart and to give service to other members of the congregation.

How can we serve others at church services? By teaching children, helping clean the building, singing hymns and special music, arranging chairs, greeting people, etc. We provide an atmosphere in which others can get something out of the sermons. We fellowship, and find out needs to pray about and things to do to help others during the week. If you aren’t getting anything out of the sermons, then at least attend in order to give to others.

Paul wrote, “Encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). “Spur one another on toward love and good deeds,” (Hebrews 10:24). This is the specific reason given in the context of the Hebrews 10:25 command for regular assemblies. We are to encourage others, to be a source of positive words, whatsoever things are true and lovely and of good report.

Consider Jesus as an example. He regularly attended synagogue and regularly heard readings of Scripture that didn’t add anything to his understanding, but he went anyway, to worship. Maybe it was boring to an educated man like Paul, but he didn’t let that stop him, either.

Duty and desire

People who believe that Jesus has saved them from eternal death really ought to be excited about it. They enjoy getting together with others to praise their Savior. Of course, sometimes we have bad days and don’t really feel like attending. But even if it is not our desire at the moment, it is still our duty. We can’t just go through life doing only the things we *feel* like doing — not if we follow Jesus Christ as our Lord. He did not seek to do his own will, but the Father’s. Sometimes that’s what it boils down to for us. When all else fails, the old saying goes, read the instructions. And the instructions tell us to attend.

But why? What is the church for? The church has many functions. We have grouped them before into three categories — upward, inward and outward. That organizational scheme, like any scheme, has both virtues and limitations. It is simple, and simplicity is good.

But it does not show the fact that our upward relationship has both a private and a public expression. It glosses over the fact that our relationships within the church are not exactly the same for everyone within the church. It does not show that service is given both inward and outward, both within the church and to the community around.

To help bring out additional aspects of the church’s work, some Christians have used a four- or five-fold scheme. For this article, I will use six categories.

1) Worship

Our relationship with God is both private and public, and we need both. Let’s begin with our public interaction with God — worship. Of course, it is possible to worship God when we are all alone, but the term *worship* usually suggests something we do in public. The English word *worship* is related to the word *worth*. We declare God’s worth when we worship him.

This declaration of worth is made both privately, in our prayers, and publicly, in words and songs of praise. 1 Peter 2:9 says that we are called to declare God’s praises. The implication is that this a *public* declaration. Both Old and New Testaments show God’s people worshipping *together*, as a community.

The biblical model, in both Old and New Testaments, is that songs are often a part of worship. Songs express some of the emotion we have with God.

Songs can express fear, faith, love, joy, confidence, awe and a wide range of other emotions we have in our relationship with God.

Of course, not everyone in the congregation has the same emotion at the same time, but we nevertheless sing together. Some members would express the same emotion in different ways, with different songs and different styles. Nevertheless, we still sing together. “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19). We have to meet together to do this!

Music should be an expression of unity — yet often it is a cause for disagreement. Different cultures and different age groups express praise for God in different ways. Almost every church area has several cultures represented. Some members want to learn new songs; some want to use old songs. It seems that God likes both. He enjoys the psalms that are thousands of years old; he also enjoys new songs. It is helpful to note that some of the old songs — the psalms — command new songs:

“Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. Sing to him *a new song*; play skillfully, and shout for joy” (Psalms 33:1-3).

In our music, we need to consider the needs of people who may be attending our services for the first time. We need music that they will find meaningful, music that expresses joy in a way that they comprehend as joyful. If we sing only those songs that we like, it sends the message that we care about our own comfort more than we care about other people.

And we cannot wait until new people start attending before we start learning some contemporary-style songs. We need to learn them now, so we can sing them meaningfully. But music is only one aspect of our worship services. Worship includes more than expressing emotion. Our relationship with God also involves our minds, our thought processes. Some of our interaction with God comes in the form of prayer. As a gathered people of God, we speak to God. We praise him not only in poetry and song, but also in ordinary words and normal speech. And the Scriptural example is that we pray together, as well as individually.

God is not only love, but also truth. There is an emotional component and a factual component. So we need truth in our worship services, and we find truth

in the Word of God. The Bible is our ultimate authority, the basis for all that we do. Sermons must be based in that authority. Even our songs should be truthful.

But truth is not some vague idea that we can discuss without emotion. God’s truth affects our lives and hearts. It demands a response from us. It requires all our heart, mind, soul and strength. That is why sermons need to be relevant to life. Sermons should convey concepts that affect how we live and how we think on Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, etc., in the home and on the job.

Sermons need to be true, properly based on Scripture. Sermons need to be practical, directed to real life. Sermons also need to be emotive, properly calling for a heart-felt response. Our worship includes listening to God’s Word, and responding to it with repentance from sin and with joy for the salvation he gives.

We can listen to sermons at home, either on tape or on radio broadcasts. There are many good sermons available. But this is not the full church experience. As a form of worship, it is only partial involvement. It is missing the community aspect of worship, in which we sing praises together, in which we respond together to the Word of God, in which we exhort one another to put the truth into practice in our lives.

Of course, some members cannot attend services because of ill health. They are missing out — as most of them know quite well. We pray for them, and we also know that it is our duty to visit them to make mutual ministry possible for them (James 1:27).

Although shut-in Christians may need to be served in physical ways, they are often able to serve others in emotional or spiritual ways. Even so, stay-at-home Christianity is an exception based on necessity. It is not what Jesus wants his able-bodied disciples to do.

2) Spiritual disciplines

Worship services are only *part* of our worship. The Word of God must enter our hearts and minds to affect what we do throughout the week. Worship can change its format, but it should never stop. Part of our response to God involves personal prayer and Bible study. Experience shows us that these are essential for growth. People who are becoming more spiritually mature hunger to learn from God in his Word. They are eager to give him their requests, to share their lives with him, to walk with him, to be aware of his

constant presence in their lives.

Our dedication to God involves our heart, mind, soul and strength. Prayer and study should be our desire, but if they are not yet our desire, we need to do them anyway.

It reminds me of the advice that John Wesley was once given. At that time in his life, he said, he had an intellectual grasp of Christianity, but he did not *feel* faith in his heart. So he was advised: Preach faith until you have faith — and once you have it, you will certainly preach it! He knew he had a duty to preach faith, so he was supposed to do his duty. And in time, God gave him what he lacked. He gave him heart-felt faith. What he had formerly done out of duty, he now did out of desire. God had given him the desire that he needed. God will do the same for us.

Prayer and study are sometimes called spiritual disciplines. “Discipline” may sound like a punishment, or perhaps an unpleasant thing we have to force ourselves to do. But the real meaning of the term *discipline* is something that “disciples” us, that is, teaches us or helps us learn. Spiritual leaders throughout the ages have found that certain activities help us learn about God.

There are many practices that help us walk with God. Many church members are familiar with prayer, study, meditation and fasting. And there are other disciplines we can also learn from, such as simplicity, generosity, celebration or visiting widows. Church attendance is also a spiritual discipline, giving benefits for the individual relationship with God. We may also learn more about prayer, study and other spiritual habits by attending small groups in which we see how other Christians practice these forms of worship.

Real faith leads to real obedience — even when that obedience is not comfortable, even when it is boring, even when it requires us to change our behavior. We worship him in spirit and in truth, at church meetings, at home, on the job and everywhere we go. The church is composed of God’s people, and God’s people have private worship as well as public worship. Both are necessary functions of the church.

3) Discipleship

Throughout the New Testament, we see spiritual leaders teaching others. This is part of the Christian lifestyle; it is part of the great commission. “Go and make disciples of all nations...*teaching* them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-

20). Everybody must be either a learner or a teacher, and we are usually both at the same time. “Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Colossians 3:16). We must be learning from one another, from other Christians. The church is an educational institution.

Paul told Timothy, “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2). Every Christian should be able to teach the basics of the faith, to give an answer concerning our hope in Jesus Christ.

What about those who have already learned? They should become teachers, to pass the truth along to new generations. Obviously, a lot of teaching is done by pastors. But Paul commands *every* Christian to teach. Small groups provide one way in which this is done. Mature Christians can teach both in word and in example. They can tell others how Christ has helped them. When their faith is weak, they can seek the encouragement of others. When their faith is strong, they can help the weak.

It is not good for man to be alone, nor is it good for a Christian to be alone. “Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!... Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12).

By working together, we help one another grow. Discipleship is often a mutual process, one member helping another member. But some discipleship flows more purposefully, with more direction given to it. God has appointed some people in his church for that very reason: “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13).

God provides leaders whose role is to prepare others for their roles. The result is growth, maturity and unity, if we allow the process to work as God intended. Some Christian growth and learning comes from peers; some comes from people in the church who have the specific assignment of teaching and

modeling the Christian life. People who isolate themselves are missing out on this aspect of the faith.

As a church, we have always been interested in learning. We were concerned to know the *truth* on as many subjects as we could. We were eager to study the Bible. Now, it seems that some of the zeal has been lost. Perhaps this is an inevitable result of doctrinal change. But we need to regain the love we once had for learning.

We have much to learn — and much to apply. Local congregations need to offer Bible studies, classes for new believers, training in evangelism, etc. We need to encourage lay ministry by giving permission, giving training, giving tools, giving control and getting out of the way!

4) Fellowship

Fellowship is clearly a mutual relationship among Christians. We all need to give and to receive fellowship. We all need to give and receive love. Our weekly meetings demonstrate that fellowship is important to us, both historically and right now. Fellowship means a lot more than talking to each other about sports, gossip and news. It means sharing lives, sharing emotions, bearing one another's burdens, encouraging one another and helping those who have need.

Most people put a mask on to hide their needs from others. If we are really going to help one another, we need to get close enough to one another to see behind the masks. And it means that we have to let our own mask fall down a bit so others can see our needs. Small groups are a good place in which to do this. We get to know people a little better and feel a little safer with them. Often, they are strong in the area in which we are weak, and we are strong where they are weak. So by supporting one another, we both become stronger. Even the apostle Paul, although he was a giant in the faith, felt that he could be strengthened in faith by other Christians (Romans 1:12).

In ancient times, people didn't move around as often. Communities would develop easier in which people knew each other. But in industrialized societies today, people often do not know their neighbors. People are often cut off from families and friends. People wear masks all the time, never feeling safe enough to let people know who they really are inside.

Ancient churches did not need to emphasize small groups — they formed them naturally. The reason we

find it necessary to emphasize them today is that society has changed so much. To really form the interpersonal connections that ought to be part of Christian churches, we need to go out of our way to establish Christian friendship/study/prayer circles.

This will take time, yes. It really takes time to fulfill our Christian responsibilities. It takes time to serve others. It even takes time to find out what kinds of service they need. But if we have accepted Jesus as our Lord, our time is not our own. Jesus Christ makes demands on our lives. He demands total commitment, not a pretend-Christianity.

5) Service

When I list “service” as a separate category here, I am emphasizing physical service, not the service of teaching. A teacher is also a washer of feet, a person who illustrates the meaning of Christianity by *doing* what Jesus would do. Jesus took care of physical needs such as food and health. In a physical way, he gave his life for us. The early church gave physical help, sharing their possessions with the needy, collecting offerings for the hungry.

Paul tells us that service should be done *within* the church. “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). Folks who isolate themselves from other believers are falling short in this aspect of Christianity. The concept of spiritual gifts is important here. God has placed each of us in the body “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:7). Each of us has abilities that can help others.

Which spiritual gifts do you have? You can take a test to find out, but much of the test is really based on your experience. What have you done in the past that turned out well? What do other people say you are good at? How have you helped others in the past? The best test of spiritual gifts is serving within the Christian community. Try a variety of roles in the church, and ask others what you do best. Volunteer. Every member should have at least one role in the church. Small groups are again an excellent opportunity for mutual service. They provide many opportunities for work, and many opportunities for feedback on what you do well and what you enjoy doing.

The Christian community also serves the world around us, not only in word, but also in deeds that go with those words. God did not just speak — he also

took action. Actions can demonstrate the love of God working in our hearts, as we help the poor, as we offer comfort to the discouraged, as we help victims make sense of their lives. It is those who need practical help who are often the most responsive to the gospel message.

In some ways physical service may be seen as supporting the gospel. It can be seen as a method of supporting evangelism. But some service should be done with no strings attached, no attempt to get something in return. We serve simply because God has given us some resources and has opened our eyes to see a need. Jesus fed and healed many people without any immediate appeal for them to become his disciples. He did it simply because it needed to be done, and he saw a need that he could fill.

6) Evangelism

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel,” Jesus commands us. Frankly, we need a lot of improvement in this area. We have been too conditioned to keep our faith to ourselves. Of course, people cannot be converted unless the Father is calling them, but that fact does not mean that we shouldn’t preach the gospel!

To become effective stewards of the gospel message, we need a cultural change within the church. We cannot be content to let other people do it. We cannot be content to hire other people to do it on the radio or in a magazine. Those forms of evangelism are not wrong, but they are not enough.

Evangelism needs a personal face. When God wanted to send a message to people, he used people to do it. He sent his own Son, God in the flesh, to preach. Today he sends his children, humans in whom the Spirit is living, to preach the message and give it appropriate shape in each culture.

We need to be active, willing and *eager* to share the faith. We need enthusiasm about the gospel, an enthusiasm that communicates *at least something* about Christianity to our neighbors. (Do they even know that we *are* Christians? Does it look like we are *happy* to be Christians?) We are growing and improving in this, but we need more growth.

I encourage all of us to give thought to how we might each be Christian witnesses to those around us. I encourage every member to obey the command to be prepared to give an answer. I encourage every member to read about evangelism, and to apply what they read. We can all learn together and spur one another on to good works. Small groups can provide some training for evangelism, and small groups can often become agents of evangelism themselves.

In some cases, members may learn faster than their pastors. That’s OK. The pastor can then learn from the member. God has given them different spiritual gifts. To some of our members, he has given a gift for evangelism that needs to be awakened and directed. If the pastor cannot equip this person for this form of ministry, the pastor at least ought to encourage the person to learn, and implement, and provide examples for others, so that the whole church might grow. In this six-fold scheme of the work of the church, it is important to mention evangelism specifically.

Conclusion

I have commented at length on the purposes of the church, and I have highlighted areas in which we need growth. I hope that people find it helpful to see the bigger picture of what we are doing.

Most people who read this article are faithful and supportive. However, I would like to add a few words for people who don’t attend anymore. I cannot know your heart. I do not know all your hurts and questions. But I do know that you are missing out on a significant percentage of the Christian life. The biblical picture throughout is that Christians meet together regularly. If you are not, please consider attending again. There is so much God wants to do in your life.

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