

## Going to Church

On many occasions I've been asked the question 'do you have to go to church to be a Christian?' Some questioners would simply rather do something else on a Sunday. They want to be a Christian, but under terms that suit their chosen lifestyle and indeed we are all selective about which areas of our lives we surrender to Jesus.

Others though, ask the question because they genuinely can't see the point of going to church. It is easy to see how they have arrived at this place if their post-church life is essentially the same as it was in their church days.

So in response to the question can we articulate what the point of church is and give evidence to back it up? It is clear that as church attendance has declined, so has our society's knowledge of the story of Jesus. In other words, when people attended church they seemed to gain something at a knowledge level that has not subsequently been met in post-church generations through other educational means.

I'm sure though that the point of going to church is not just about gaining an intellectual knowledge of the story of Jesus, because the story itself demands more than that. It demands that we live according to an agenda set by Jesus rather than the one we might set for ourselves. To do so requires us to know Jesus at a relational level, not just know about him or some rules of living that we perceive he has set. It is possible and perhaps commonplace to do church without taking on this way of life. Recent studies of western societies suggest that the lifestyles and behaviour patterns of church-goers are little different to those with no church affiliation. The petty disputes and power struggles that are sadly all too common in the church environment also reflect this. We are still faced though with the question of whether it is possible to live a Jesus-centred way of life without church?

When I speak of church I speak not of a religious event but of a community of disciples of Jesus journeying together. This personally has been the point of church for me. Through being a Christian I have changed. I am more confident in who I am and I dare to say that I'm more like Jesus than I was, though to be fair there was plenty of room for movement on that score and there still is. The influence of other disciples has been integral to this change and it seems from the New Testament that this is the way that Jesus would have it be.

And yet the event, the act of worship, the going to church still has to mean something. It is a central part of what followers of God seem to do and have always done. If this event is simply a religious performance it is no wonder that people might question its necessity. But for me, my moments of greatest intimacy with God have invariably been during acts of worship among others who are genuinely seeking to live for Jesus. This then is perhaps the pointer to the answer to our question. Instead of expecting church-going to change our lives I wonder whether it might be a corporate commitment to changed lives that ultimately alters our experience of church-going and that this altered experience will enable us to get the point of what it is all about.