

## Why go to church?

BCF August 27, 2017

I want to ask an important question this morning, and it may seem an odd one coming from the preacher.

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The question is, why go to church? Why are you here? Why have you come to church, and specifically this one? What are you expecting to gain from being here? Why are you spending this Sunday morning singing songs and listening to a preacher when you could be sleeping in or catching up with e-mail or reading the newspaper or watching television or going hiking or studying for tomorrow's exam (yes, I know it is the beginning of semester, but these pesky exams come faster than you expect; one of my chemistry colleagues is planning to send out a worksheet for his students to turn in at tomorrow's class!)

You may be asking "What is then point of this message? After all, we are here, aren't we? Surely it is those who are not in church this morning who need to hear this message? Isn't this all a bit of a waste of time?"

Well, obviously I don't think so, or else I would not be up here preaching on this topic. And when you think about it, although we are all here physically, in addition to out of town guests, there are at least four different groups of people listening to this message. Let me describe them to you, so you can see which group you identify with:

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1. If you are in the first group you are a *truth-seeker*. You are here out of curiosity, like a tourist in a foreign country. You are not a Christ-follower, but you are interested in learning about Jesus and about the Christian faith. We are very glad that you are here, and I hope that this message will help you understand a little better what it means to be a Christ follower.

2. If you are in the second group you are a *church-seeker*. You are already a Christ-follower, and you are looking for a church to call your home church, and you are trying to decide if this is the right church for you. We are very glad that you are here, and I hope this message will help you understand what it means to make this church your own.

3. If you are in the third group you are an *encouragement seeker*. You are Christ-follower and a regular attender at this church, but you are going through some personal struggles, and you are having some doubts which are causing you to miss out on some of the benefits of full involvement in the life of this church. We are very glad that you are here, and I hope this message will help you understand what it means to get involved in a deeper way in the life and ministry of this church.

4. If you are in the fourth group you are a *challenge seeker*. You are already a participating member of this church, and you have come to be challenged by the truth of God's word. We are very glad that you are here; may your tribe increase! And I hope that this message will encourage you as you continue to serve the Lord both within this church and in the wider world.

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So what is so special about going to church? Let me begin by giving you a glimpse of three among many reasons why you should come to church, and specifically to BCF, because these truths are right at the core of what we believe and what we teach and preach.

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1. **To be challenged by the truth**
2. **To experience community**
3. **To engage in mission**

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1. **To be challenged by the truth.** If there is one need for clear thinking today it is in this area of truth. We live in an age where the very concept of absolute truth is claimed to be wrong. The postmodernist view, which is the dominant view in western society, is that all truth is relative, and there is no such thing as absolute truth. And so we have people speaking openly of "alternative truth", and others who believe and teach that truth is created, not discovered. Dennis McCallum, in his book "The Death of Truth", reports that in a recent series of more than twenty random interviews at a major university, people were asked if there was such a thing as absolute truth. All but one respondent answered along these lines: "Truth is whatever you believe" or "There is no absolute truth" or "People who believe in absolute truth are dangerous." Or "If there were such a thing as

absolute truth, how would we know what it is?” Ironically, those who hold that all truth is relative affirm at least one absolute truth: the truth that there is no such thing as absolute truth. Like other non-Christian worldviews, postmodernism is self-defeating and cannot stand up under its own claim.

Sadly this lack of belief in absolute truth has led to a major decline in our culture. As one writer put it

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“There should be little doubt that contemporary culture is in crisis, hurtling toward destruction. Questions that were once considered settled issues are now up for grabs. One hundred years ago, it would have been difficult to anticipate a genuine debate about the nature and definition of marriage, the morality of killing a child in the process of delivery, or whether a man is “too religious” for public office. However, these issues are not only being debated, but they are being practiced. Gay marriage is happening, partial-birth abortion is a common procedure, and political candidates regularly tone down their religious affiliations at the behest of their handlers. (Voddie Baucham in “The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World.”)

It is also interesting that millions of people who do not believe in absolute truth nevertheless believed in the accurate mathematical calculations that predicted the eclipse of the moon, and turned out to watch it.

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And many of them never asked the question “How is it that the moon exactly blocks out the sun?” If it were any bigger, we would have a complete coverage without the wonderful corona. If it were any smaller, we would never have a complete eclipse. But because the Moon is about 400 times smaller than the Sun and is also about 400 times closer to the Earth than is the Sun, the size of the Moon in our sky when it is in the right orbit exactly matches the size of the Sun. Is that just a happy coincidence?? As the psalmist David wrote almost 3000 years ago

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The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Ps 19:1

There is much more that could be said, but let us turn from the delusions of post-modernist thought to the reality of the authority of God’s word. The Christian writer and speaker Os Guinness puts it this way:

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“At first sight, the biblical view of truth is obscene to modern minds. It’s arrogant, it’s exclusive, it’s intolerant, it’s divisive, it’s judgmental, and it’s reactionary. But on a deeper look, the biblical view is profound, timely, and urgent for today, even for those who reject it. But obviously regardless of what the world thinks, we follow the one who is the way, the truth, and the life. We therefore worship and serve the God of truth, whose Word is truth, and who Himself is true and may be trusted because of his covenant faithfulness.”

Os Guinness <http://rzim.org/just-thinking/why-truth-matters/>

As Christians we have sung “This I Believe” and recited the Apostles’ Creed together, and since we believe in God we also believe that He is the only basis of truth. As Christians we thus believe there is such a thing as absolute truth, and we believe that this truth is communicated through God’s word, the Bible. And so it is no surprise that we find the word “truth” occurs 183 times in the NIV translation of the New Testament. One of our Lord’s most common phrases was “I tell you the truth” occurring 28 times in Matthew’s gospel alone. And as Os Guinness noted, not only did Jesus claim to tell us the truth, he claimed to BE the truth:

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John 14:6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the TRUTH and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. NIV

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And when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate to be judged by him, he told Pilate that he came into the world, to testify to the truth. And Pilate, a post-modernist before his time, asked “What is truth?”, and then went on to sentence a man to death that he knew to be innocent.

And so one of the core values of this church is the TRUTH that God has revealed to us. We seek to copy the early Christians, who devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Acts 2:42

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We do not have the apostles with us today, but we do have their teachings as recorded for us in our source for truth, which is God's word, the Bible. Paul writing to his protégé Timothy, says

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2 Tim 3:16-17

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Heb 4:12

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

These Scriptures remind us that God's word is something God-breathed and living, but it is also for our good; for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man or women of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. And we are not its judge; it is also our judge.

And God's word is not just something to be looked at and admired from a distance, like a flower or a painting; it is instead something to be heard and obeyed. But how should we hear? Many of you have traveled by air and have heard the flight attendant say something like this "Now we request your full attention as the flight attendants demonstrate the safety features of this aircraft". And then the flight attendants go on to talk about seat belts and emergency exits and oxygen masks and how to prepare for a crash landing. And you have heard all this before and you go on reading your book or checking your Smartphone.

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But now suppose you are on USAirways flight 1549 that lost power out of LaGuardia airport on January 15, 2009 after hitting a flock of geese, and the flight attendant stands up and says "we are going to crash land in the Hudson River, and here is how you prepare for a crash landing", do you think you would be reading your book or checking your smartphone? No way; you would be listening with all your attention, eager to learn how to maximize your chances of survival and eager to do exactly what the flight attendant tells you.

So I have news for you; we are all on a plane that is going to crash and burn. It's called planet earth, and one day the Lord Jesus is going to come and make a new heaven and a new earth, and it is going to be very important that we have not only heard the safety warnings in the Bible, but also taken them to heart and obeyed them.

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*Spoken truth does not become real to us until it is believed and obeyed.*

So the first and most important core value at BCF is to convey God's truth in His word by whatever means is appropriate and in ways that engage the hearer. For adults this means this preaching service, where worship of God is combined with bible teaching, adult Christian Education classes, home Bible study groups, and other teaching times such as the Abound women's classes. The apostle Paul, speaking to the leaders of the church at Ephesus, said

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Acts 20:27

For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. NIV

And this is what your elders and other church leaders seek to do. As Sandy said in a message he gave a couple of years ago,

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"Our job as church elders and teachers and leaders is not to tell you our opinion, to give you the latest study or poll, or even to tell you what we think God is saying, but to tell you what God has said and is eternally saying in his Word."

And this can be challenging: we will continue our sermon series on the book of Romans next week, and within a few weeks we will have to wrestle with Paul's teaching on how God's mercy and His justice combine with His predestination of some to be objects of wrath. Fortunately Sandy and not I will be the preacher for this section of Romans! No wonder the apostle Peter said of Paul's letters

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2 Peter 3:16

His (Paul's) letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. NIV

But teaching the truth through preaching and teaching adults is only part of the way that BCF upholds the core value of truth. We love the special adults known as college students, and if you are here from any of our local colleges and universities I hope that you will find your way to our college class, where you can be part of a motivated group of students eager to learn and share God's word together. And if you are in that class, share the news with your friends on Facebook or Twitter so they can join you next week.

And God's truth is also crucial for our children. This church and indeed all churches are only one generation away from oblivion, and our children are the next generation of Christ-followers and church leaders who will continue to be the church long after I am in the grave. And so we have an active teaching ministry to children, with classes for all ages at 9:45 am and classes for younger children only at 11:15 am. We also have two ministries on Wednesday evening for children; Pioneer Girls for girls and Christian Service Brigade for boys.

And there is one key component of the truth that is so important that a whole separate service is devoted to it. This key truth is that Jesus Christ died for our sins. After Pilate asked "What is truth?" he sentenced Jesus to death, and Jesus was taken out and nailed to a cross, where he died in agony six hours later.

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And in dying Jesus, the Son of God, paid the penalty for our sins that we could not pay. But before He died He commanded His followers to remember Him in a simple act of eating bread and drinking wine in His memory, and we do this in a special service at 9:00 am every Sunday, in the chapel behind me. All Christ followers are welcome to join us next Sunday or any Sunday. In this service we are both challenged by the truth and also comforted by the truth.

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So the first reason to go to church is to be challenged by the truth. But there is an important second reason,

#### **2. To experience community.**

So the first thing to say is that God's plan for us is that we live our lives in community with others. Adam had everything he needed in the Garden of Eden; beautiful trees "trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food," a river to water the garden, animals to name, and so on. But God said Gen 2:18 "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him", and He created Eve. And since then men and women have been enriched by living in community with others.

John Donne (1572 – 1631) reminds us:

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No man is an island,  
Entire of itself,  
Every man is a piece of the continent,  
A part of the main.

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Community is so important to us that Facebook is doubling-down on becoming the best place for community. Mark Zuckerberg said, "we started a project to see if we could get better at suggesting groups that will be meaningful to you. We started building artificial intelligence to do this. And it works. In the first six months, we helped 50 percent more people join meaningful communities."

While this sort of digital community may be helpful to some, the best community is one where people can be encouraged in their walk with God without being condemned, and where people can reach out in love to each other. And that is exactly what the church provides. Listen to these words from the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians:

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Eph 4:1-6, 11-16

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

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11 It was (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 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.

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14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 15 Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. 16 From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Notice how Paul makes it clear in this passage that we are called to live in community: “bearing with one another in love.”, “From Jesus the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

And the writer to the Hebrews makes it very plain:

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Heb 10:23-25

23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. 25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching. NIV

So as Sandy pointed out, the church is not just a place for Bible data download for individuals; it is a place for authentic community “When we take God for our God, we take his people for our people.” (Matthew Henry) But how does this happen? True community does not just come up and grab you; it is something you must work for. This church offers opportunity for three levels of community:

- a. Large group. If you are listening to this message live, as opposed to online, you are already experiencing this level of community. It is good, but it is limited by its size, and you probably cannot connect with more than two or three people in this group
- b. Medium group. This could be an adult SS class, an Abound class, etc. In this smaller group you will get to know more people by name and will begin to develop deeper friendships
- c. Small group. This could be a House Group or other small group where you really get to know other believers and learn to love them and care for them. You just heard Hollie Gragg sharing what House Group meant to her. If you are not involved in a small group of some kind, let me encourage you to get involved. As Hollie mentioned, there are sign-up sheets in the front and back lobbies where you can express an interest in joining a House Group, and someone will contact you to invite you to one that suits your schedule.

Dr. Arthur Lindsley of the C. S. Lewis Institute has some wise words on the subject:

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Above all you (and I) need to be stimulated to love. You need to encourage others to love and you need others to encourage you in that pursuit. You need to give to others the gifts God has given you and receive from others out of the gifts God has given them. You are “one vast need” and must avoid the extremes of saying, “I am not needed,” or, “I don't need you.” .....you need to find a church that upholds the Gospel and preaches the Word of God! All of us need instruction, worship, fellowship, and expression of our faith (in evangelism and service). You need both sacraments and structure that will regularly stimulate you to love and good deeds. So don't forsake the “assembling of yourselves together.”

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### 3. To engage in mission.

The first reason for going to church is a vertical one; to receive teaching from God's word and to worship Him. The second reason can be thought of as an inward one; to relate to others within the church for love and mutual support. But this third reason is an outward one; it is to enable us to engage in mission. And mission is not just an optional extra, for “Super Christians” only. Jesus' last word recorded by Matthew were

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Matt 28:18-20

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Acts 1:7-8 He said to them: .... "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (NIV)

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Rom 1:16

16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. (NIV)

William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury 1942-1944, said "The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members," and we are called to be servants of others by sharing the good news with them. One of the secrets of doing this is to be willing to identify yourself as a Christian whenever you meet someone new. I usually try to slip in a question such as "are you interested in finding a church in town" if the person is a newcomer, and then follow on with more questions if the individual indicates an interest. Of the last two people I asked this question, one was a Jew and followed up with a polite "which church do you attend?" while the other person turned out to be a Christ-follower who attended a different church.

Another secret is to have a short summary of the gospel worked out in advance. Peter tells us

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"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." 1 Peter 3:15 NIV

Randy Newman, in his book "Questioning Evangelism" shows how this worked out in one case. He tells the story of a Christian student conference that invited four non-believers to be paid \$25 to be on a panel to answer questions on their beliefs for one hour. Near the end of the hour they asked "What do you guys believe?" The moderator did not want to break his promise of keeping them for just one hour, so he gave this short summary of the gospel on the spur of the moment:

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"What we believe could be called "Mere Christianity", the kinds of things on which the Christian church has agreed for centuries. We believe that there is a God and that He's made Himself known to us so we can have a personal relationship with Him-- one that would help us in this life and one that would last forever, in heaven. We also realize that we've all fallen short of any decent standard of goodness. In other words, we've all got some sin in us that's messed up a lot of things -friendships, consciences, relationship with God, things like that. We believe that Jesus is the answer for our problems. He not only taught us lessons on how to live so we don't have these problems, but He also died on the cross to take away the penalty that we deserved for the problems we've created. Each of us has come to the point where we follow Him every day of our lives."

Not bad for a spur of the moment response! A short summary along those lines would help all of us be ready to answer questions about our faith.

Well, my time has gone. I conclude by coming back to my original question and the four groups of hearers I mentioned earlier.

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- If you are a truth-seeker

You will hear the truth from God's word, and you will be able to connect with people in this church who can help you in your search.

- If you are a church-seeker

You will hear Truth, be connected to a multigenerational community, and be equipped for a life Mission.

- If you are an encouragement seeker

Take advantage of one of our small groups, so you can be encouraged by a loving group of friends who will pray for you and challenge you in your walk with the Lord.

- If you are a challenge seeker

Keep on keeping on in your desire to hear God's word and apply it to your life. And be careful not to let the Devil lull you into other paths.

As Sandy said "you have an enemy who seeks to distort truth and deceive you, who would divide the body of Christ and seek to isolate you, and who would –whether with pleasures, entertainment, busyness, poor relationship choices, or life pursuits that don't have time for God and his people – to divert you from the mission and calling he has given you – and us – which can only be fulfilled in community."

***As a church we value the Truth he has revealed to us, the Community he has called us to be, and the Mission he has given us to fulfill.***

May the Lord Himself bless you as you seek to apply this message to your own situation.