

From Acorn to Oak
What is the church? Why should I attend?
Rev. Edward D. Seely, Ph.D.

It is said that Dwight L. Moody was once confronted by a man who told him that he didn't need the church, that he could worship God by himself and serve him just fine without the church. Moody paid a visit to the man, and as they were sitting in his home watching the fire burn in the fireplace, the evangelist, without saying a word, walked over to the fireplace, took the tongs, and lifted a brightly burning log out of the fire and placed it on the hearth.

Moody returned to his seat, and both men silently watched the ember rapidly extinguish. When the flame on the separated log was no longer visible, the evangelist arose, took the tongs, and moved the log from the hearth back into the fireplace. Again he took his seat.

Both men continued to watch in silence as the ember, that by itself burned out, suddenly burst into flame, and resumed accomplishing its purpose: giving off light, warmth, and enjoyment. As Moody stood to leave, the man he came to visit broke the silence and through moist eyes said, "Mr. Moody, now I understand. I'll be back in church next Sunday."

This anecdotal account illustrates not only current social science research regarding the power of visual images to teach but much more importantly in this case a profound truth about the church. When someone absents him or herself from the corporate body, he or she becomes diminished and loses the potential for which he or she was created and called to function. When the ember was withdrawn from the fire, it ceased to give off the light, heat, and joy intended when it was lit; instead it became dark, dirty, and useless...until it was reunited with the other embers, thus regaining its usefulness and being productive as intended.

Further, the whole entity is diminished. As the fireplace doesn't give off as much light and heat, the church loses the benefit of the person(s) staying away, not sharing his, her, or their wisdom, spiritual gifts, energy, and many other blessings.

This reality of increased productivity in concert with others is becoming less recognized and/or valued by younger generations today and is a considerable concern in the church. Research by the Barna Group, which specializes in scientific investigations and analysis pertaining to the intersection between faith and culture, has empirically observed what many of us who are leaders in the church have suspected for some time that a significant percentage of younger people are absenting themselves from involvement with the church. Accordingly, they write,

As of 2014, the estimated number of people in the U.S. who Barna Group would define as "churchless"—meaning they have not attended a

Christian church service, other than a special event such as a wedding or a funeral, at any time during the past six months—stands at 114 million. Add to that the roughly 42 million children and teenagers who are unchurched and you have 156 million U.S. residents who are not engaged with a Christian church. To put that in context, if all those unchurched people were a separate nation, it would be the eighth most populous country in the world, trailing only China, India, Indonesia, Brazil, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the remaining churched public of the United States (159 million).

Barna tracking research has seen significant shifts in church involvement over the past decade. During that time, the number of adults who are unchurched has increased by more than 30%. This is an increase of 38 million individuals—that’s more people than live in Canada or Australia.¹

The Barna Group also reports research revealing that the percentage of adults in America who do not attend church has risen from 30% to 43% of the population since 1990.² Yet, the findings also indicate that those staying away from church are not hostile to the Christian faith, nor do they seek to belittle or tear down the faith; in fact, 62% of them consider themselves Christians. “Many of them remain culturally tied to Christianity and are significantly interested in it” Barna states; it’s just that as far as church attendance goes they just “have decided they can better use their time in other ways.”³

Individualism has always entwined itself in the cultural ethos of the United States, and it is also alive and kicking in many other countries of the world. Furthermore, many other components of our culture, while not evil per se, foster a focus on the individual that contributes to a mentality that minimizes a need for communal commitment. One of the most recent of these components is the Internet in which a growing number of people are finding religious needs being met on the Web. Like fire and water, the Internet can be used for good or for ill. Used as a haven for rampant individualism, the result is counterproductive to our society and the church. On the other hand, many find that the Internet facilitates faith in Christ, connecting with the church, and the accomplishment of its mission. Yet, the question arises, “Is the church still needed?”

First of all, the church is the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12, 27); he is its head (Ephesians 5:23); and Jesus said even “the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 15:28). The church first appears in the Old Testament in God’s establishing his covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17; Galatians 3:26-29), and throughout the New Testament its mission is described and commanded. Further, the

¹ <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/698-10-facts-about-america-s-churchless#.VIk3pMlrj3B>
(Accessed 12/10/14)

² <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/685-five-trends-among-the-unchurched#.VIIBeMlrj3B>
(Accessed 12/11/14)

³ <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/698-10-facts-about-america-s-churchless#.VIk3pMlrj3B>
(Accessed 12/11/14)

church is the people of Christ, not a building, and many of the people use the Internet for the purpose of trying to accomplish the mission Christ gave his church; yet, the Internet is a means the church can use to serve the Lord, but it is not a replacement or a substitute for his body. Thus, the church will always exist, and it is always needed, even by people who don't see such a need.

Social science studies have shown that communities where the church is present have significantly less crime and a higher quality of life than where its impact has not been as far reaching. For example, while certain justice issues pertaining to women have yet to be more fully achieved in our society, contrast the circumstances of women in the United States, where not only the Constitution but the culture has been shaped by the Bible, with the circumstances of women in countries where Islam is the dominant religion.

The church will always be needed. It is the primary means through which God is accomplishing his redemptive purposes in and through Christ. Yet, some ask, "Can't I still be a Christian and not attend an organized church, in particular worship services?"

Think of the last time someone praised you for something specific you did. How did you feel? Now try to recall if several people at once praised you for what you did for them, how did you feel? If several people haven't praised you, think of how you would feel. Now shouldn't we even more so praise God for all he's done and continues to do for us and at such a great cost to himself? We glorify God when we engage in corporate public worship. Further, is not an earthly father especially pleased when all of his children come to him and give him praise rather than if only half or fewer of his children do so?

We have a special opportunity to worship God with many others and glorify him as he so richly deserves. In so doing, we receive many benefits.

Reasons for Participating in Corporate Church Worship

Many people today question whether it is necessary for them to attend the worship services of an institutional church. The following are reasons for corporate church worship drawn from the Bible, God's Word; the wisdom of the historic church; and social science research.

God's Word clearly states that we should worship him regularly. Jesus himself did do and provided such an example for us to follow. In Luke 4:16 we read that Jesus on the Sabbath day "went into the synagogue, *as was his custom.*" (Italics mine) Even Jesus worshiped regularly. In his human nature he obeyed his parents (Luke 2:52), and he "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." (Luke 2:52) In Hebrews 10:25 the writer exhorts his readers, "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." That "meeting together" involved worship and the special fellowship God's people have with each other (*koinōnia*, the subject of which we'll return to below) that is a great blessing, including encouragement.

Regular attendance at church worship gives us a disciplined means of praising God. We can and should ask the person who says he or she “would rather worship God in my garden [or in the woods or on the beach as is also said],” “But do you? Even if your premise were correct (that God would be just as pleased to have his children worship him individually instead of corporately, which premise cannot be defended from the Bible, his Word), do you in fact worship him on Sunday mornings (the day Christians all over the world from the first century have witnessed to the Lord’s Resurrection by their corporate worship) or any other time each Sunday?” Through corporate worship we human beings, who are weak and constantly tempted to become involved in other matters than worship, have a strong and healthy discipline to join with our brothers and sisters in Christ and praise and worship in other ways the owner and ruler of the universe who has performed the most wonderful demonstration of love for us ever!

Our greatest blessing in church worship, even in a small gathering, and the main reason for attending, is that we are assured of meeting with Jesus, and also of course with the whole triune God, since all three Persons of the Trinity (Father, only begotten Son Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit, three Persons in one essence) share the same substance. Recall that our Lord himself said, “...where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matthew 18:20)

Blessings in the Call to Worship

In historic Christian worship services, the pastor begins by reading a passage from God’s Word such as Psalm 95:6-7, “Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.” How do you feel when you receive an invitation to the home of someone you respect and who is very important in your community? What an unparalleled privilege and pleasure we receive from such an invitation! How much more, how much exceedingly more, when we sense that the God of the cosmos, the whole universe, has invited us to come into his house and meet with him in his very presence!

Blessings in the Prayer of Confession and the Immediately following Assurance of Pardon

Being perfect, Jesus never had to confess any sins. But I do. I long to come to worship and participate in the prayer of confession, which historically and still occurs early in the service, just after God’s call of us to worship (the reading of a passage such as Psalm 95:6-7, “Come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. For He is our God, And we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.” [NASB]) and a hymn or song of praise.

Not only theologically is it necessary for sinful people to be cleansed in order to come into the presence of God who is Most Holy, but intuitively I sense my great need to be relieved of the weight of my sin, including its effects. And God provides that relief

immediately in two ways. It occurs when I confess my sins to him in the prayer of confession, and then it occurs most wonderfully when I hear the blessed words in the assurance of pardon that next follows, also typically from God's Word in a passage such as Psalm 103:8-13, "The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him...."

What relief! The burden is gone!

When this feeling of guilt is not relieved by God, humans try to relieve it in other ways. Some of those ways are counterproductive to their health and other wellbeing. All the ways of trying to relieve guilt other than by God are ultimately ineffective.

Another passage that is often used in the assurance of pardon is 1 John 1:6-9, "If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

Notice how practical and helpful is this worship! It frees us from guilt, shame, and intense feelings of inadequacy and strengthens us for engaging life! It provides the basis for mental, including emotional, health.

The music of the church facilitates and reinforces the message of God's gracious love. The instruments and voices help me express my joy in the Good News of what Jesus did, continues to do, and forever will do. The music also enables me to express my eternal gratitude to the triune God for all I value, cherish, count as good, and enjoy.

These blessings do not occur out in the woods. Even if those who go into a forest seeking to worship God (would that be the only true God who reveals himself in the Bible?) took their Bible and knew where to look for these passages above and the many other related texts, they would miss the profound significance of hearing God's forgiveness being authoritatively and lovingly proclaimed by a fellow human being whom he has called and ordained to be one of his spokespersons. The wind rustling the leaves can't even come close to the breath of a faithful pastor through whom God is speaking in ways that calm our deepest concerns.

The Holy Spirit uses our consciences to convict us of our sins. (John 16:8; Romans 2:15) We feel guilt. Yet, we are relieved of our sin and guilt. How do we overcome our sin and guilt and experience forgiveness, from God and from those we've offended? Those blessings come in God's corporate worship services and in the special Spirit-infused

koinōnia of the church—not out in the trees. Even when we are in wonderful quiet (for us) of nature, and even when we remember in our solitude the promises of God for forgiveness, we can't come close to the balm of the assurance and experience of forgiveness and relief from our guilt as we can when we hear in the worship services those precious words of forgiveness as proclaimed by the ordained and authorized representative of God through whom God is speaking to assure us of our pardon. Similarly, though on a different plane, we are comforted by the forgiveness extended to us of other humans who know and view us as we are: flawed but renewed in Christ Jesus.

In some parts of the world the church meets in congregations that do not have an ordained pastor. They still receive these blessings when their church leader, who is a committed believer in and follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, reads those words and others from the Bible at this point in a corporate Christian worship service.

This forgiveness is much more meaningful for those who are members of the church, who are committed to each other, rather than only attendees who lack that commitment. An analogy is marriage, which metaphor God uses for his relationship with the church throughout the Bible. (Jeremiah 3:1-25, esp. v. 20; Ephesians 5:21-33, esp. v. 32) The Biblical one flesh marital bond, in which a man and a woman experience the deeply profound oneness in Christ, enables, facilitates, and fosters the ability and desire to forgive which is far more satisfying than is typically experienced in the commitment-less cohabitation that leaves so much to be desired.⁴

Blessings in the Proclamation of the Word of God

In corporate worship we meet the triune God, and he reveals himself in and through the clear and faithful proclamation, explanation, and application of his Word to our lives and in the sacraments. In these ways and in the congregational prayers we sense the mystery and awe of God, we're drawn to him in and through the presence of Christ Jesus, and we're further equipped by the Holy Spirit for living life abundantly and effectively in Christ in the service to which he is calling us. We learn who God is, what he is like, and his plans for us, our role as he works in and through us as he accomplishes the redemption of his creation. We discern the difference between God and his creation, a distinction which is often blurred and misunderstood by people who only want to worship God in the woods or somewhere else in nature. We rejoice in God and in his creation without confusing them. Many churches hold at least one or more of their worship services outdoors in the summer, thus giving worshipers an experience of meeting God in a natural milieu but with the clear distinction of each, which enables us to worship the Creator and more fully appreciate and respect but not worship what he created.

I have had considerable experience with the pleasures of worshiping God in the out of doors. I was very involved as a scout and in various leadership capacities with the Boy Scouts of America. I was on the camp staff of one of the New York State Boy Scout

⁴ For an extensive documentation of the dangers of cohabitation, see my essay, "Is Cohabitation for God's People?" on the Marriage page of my Web site at www.fromacorntoak12.com.

camps in the Catskill Mountains. It was a pleasure to worship on Sunday mornings in the chapel in the pines, but I was doing it not alone but with a group of other Christians who were attending camp that week in a traditional Christian worship service based on the proclamation of God's Word and led by a pastor or a worship leader following the prescribed order of service. I've had similar experiences at a lot of other outdoor camps.

When we attend church worship services we're blessed individually as well as corporately. We're edified, encouraged, and strengthened in our faith by attending worship. In particular, we're further informed, inspired, and equipped in our high and holy calling and mission to witness for Jesus Christ more effectively and to serve him in other ways as well.

By attending corporate public worship services regularly, we are taught God's Word. If I were to only go out in a garden, woods, or beach and worship by myself, I'd not cover the whole counsel of God; I'd just focus on the things that most interested me or that I thought were important. In so doing I would be ignorant of vital needed information and fail to mature and become equipped for functioning most effectively in my calling from God in the place he has for me in his plan for redeeming his creation. In my observation, and in the testimony of the historic Christian church, this typically occurs with all who try to "go it alone."

In a sermon based on a text from the Bible, which is an explanation of that text, God speaks to us; we don't get that "out in the woods." We hear what we need to hear from an authority credentialed by respected educational institutions, and an official ecclesiastical organization, in the historic Christian tradition, who has prepared a thoughtful presentation explaining God's Word and applying it to matters we address and need to address today in order to serve most effectively in the holy calling God has given us, and to experience the most joy in so doing.

We increase in our understanding: we grow in our ability to make sense out of life. We find answers to the great questions of life and eternity. And we're encouraged to ask the tough questions of life and to find their answers in and consistent with God's Word, our ultimate guide, trustworthy standard, and highest authority. Because Jesus has set us free from the bondage of sin, we seek the truth, and the church helps us apply it accurately to the issues of life we encounter.

One way I've seen this understanding occur many times in both my own life and in the life of others in the church is in the answer to one of the most often asked questions: "Why does God allow evildoers to prosper while at the same time so many righteous people struggle?" The answer to that question is found in the Bible and in the helpful commentary that is given by pastors who have studied and prepared carefully to explicate those texts in sermons in the church's corporate worship and in church education classes. See for example Psalm 73:1-17 (cf. v. 17).

As much as I've studied God's Word, have degrees in theological education, and have taught and preached God's Word, I never cease to be amazed at how much I still have to learn! As I attend worship and hear an exposition of a Scripture passage, even one I've read and taught many times, I rejoice in learning more, not only about the meaning of the text but also its application in many new ways! Even though I hear some words that I've heard most of my life from the Bible and from sermons, I'm blessed as I hear them again in worship. I receive new insights and new applications for this time in my life that inform me regarding matters I'm engaging now that I never before dreamed I'd be encountering. Frequently fellow believers and I hear a Bible text and its explanation that provides us with an insight to share in an upcoming conversation that very week or soon after that we never anticipated, but that God knew was coming. What a joy it is to communicate what we've learned with others, which is part of what God is calling us to do.

Believers receive vital instruction helpful for their physical and spiritual health. Over time in a church faithful to the Bible, we receive "the whole counsel of God." This occurrence is especially true in churches that follow the lectionary, a prescribed series of Scripture texts for each Sunday over a three-year cycle, on which the sermons are based; thus the worshipers hear a balance in the messages that cover the main themes of God's Word rather than over-repeating the favorite emphases (sometimes called "hobbyhorses") of the pastor. In a congregation that proclaims the Bible as God's Word and infallible, we learn the full counsel of God, what we believe as Christians. In worship we are edified, but we also have many other opportunities to learn, for there are subjects in the Bible that, together with the explanation of what they mean and how they are applied, require more time than the 20 minutes, or in some places even an hour, a sermon is typically allotted.

Our society, which doesn't hold to a Biblical standard, is finding it more and more difficult to define what is right and what is wrong, especially in moral and spiritual matters. People who try to "go it alone" are buffeted by Satan and his legions of demonic followers. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5.) We need the help of fellow believers in and followers of Christ to stay on the right path. As members of a church we learn what is right and wrong and how to explain this distinction with conviction and with courage that comes from God directly in our hearts and minds and through fellow members.

We learn to be discerning and to speak the truth in love. For example, we distinguish homosexuality (Romans 1:18-27) from the gift of singleness (Matthew 19:11-12), yet following the command of Christ Jesus, we show love to all people, even our enemies (Matthew 5:44). The apostle Paul defines this love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, which includes being patient, kind, not envious or rude; it does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. We thus don't commit the naturalistic fallacy (saying that since something exists, it ought to exist) and confuse love with condoning behavior God condemns. At the same time love characterizes our approach to and our actions concerning homosexuals; we oppose homosexuality, because God opposes it, and social science

research shows why: the homosexual lifestyle is very unhealthy, dangerous, and unholy.⁵ There is a disconnect between loving people as Christ has commanded and advocating for a lifestyle that will harm them. How can a person truly love someone and affirm, much less encourage, that one's choice to engage a lifestyle that is unhealthy, dangerous, and unholy? That is why Scripture tells us in many places that if we see a brother or sister going down the wrong path, we must speak up, albeit in love. (Leviticus 19:17b; Luke 17:3; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20)

By attending worship and other learning opportunities with the church, we are reminded of Biblical teachings we've forgotten, but which we need to remember and to act on, in order to obey and to serve God most effectively, and to experience in abundance joy and fulfillment in life. (Cf. John 10:10) We remember and are blessed by the characteristics of God himself. (Cf. 2 Peter 1:12-15 for the importance of being reminded.)

Believers are inspired as their focus is lifted to God, relieved from their burdens by doing so, and receive guidance for coping with, dealing with, and overcoming the challenges of life. When we encounter problems, especially big ones, we tend to get tunnel vision and focus inward, concentrating on the thorn in the flesh that is causing so much discomfort. In so doing we lose the broad view, including the eternal perspective, that puts things in their proper proportion and order. Losing the broad perspective leaves God, our greatest help and hope, out of the picture. We need to remember that God is not only in the picture; he's holding the picture!

Fellow believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ help us to keep that perspective. In meeting with them, they remind us of these realities, and comfort us in other ways, during the difficult times we encounter and at other times as well.

We're healed of the great hurts of life, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The healing is always from God, sometimes directly and often indirectly through others in the church. We receive sound advice for dealing with the challenges of life, from small to large, both in sermons and in more focused counseling on other occasions as needed. Such a resource is vitally important, indeed crucial. So many individuals, books, videos, Web sites, and other sources are leading multitudes of people astray by offering counsel that is spiritually bankrupt, even demonically inspired, and contrary to God's Word. Watch out for them!

When we regularly attend corporate Christian worship, our minds expand to include the broader perspective in which we live, our historical roots and the future in the context of eternity, and that perspective blesses us and many others. Many people are "trying to find themselves," and they are only looking within. No wonder they lack a sense of meaning and value. First of all, the fallen human heart is "deceitful above all things and

⁵ For further information and documentation of these realities, see my book, *What Is God's Will Concerning Homosexuality? Help for Church Leaders and Others to Speak the Truth in Love*, which is available for free and shareable on the Current Issues page of my Web site at www.fromacorntooak12.com.

beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9) Looking within fails to provide a viable and sustainable source of help in “finding oneself.”

Part of the reason for this reality is that we are not “an island to ourselves.” We are connected with, partially shaped by and partially influencing, other people historically, in the present, and in the future.

In a fourth century A.D. church on the island of Crete, I stood in the narthex of the church at the entrance to the nave. Just inside the nave to the right of the main aisle lay the skeleton of an Early Church saint in an open sepulchre. A Greek Orthodox Christian nodded to the saint and said, “I am connected to that early believer and find meaning in my relationship with him and fellow believers in our eternal covenant relationship with God.”

When we have significant problems, we tend to narrow our focus on that issue and lose sight of the context in which we are living. When we broaden our perspective and see a particular problem we’re encountering in the light of eternity, including the past as well as the future, all under the control of God who is sovereign and who loves us and is committed to his covenant people, we are freed from the tyranny and bondage of the present predicament. We see that this angst of the moment has not always been so and will not last forever. In God’s worship our minds and hearts are lifted (*sursum corda*) and we receive his help in our every need.

Furthermore, until we find our identity in our relationship with the triune God, we will experience a constant and highly unsatisfying emptiness and meaninglessness in life. (Ecclesiastes 1:14) Thus, we see many people trying to escape and, sadly, using means counterproductive to their own and others’ well-being, such as alcohol, drugs, aberrant sex, gambling, excessive entertainment, and self-harm in addition to many other ways of avoiding reality. On the contrary, as we worship God, we draw near to him and sense the meaning, purpose for living, and joy in further awareness of our place in his world in the high and holy calling he has given us in his plan for redeeming his creation. (Ecclesiastes 2:26; Psalm 68; Matthew 28:16-20) We also see and receive his help to fulfill that calling!

This broadening of perspective is not only with regard to matters on this earth, but it also has a cosmic dimension. In our participation in corporate worship and other aspects of the life and work of a true church of Jesus Christ, in a congregation which holds to the Bible as the trustworthy Word of God and our highest authority, where Christ is proclaimed, honored, and glorified, we are equipped and strengthened for engaging in, and winning, the spiritual warfare which lies behind all the evil and hardship that is going on in the world. We have the protection and support of God and his people in his covenant community, through whom he is working to redeem his creation. (Ephesians 6:10-20)

Everyone is affected by this cosmic battle, but multitudes, including too many in the church, are blissfully (until something bad occurs) unaware of what is going on. They tend to be the ones who shout the loudest, “Where’s God in all this?!” when something goes terribly wrong, and they find themselves impacted by and struggling with the serious problems including evil that the enemy, Satan, the demons, and their followers through whom they work, perpetrate.

But, thanks be to God that he is sovereign, and he loves us. He is working in and through his church to accomplish his redemptive purposes. He has promised that he will build his church and that the gates of hell will not overcome it. (Matthew 16:18) One of the ways he is building and strengthening his church is as we regularly meet together for edification and encouragement and guidance. (Hebrews 10:23-25) By regularly meeting with God in his worship and participating in other work, as he’s calling his covenant people to do, we become ever more aware of and receive his protection and ongoing support. (Matthew 10:19-20; 18:20; 28:20) God, working through his people, guides, strengthens, and emboldens us to make the tough choices and do what pleases him throughout our lives and especially during challenging times.

Without the guidance and support that God provides through his people, one becomes vulnerable to the temptations, misdirection, and evil of the enemy. As more and more people drift away from their moorings in God’s covenant community, the church, they make choices and engage in activities that not only displease God but are counterproductive to their own well-being and the well-being of our society. Consult the social science literature to see the correlation between the decline in church attendance and the increase in social evils such as abortion, divorce, cohabitation, adultery, substance abuse, suicide, and a host of other maladies.

In fact, the church is the primary source in society for keeping the definition of these problems as being bad not good. There are many, in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, who want to redefine these issues, calling “evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.” (Isaiah 5:20) The church by teaching the truth in God’s Word, preserves human dignity and the awareness that one is made in and carries with him or herself the image of God, which means that he or she can be viewed as such by him or herself as well as by others.

Blessings through the Prayers of God’s Righteous People

The Bible says that “the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.” (1 Peter 3:12) Indeed, through the prophet Isaiah we hear God saying, “your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” (59:2) “The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.” (James 5:16 NRSV) For these reasons I’ve often said that I’d rather have one righteous quadriplegic in Christ, who can only lay in bed and move just his or her eyelids, praying for me than a million pagans. And in God’s corporate worship we have many righteous people praying for us. How are they

righteous? They are credited with Christ's righteousness on account of their faith in him (Galatians 3:26-29; Romans 4) and are trying to live out that faith in their daily lives in gratitude to him.

Thus, we are prayed for in the corporate worship of the church, and in so doing, we join those prayers for ourselves as well as for others. We learn to pray.

By attending church worship and other activities, we come know other believers and the pastor(s) who then care for us. If we or our family have needs, we can ask these people in the church, and they will pray for us and help us in other ways. Some churches also have email prayer lines that are daily updated. We can come to the pastor's office to meet with him or her for counsel and/or for prayer. The pastor will also come to our home and meet with and pray for us and our family.

Through the prayers led at corporate church worship, we broaden our awareness of the needs of others throughout the world, and we pray for their needs. We learn of the power of the prayers of those whom God declares righteous by their faith in Christ. We see exciting results of such prayer.

The children of Christ's followers who attend corporate public church worship services regularly, especially with both parents, tend to avoid many serious and negative practices. Some of these benefits include significantly less tendency to become involved in premarital sex, illicit drug use, dropping out of school, and suicide.⁶

They also tend to select as marriage partners fellow believers in and followers of Jesus Christ, which results in a much more successful marriage than is experienced in the population as a whole, for just one example, a significantly reduced divorce rate, as a result of obeying God's will to only marry a fellow believer in Christ. (2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 1 Corinthians 7:39; Malachi 2:11; Ezra 9:1-2 and 3-10:44; Nehemiah 10:30; Exodus 34:16; Genesis 26:34-35; 27:42-28:1 ff.; Deuteronomy 7:3-6; James 2:26)⁷

Blessings in the Benediction

The benediction, also coming to be called the Sending, is the last part of the service during which we are reminded that God sends us back into the world to continue growing in Christ and to partner with God in his redemptive work in his creation. In the benediction (from the Latin meaning good words) we hear the pastor proclaim words from the Bible in which God promises to go with us, equipping us with all we need to serve him effectively and to facilitate the accomplishment of his redemptive purposes,

⁶ To see more benefits, see the document, "Empirical Benefits of Church Worship," on the Christian Worship page of my Web site. It may be accessed at this URL: <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Empirical-Benefits-of-Church-Worship.pdf>.

⁷ See the supporting documents on the Marriage page at <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/marriage/>.

which is why he has called us to be holy (that is separate and uncommon) to him. These words are very supportive, encouraging, and strengthening.

Consider the meaning of these passages from the Bible that are often used in the benediction, and consider how you feel after reading and hearing them. “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.” (Numbers 6:24-26 NRSV) “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.” (Jude 1:24-25) “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Corinthians 13:14) “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.” (Hebrews 13:20-21)

Singing a benedictory song, such as a psalm put to music, lifts our spirits and gives us peace and joy that meets our deepest needs as does no other activity, especially as we do so standing next to other brothers and sisters in the Lord. An example of one such composition is “Psalm 84: How Lovely, Lord, How Lovely.”⁸

Blessings after the Benediction

Having worshiped, we leave further equipped mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically strengthened to serve God in the high and holy calling he has given us to be his witnesses. Of course, before we even leave the church building we’ve begun to witness to him. Corporate worship, in addition to individual worship, is one special way to witness to Christ’s Resurrection, especially when it occurs on Sunday, Resurrection Day. As the world travels by the church’s building and sees a parking lot full of cars, observers conclude that a significant number of people are taking the triune God, including his only begotten, risen, and reigning Son, seriously.

Regarding edification, we have to remember who the church is and who attends the worship services. To begin with, all humans are sinners and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23) We all need to grow more Christ-like. The members of any congregation are in various stages of sanctification, the ongoing growth in Christ-likeness that occurs throughout the life of one who is a believer in and follower of the Lord Jesus.

Thus, some will be more mature (cf. Ephesians 4:13) than others at any given point in time. Then there will be some in attendance who are not committed to Christ. All of us need to hear God’s Word in order to improve *in God’s sight*. In my own sight I may not

⁸ See the arrangement by Arlo D. Duba and Hal H. Hopson in *Sing! A New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, CRC Publications, 2001), p. 184.

need to improve, but my standard is not the same as God's standard, or even another person's perspective who can readily see where I need to do some improving.

I wish more people would point out those areas on which I need to do some work. Most people are afraid to say anything, because they want to be liked, and past experience has shown them that such speaking up isn't well received. But it should be, especially in the church. In fact, that corrective feedback is commanded in Scripture. For just a few examples, consider these: "Rebuke your brother frankly so you will not share in his guilt." (Leviticus 19:17b) Jesus said, "So watch yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him." (Luke 17:3) Paul wrote, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted." (Galatians 6:1) Observe that these are sins that are being referred to in these texts. God is not saying we should be walking around nit-picking and calling people on matters that involve only a difference of opinion.

We open ourselves in a healthy way to being accountable to other believers. The church in its exercise of discipline, corporately and individually, helps us to keep on the right track. If I try to "go it alone" I can justify to myself many things that are wrong; I need the watchful and loving eye of others and their counsel to hold to a Godly lifestyle and to function more and more in ways that will glorify God.

The key, as God also said, this time through the apostle Paul, is to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), which love he defined as being patient, kind, and acting not in a way that is boastful, arrogant, or rude. (1 Corinthians 13:4-5) The truth is, we need one another, especially as God works through us to help each other to mature in Christ-likeness in God's calling for us to be holy to him for the accomplishment of his purposes through us. As one Lutheran pastor well put it, "We won't attract people to Christ if we're living our lives in the gutter."

You've heard the partial-truth, "God accepts you as you are." The matter depends on our relationship with Christ Jesus. If we've been credited with Christ's righteousness, we are acceptable to God in an eternal relationship with him, who requires those in his presence to be righteous, but even then, he wants us to improve in our actions. In Christ we are OK ontologically, but morally and ethically in this phase of life here on earth we always need to do better, to be more like Christ in our actions and in the accomplishment of God's purposes, his work in and through us. (Cf. Ephesians 2:10)

Further, the key message of the Bible is that outside of Christ we are not acceptable to God. To correct that often-heard partially true assertion, we need to add some more words for all of us—those in as well as those outside of Christ. As a minister/evangelist friend of mine accurately responds to that partial-truth for those in Christ, "Yes, God accepts you as you are, but he loves you enough to not leave you that way!" In order to find how to not remain that way, and how to become mature in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16), we need to hear his Word from those who live in and walk with Christ and who've studied and applied the Word in their lives.

Other Benefits from Attending Church

We find and develop deep friendships. Social science research confirms what we feel in our daily lives, namely that the need to belong is one of our greatest needs as human beings. That need is met most fully through friendships in Christ that grow to a much deeper and more meaningful level than those we have in society in general.

In the special Holy Spirit-led fellowship in Christ, that the New Testament calls *koinōnia*, we're encouraged by others and we encourage them. This encouragement occurs in many ways:

- By warm greetings that lift our spirit and convey acceptance and belonging.
- Through affirmations of work and characteristics that are right and good.
- By affirming our faith in our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ and the reasons for it, thus greatly facilitating perseverance.
- By giving and receiving advice based on God's wisdom as the Holy Spirit speaks through friends in Christ on matters of importance to us.
- By giving and receiving admonition. God helps us learn his will as he speaks directly to us in our own minds and hearts and as he speaks through others. If we have thoughts that differ from the Bible's interpretation by the historic Christian church, we must talk about them with a respected leader in a Bible-believing church, one who has the courage to tell us what we need to hear, not what we necessarily want to hear. Through receiving corrective feedback in the context of affirmation and love.

God blesses us not only directly as individuals but indirectly, corporately, through other believers in the Body of Christ, the church. Involving others, he primarily and mostly works through the church to bless us. We know these gifts are from God, because he has told us so: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." (James 1:17)

The freedom from the bondage to sin that Jesus provides frees church members to care for one another. They are able to consider, and desire to help, others and not just focus on their own needs and desires. Caring Christians coming to know and love others who attend worship and other times of fellowship together, help them think rightly and work through times of doubt if they arise and to overcome the difficulties encountered in daily life. As a result, the church makes a significant difference in the community of which it is a part in countless and far reaching ways.

We need the regular reminders of what is right and what is wrong, as the Bible, God's Word, is truthfully proclaimed, explained, and applied to our daily lives. Moreover, we rejoice in seeing that we're not the only ones who believe that way; many others throughout the whole world, all in Christ Jesus, do too!

The members and leaders of the church lovingly listen to us in ways we do not find in the world that doesn't care about, and has little time, for us. They not only do this for us when we meet together at church. When we have questions and/or problems at home, at work, in school, in our neighborhood, we can find help in the body of Christ, the church; we ask God for help in this context and we receive that help. We find the wisdom to answer the most important questions in life and eternity and usually without cost (always without cost unless a problem requires the extra help of a trained professional such as a Christian physician, psychologist, or other worker). When such highly specialized help is needed, we have the assurance the church will guide us to one who is trustworthy, competent, and caring; never rely on the yellow pages in such circumstances.

We sense we're loved and accepted as we are and are not made to feel we have to be someone we are not. This is not to say we shouldn't always be trying to be more Christ-like, which all of us need to do. When we're most honest with ourselves, we recognize we all have changes we need to make. But Jesus is the only one we all are trying to be like; we never sense someone maturing in Christ is trying to remake us according to his or her preconceived notions.

We grow in our love for all people as they grow closer to God who loves all people and who wills that his Kingdom will comprise those "from every nation, tribe, people and language." (Revelation 7:9) We learn to value fellow believers from other parts of the world and what they bring into God's kingdom that enriches our lives. As people mature in Christ racism diminishes and extinguishes. (Ephesians 4:12-18)

We learn of and have opportunities where we can serve God with brothers and sisters in Christ both in the church and in the community in which we live and work. In so doing we sense we are connected with and pleasing God and helping to accomplish his redemptive purposes for his creation. In such opportunities for service we experience joyful fellowship at a deep and profoundly meaningful level that is uniquely enriching, including as a witness for Christ partially fulfilling his calling for us.

Marriages are strengthened and maintained, especially for those who were married in the church. For those who were married with a traditional liturgy, they took their vows "before God and these witnesses." A considerable percentage of the witnesses were members of that church with whom the couple is still in a relationship, and the couple is accountable to them if they don't live up to those vows. They are especially accountable to God. For those couples who now are part of another church, their present congregation serves to help them stay on the right path. (See for example, Leviticus 19:17b; Luke 17:3; Galatians 6:1; Ephesians 4:15; James 5:19-20.) All these benefits are even more strongly and easily experienced by couples who are members of the church, for the members find it much easier to relate to those who are fellow members, in the same way that family members can speak more easily and helpfully to members of their family than they can do with those who are not family.

The whole family is strengthened and blessed in countless ways, each member individually, and the whole family together corporately. Each person experiences the work of the Holy Spirit in his or her mind and heart directly during worship and in other activities, as well as indirectly through brothers and sisters in Christ in the life and work of the church, for example in conversations while working together on a service project, at choir or praise team practice, or in Bible study and Sunday school classes. When children hear other adults voicing and living the same values as their parents, they and their parents are all strengthened and encouraged. Even in nursery little children experience the special love and caring of Holy Spirit-inspired believers in and followers of Jesus Christ. That special milieu facilitates the development of an “at home” feeling for which the children will long when they are away from it as adults.

As Paul indicates in the first part of the Philippians 4 passage, sometimes conflicts occur in the church, but they usually are, and always can be, short lived. Further, when a conflict due to our human sin and immaturity occurs in the church, we have help on the vertical plane from God and on the horizontal plane from many others who will help us resolve the matter. Again, such human resources are more forthcoming with membership, as analogous in family relationships contrasted with visitors in a family context.⁹

We have opportunities to prepare to serve and to then serve. We read in Ephesians 4:11-16 that God has given spiritual gifts to the believers in and followers of Christ Jesus so that they will be able to help people mature and become more Christ-like. We don't usually find these people out in the woods on Sunday morning. Conversely, all of us who are believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, are important parts of the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) We've been given gifts to use to help build up the body of Christ, to help brothers and sisters in the Lord, to bless them and facilitate the accomplishment of his purposes. We can't bless them as much as possible if we're not with them.

As we engage in the worship of the triune God in the company and ongoing fellowship with his covenant people, we mature in Christ-likeness and in God's service. We seek to prepare ourselves and help others to prepare

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. 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. (Ephesians 4:12-14)

⁹ See the accompanying essay, “What is the Church? Why should I become a Member?” on my Web site at <http://www.fromacorntoOak12.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/What-is-the-church-Why-should-I-become-a-member.docx.pdf>.

Preparation for the end of life here on earth should be mentioned as one of the first reasons to attend church regularly, but I put it at the end since many if not most people may not read farther if this were one of the first points. Sadly, those who ignore preparation for eternity are the least prepared and find the end of this phase of life most difficult when it comes instead of experiencing the joy Jesus has provided. To do well in the challenges facing all of us in our final days in this world requires a life-long walk with the Lord, maturing in Christ via the time honored means of God's grace, which include hearing the proclamation of his Word and receiving the sacraments in his sanctuary where he meets with his people and dialogues with us, drawing us closer to him and to our church family, whose support is huge when our death, and the death of our loved ones, draws near and comes. To be the strongest and best prepared, we need to meet with God in his sanctuary regularly, ideally at least weekly, throughout our whole lives.

As a retired pastor, I've observed the very significant difference in countless people who've faced their death and the death of loved ones. Those who have given little thought to matters pertaining to God and his weekly worship throughout their lives have a much harder time coping in these situations. On the contrary, those who've nurtured their faith in Christ, and the faith in Christ of their loved ones, do grieve, including weeping, (John 11:35) but "not as those who have no hope." (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

I've experienced the death of both of my parents, who were wonderful and whom I loved dearly. I have also experienced the death of my precious wife of 48 ½ years. The death of a spouse is much, much harder. As Jesus explained, "at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh...So they are no longer two, but one." (Matthew 19:4-5) That Biblical one flesh marital bond is such a deep and profound oneness, that when separation occurs, especially where abundant love exists, enormous sadness emerges.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in Christ we can say with the apostle Paul,

"Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. (1 Corinthians 15:54-58)

¹⁰ However, God gives us all we need to help us cope with and overcome this greatest of all challenges. In a brief video, entitled "Managing Grief: Thanking God in and for Everything," and an accompanying essay, "Preparing for Living again as an Unmarried Person," I have explained how God has greatly helped me, and in countless ways each day continues to help me, function well in this temporary time between now and when I am reunited with my precious Carol in his eternal service and presence! Those resources can be accessed on my Web site at <http://www.fromacorntooak12.com/marriage/>. As with everything else on my Web site, they can be accessed for free and forwarded to anyone who may find them helpful.

The encouragement we hear each time we attend the meetings of the body of Christ, the church, enables us to stand firm indeed! And when our time comes to face the end of life on this earth, we can do so without fear and even look forward with joy to what is coming in and with Christ Jesus, with our loved ones in him, and with all his other people throughout the ages!

In this essay, we have seen many reasons why to attend church. God blesses us uniquely in countless ways in his church, the body of Christ, especially in services of God's worship, and in other ways in the life and work of the church, the people of God,¹¹ blessings that are not obtained anywhere else outside the church.

But there's more! Much more!! Many additional blessings are experienced uniquely when one joins a local congregation of Christians. Let's look together at what God offers you when you become a member of his church. See my accompanying essay, "What is the church? Why should I become a member?"¹²

¹¹ The church in the Bible always refers to people, never to a building.

¹² See the essay on my Web site, "What is the church, and why should I become a member?" on the Christian Theology page, in the section "What is the church, and how is God using it? (Ecclesiology)," which can be accessed at <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/what-is-the-church/>.