

QUESTION 1



Is church only for Christians?

It's a little surprising until you come across the idea for the first time, but there are quite a lot of people who think that going to church is something that you should only do if you are a Christian.

After all, I suppose the thinking is that if you are a Muslim, you go to a mosque; if you are Hindu, you go to a temple; and if you are a Christian, you go to a church. If you are not a Christian, or do not believe in any sort of higher power at all, you go to Starbucks on Sunday morning instead. You wash your car. You play golf. You catch up on sleep after a busy week. You read the latest blog on your iPad, and you generally take life easy on Sunday morning.

The strange thing is that some people who do not call themselves Christians feel that if they were to turn up one Sunday morning or



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Saturday evening at a church service, they would be intruding. They look around and wonder whether everyone is thinking, 'What are *they* doing here? Surely they know you are meant to bow at this point, raise hands here, scratch behind left ear in meaningful way as the minister performs this particular genuflection?'

The strange thing is that actually many people who are regular church-goers are absolutely *thrilled* when new people decide to show up and check out church for the first time. They don't *care* whether the newcomers know everything or not – they are like a breath of fresh air. They want the new people to have the freedom to find things out, and wish to see if they encounter the God that these regular church-goers believe is real.

Why this feeling then that someone who is not yet a Christian perhaps should not be *allowed* to come to church? Or, if they do turn up, why do they sometimes feel uncomfortable? After all, if you've never been to a natural history museum before, you don't think everyone is thinking, 'What's this guy doing here? You mean he can't tell the difference between a pterodactyl and a brontosaurus! Get him out of here!'

Some of this comes down to the sheer *awkwardness* of many church services. The funniest example of this awkwardness comes from a clip on YouTube of Rowan Atkinson as he plays his well-known comic character Mr Bean. It is sheer comedy gold. The link is <http://tinyurl.com/myab7ay>.

This is also strange because as the late former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple is said to have put it, 'Church is the one society that exists for the benefit of its non-members.' That is the whole point of church, to be a living testimony to who God is for those who are looking to discover him. The Puritans talked about it in terms of 'means of grace'. The church is



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a 'means of grace'. It is a zone which God has designed where, if you come with an open heart and if the Spirit is at work in your life, you will encounter God himself. It's not our place; it's his place. It's not a 'sanctuary' in the sense of a special religious area which is separate from normal human reality; it's more like the center of the TARDIS in *Doctor Who*. It's a place where the time orbit of the universe is designed to be able to open up. This 'temple' is really Jesus himself (John 2:20-21), and church is simply a means to that encounter with Jesus.

I remember a conversation I had with someone along these lines. We had gone out kayaking into the Long Island Sound. This is a calm piece of water that extends from New York City into New England and is a precious reserve of wildlife and offers opportunities for water sport. He and his wife had come to visit us, and I was hoping that he might come to church with us. It was a little awkward because I was the preacher, and asking someone to church when you are preaching is a bit like asking someone to a restaurant when you are the cook. You know the conversation after church, if they come, will be a little awkward, too, as they flounder after seeing you now from a somewhat different point of view after hearing you preach the Bible. Anyway, I was trying to build up courage to invite this person to church, and as we paddled around in our kayaks, some sort of garbled sentence blundered out of my mouth. As I stammered away about him coming to church, he said to me something I will never forget: 'I didn't know you would want us to come. Sure, we'll be there. Look forward to it.' And we kept on kayaking.

In other words, no big deal. And in other words, you are invited and welcome, and sometimes people who don't regularly come to church just need to hear that.

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I asked that person afterwards what he thought of the church. He said some nice things about the sermon (always good to hear), and then he remarked how a particularly square-bodied person had greeted him when he came in the door. He said it was like being hugged by a small car.

A story

Bill was not sure he belonged. He walked into the large church building and scanned around. Apparently, he had arrived late as there were no seats at the back of the auditorium – the place to which he naturally would have gravitated. A friendly-looking man smiled at him and offered him a handshake as he hovered on the threshold. Somewhat gingerly he took it – a firm grip, brief look in the eye. He was ushered all the way down the aisle to the front of the church. There wasn't much room for him elsewhere. They were singing some sort of song, words that he could not catch, and once the usher had deposited him in his assigned seat, he attempted to follow along. Before too much time had passed, the song was over, and everyone immediately sat down. After a moment's hesitation, he joined them.

Some guy got up to the podium, prayed for a moment or two, opened what Bill was pretty certain was a Bible, and started to speak. He had a gentle manner and was reasonably engaging, and for most of the time Bill was listening.

At the conclusion they sang again. Bill joined in once more, now slightly less hesitatingly. The 'service' apparently had now come to an end. He looked around wondering whether anyone would talk to him, and hoping they wouldn't, started to make his way towards the exit. Bill was thinking about God, the Bible, living a life of genuine value – those were some of the themes

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that the sermon had encouraged – and he wanted to get out to a coffee shop, order a strong cup of Java and think.

A middle-aged woman accosted him. She had a big smile. Too big, Bill thought, and she began to pump him with questions. How long had he been coming? Where was he from? Was he married? Bill thought the kindly woman was trying to marry him off to her spinster daughter. Before Bill straight out asked what her point was in talking to him, the woman whisked off to have another conversation with someone she evidently knew much better. Bill once more inched his way towards the exit.

Before he could get out, though, the minister reached out a hand to him. 'Thanks for coming,' the pastor said. 'Glad you were here.' Bill muttered a reply. What was he to say to a 'man of the cloth'? (Bill thought that was what this kind of person was – not sure – something like that.) Bill hoped that the interview with the minister was over, and he once more (and perhaps at last he would make it) moved towards the door to leave. Before he had taken more than a step, though, the pastor said, 'Anything you would like me to be praying about for you?'

Bill was rooted to the spot. Now that was a question and a half. Anything he would like a man of the cloth to be praying about for him? Was there ever! Not just anything, many things. Bill turned around and this time looked the man in the eye. Before he could stop himself, he began to talk.

Questions for discussion

1. Do you remember the first time you went to church? What was it like?
2. Do you remember the first time you went to a church that was a different denomination than yours, or was part of a different network than yours? What was that like?
3. When was the last time you went to church?
4. Have you ever been to church? If not, why not? What might help you get involved or at least try out a church for the first time?
5. If you are a church leader, how could you structure your church services in such a way that they maintain biblical fidelity as well as grow in biblical outreach? Are those two values – faithfulness and connection to outsiders – really in contradiction, or does one build on the other?