

What's "Going to Church" All About Anyway?

Last week I read something that caused me to question why I attend the church's assemblies. Is my motivation right? I'm reading What Good is God?: In Search of a Faith that Matters by Philip Yancey (insert here all the appropriate caveats about not agreeing with everything in the book).

In two chapters, Yancey addressed the question of what good is God in the face of all the addiction and sin rampant in our world. He spoke quite a bit about the differences and similarities between 12-step groups and local churches. A couple of his paragraphs really stood out to me. I'd like to share them with you.

I asked George why most of his friends in A.A. avoid church. He told me about people who have experienced rejection and who see church as a place to underscore their failures. "When I invite friends, they feel uncomfortable in church. They feel like misfits. Church people are so *together*, they think. They dress nice and have families and jobs. Their lives work out. Our lives are a mess. We'd rather sit in our blue jeans and T-shirts and smoke cigarettes or drink coffee and be totally honest with each other."

George then made a shrewd observation. He said that in church if someone comes in late, people turn and look at the latecomer. Some scowl, some smile a self-satisfied smile—*See, that person's not as responsible as I am*. In A.A., though, if a person shows up late, the meeting comes to a halt and everyone jumps up to greet the latecomer, aware that the tardiness may be a sign that the addict almost didn't make it. As George put it, "When I show up late, it proves that my desperate need for them won out over my desperate need for alcohol."¹

I've had my fair share of experiences with 12-step groups and local church assemblies and I can assure you this is a pretty accurate picture. No one spends time arguing about how many 12-step meetings they need to make in a week. And no one spends any time competing over who attended more. No one views attending a meeting as a notch on their spiritual belt, proving how strong they are or how better they are. Rather, they attend because they know if they don't, they'll be back on the bottle. Those meetings are a life line.

Please don't miss the forest of those paragraphs for the trees. I'm not suggesting we sit around smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, nor am I suggesting that we stop everything and welcome someone who is coming in late. I was struck by the attitude and motivation. Perhaps another set of paragraphs will help further the point.

Several times in my writing I've referred to my alcoholic friend George, who happens to be here tonight. He told me that when he first stumbled into an A.A. meeting on a bitterly cold night some twenty years ago a group of total strangers welcomed him with open arms and told him to "keep coming back." George had hit bottom, his life was a mess, and since nobody else was telling him that in those days, he accepted their invitation.

George sometimes gets a different response from his church friends. "Aren't you done with that issue yet?" they ask. And this is what George says: "I realize that for the rest of my life, I can go to A.A. meetings and nobody will ask me, 'Aren't you finished with all this talk about your alcoholism?' They will just say, 'Keep coming back—glad you could make it.'"ⁱⁱ

Hebrews 10:25 says, "Not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (ESV). There is no doubt I need to be at the church's assemblies. But after reading these paragraphs, I'm asking myself why I come.

Do I come to prove how good I am at obeying a verse I've made into a rule? Do I come to impress God and others with my ability to attend? Or do I come because I realize how much I desperately need the encouragement? When I think about someone who isn't at an assembly, do I look down from my lofty spiritual height on them? Or do I worry about what victory Satan has had over them that they felt they didn't need the encouragement, remembering that I have been there (and not all that long ago)? When someone walks in late, do I quietly berate them for not having it as together as me? Or do I simply thank God that they let their desperate need for God and His children win out over whatever other desperate need was pulling them away? When someone comes forward for the tenth time, do I wonder when they will get it together (as if I have it together)? Or do I praise God that He has a place for this person to turn and boldly invite that brother or sister to keep coming back because they are in the right place for dealing with that struggle?

At the heart of these questions is what do I think the church is? Is it a country club for the spiritually up and coming who have it all together, where we can sip our coffee from china cups with pinkies raised high and eyebrows arched? Is it a high society gathering of those who can look down on everyone else who just doesn't seem to quite measure up? Or is it a hospital for the sick, afflicted, and dying? Is it a place we are coming to be healed and so we aren't surprised to see a bunch of sick people walking around? Is it a life-saving station that is filled with coughing, spluttering people who know they have no place to look but God? Am I willing to admit that? Or do I want to come and try to lead you to believe that you can also look to me?

Finally, I ask myself: if someone comes in whose life is an obvious mess, would they think they had come to a group that would help or would they turn around and leave, thinking we don't have any room for them? Would we tell them to keep coming back?

I know I'm raising more questions than I'm answering with this article. I just want us all to think about the things this book has brought to my mind. I want us all to ask, "What's 'going to church' all about anyway?"

ⁱ Philip Yancey, What Good is God?: In Search of a Faith that Matters, Hachette Book Group, New York, 2010, kindle ed., loc. 3039.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* loc. 3268.