

JOSH MOODY

How Church can Change Your Life



ANSWERS TO THE TEN MOST COMMON
QUESTIONS ABOUT CHURCH

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS

Copyright © Josh Moody 2015

Josh Moody has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

ISBN 978-1-78191-611-7

First published in 2015

by

Christian Focus Publications Ltd,

Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire

IV20 1TW, Scotland

www.christianfocus.com

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Designed and typeset by
Pete Barnsley (Creativehoot.com)

Contents

Introduction.....	i
1. Is church only for Christians?	1
2. Do I need to go to church if I am a Christian?	7
3. Which church is the true church?	15
4. Why are there so many different kinds of churches?	23
5. What is the point of baptism and communion?	31
6. Why is preaching important?.....	39
7. Why is there so much politics in church life?	47
8. Should I go back if I have been hurt by church?	57
9. What should I look for in a healthy church?	65
10. How can I serve in a church?	73
Conclusion.....	81
References	85

Introduction

Why another book on church?

If you have been following recent publishing trends in Christian circles, you will know that there has been a spate of books on church (or 'ecclesiology'). Running through the whole list of titles that have appeared in the last ten years would be boring and redundant: you could google them yourself. But the point is there are a lot of them.

So why another book on church? Because this book is asking a fundamentally different question than the other books that predominant in publications over the past decade. In fact, that single different question is divided into ten questions in this book for ease of reading. And the overarching question is this: 'Why should I go to church at all?'

Obviously, not many books have been written on that theme because writing a book on church for people who are not sure they want to go to church is a bit like writing a book on writing for people who are not sure they want to write. There's not a big market for books for people who don't like to think about the subjects of the books that are being written. First of all, you have to be interested in church before you are likely to read a book on it. Once you are interested in church, then you will be asking different kinds of questions, namely, as a coverall kind of question, 'How do you do church?'

How Church can Change Your Life

This is technically called a 'polity' question, that is referring to matters like the organizational structure of how you do church, with particular references to authority structures, roles and the like: 'how do you do leadership?'; 'how do you do membership?'; 'how do you do worship services?'; 'how do you do outreach?'; 'how do you do small groups?' Obviously there is an important market that seeks to engage conversation about these matters.

The conversation has recently shifted, however.

That is because statistics are coming out, as well as anecdotal evidence, which suggests that the rising generation of millennials is asking a different kind of question. In some ways it is the same question that has been asked ever since the anti-institutional revolution came about as a result of Vietnam and the Swinging Sixties. As John Stott began in his famous book *Basic Christianity*, people love Jesus, but are not sure about the church.

Why go to church?

While in some ways, however, this is an old question – 'Why should I bother going to church?' – in other ways it is a new question, or at least a newly asked question. 'Why should I go to church?' That is, 'Why should I be involved in church? What does this thing called the local church have to do with Christianity (or "spirituality")? Can't I just be "spiritual" but not be "religious"?' (which seems at least in part to mean not wanting to have an affiliation with a religious 'institution').

Of course, many of us are suspicious of, or unexcited by, institutions. But more and more people are asking themselves 'Why go to church?'

Introduction

and not just (the topic of most other recent books on church) ‘How do you do church?’

This book is an attempt to answer the question ‘Why go to church?’ It is broken up into ten subsidiary questions – confidently dubbed ‘answers to the ten most common questions about church’. Whether they are *the* most common questions I suppose none can say. All I can offer is that in my experience (having now been a pastor for twenty years or so) they are very common indeed. Within these questions there are inevitably answers to some of the questions about how to do church, as well, but the focus is the prior and more foundational question: ‘Why should I go to church at all?’

The answer to that would be easy to oversimplify, or shove down people’s throats in an unsubtle and insensitive way. It would also be easy to say that the answer is simply to make the church more contemporary. I am certainly not opposed to ‘bringing the church up-to-date’ (though what that means depends on who is proposing it) as long as that does not also mean abandoning what Jesus said, in his Word, the church should be. But my instinct (and experience) is that people are not asking the question ‘Why do I need to go to church?’ because they are looking for more rock drums (and that comes from someone whose wife is a rock drummer). Smoke machines, dry ice, skinny jeans, laser shows are not wrong. But they are not the answer either.

I first began to discover this misplaced attempt to answer the question when I was working in an area of the world which was considered very secular and postmodern, which, I suppose, meant that not many people went to church anymore. We were exposed to all sorts of ideas from consultants and denominational leaders about how to draw people (back

How Church can Change Your Life

to church. I listened. I thought. It occurred to me at some point that most of these ideas were the equivalent of trying to persuade people to buy Coca-Cola (or Pepsi), when the reality was that the people around me had no interest in soft drinks at all. There was no point putting in place a really cool rock band (much as I am in favour of that sort of thing) or building a better car park (again, as much as that can be a good thing to do). But there was no point doing that when people were not coming to church because they thought church *in itself* was pointless. You can't base your argument around the assumption that people want some sort of soft drink, and try to persuade them to drink Coca-Cola instead of Pepsi, when actually they need first to be persuaded to drink any kind of soft drink in the first place.

The prior question with relation to church is simply: 'Is it necessary?' 'Do I *have* to go?' Of course, when you put it like that, you immediately cringe. It's a bit like a husband saying to his wife, 'Do I *have* to kiss you?' Something is a bit wrong when that is the question on the table.

So we need then to cast a vision for what the church is, so that the question – 'Do I *have* to go to church?' – is replaced with, 'What can I do to serve the church?'

The trouble of course is that people's ideas of church are so miscued that if church, biblical church, were really like they think it is, then I don't much blame them staying away.

You see this in marketing all the time. Whenever there is a piece about the church, you will see a picture accompanying it that has two older people and a large empty stone building. The reality is that in many parts of the world, and in many churches, there are booming congregations. Media is selective with its depiction of the reality.

Introduction

Sometimes it can almost be funny. One church I pastored had in its congregation an average age of about 27. We literally had maybe three people over 65 in the whole place. Our *elders* were in their late 20s. You get the idea. When we finally managed to buy a church building, the local newspaper turned up to capture the big moment. The place was packed with college students. We had a rock band on stage. There was laughter, excitement, a sense of thrill and newness. The news guys didn't come into the building; they didn't even enter. They took one picture – the one that went on the front page of the newspaper – of me at the door hugging one of those three older people. I loved each and every one of those three; hence the hug. But to depict that age range as a true representation of what was going on was extraordinary.

You see this media selectivity over the church worldwide.

On the other hand, people sometimes get wrong ideas about the church for good reasons. If you are one of those, then I am sorry. I know I have not personally hurt you, and my apology won't make a shred of difference in all likelihood. But there it is. Remember Christ died for the church – and boy, does it need saving.

There is another point here, though, before we get into the main body of this book and these ten questions—and that is pride.

The reality is that it is very hard for us to believe that the secret of the universe, the centre of the infinite majesty of all reality, the revelation of God in Christ, the Word eternal, is all being discussed in one rather small building on the corner of our street—or even in one very large building in the centre of our town.

Why is it like this? To help us, perhaps, we start off how we will need to continue—with humility. Going to church gets us out of our self-orientated

How Church can Change Your Life

prison. We are forced to sit next to someone who reeks of garlic. We are forced to put up with music that is not our taste. We are made to listen to truths that we wish were rather not true. All this is good for us.

It is not only good for us; it is essential if we are to find joy. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:3).

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 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

How Church can Change Your Life

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 churchgoers 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 churchgoers 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/myab7av>.

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

Is Church Only for Christians?

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 centre 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.

How Church can Change Your Life

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

Is Church Only for Christians?

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?

QUESTION 2



Do I Need to Go to Church if I Am a Christian?

This is, again, a surprising question, at least historically speaking, but is probably the most prevalent question currently of all ten questions in this book.

Augustine, the great Christian theologian from the fourth and fifth centuries, said, 'There is no salvation outside the church.' Today, certain groups of Christians might instead say, 'There's not much of any salvation in the church.' Today, the mantra is 'Love Jesus ... *not quite so sure about the church!*'

This is strange historically; it is even stranger biblically.

Biblically, the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). That means that a Christian is a part of that body. When Paul, the author of the letters to the Corinthians, said that the Corinthian Christians were part of the body

How Church can Change Your Life

of Christ, he was not talking about what theologians term ‘the universal church’ (that is, the church everywhere and at all times). He meant that actual church in Corinth. ‘You,’ he said, writing to the Corinthians, ‘you are the body of Christ.’

To be a member of Christ – that is, to be a real, true Christian – is to be a member of the church. There is no distinction because the church is the body of Christ; therefore, you cannot be a member of Christ without being a member of a church.

People get all hung up about this, because when they think of church, they think of bricks and mortar, and certain complicated religious institutions with hierarchy, and people sitting in big impressive-looking thrones on stages, wearing oddly shaped hats and long white flowing robes, and all that paraphernalia of the traditional church. Obviously, they didn’t have much of that in Corinth in the first century when Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

Paul is talking about the organic church, but he also does mean an actual church—an actual local church. To be a Christian is to be a member of one of these churches. The New Testament has no example, not a single one, of a Christian who is not a member of a church.

The early chapters of Acts also provide evidence about this. There, when many people became Christians, not only did they put their faith in Jesus, but they were joined to the church. The two go together (Acts 2:41, 47).

Here is what this does *not* mean. This does *not* mean that going to church saves you all on its own. The joke is so old it is practically hackneyed in church circles, and I can barely prevent myself from yawning as I type it, but it’s still effective in its own way: going to church doesn’t make you

Do I Need to Go to Church if I Am a Christian?

a Christian any more than going to McDonald's makes you a hamburger. Mere institutional allegiance, mere actual physical presence in a church building at a church service, however regular, however devoted in being there every time the church meets, is not what will save anyone. We are saved by faith in Jesus, not by church attendance.

Here is what this *does* mean, however, It means that if you say you follow Jesus but you are not a member of a local church that is biblically founded and gospel-preaching, I have no reason to know for sure whether you actually are following Jesus. In fact, I have pretty good evidence to suggest you are not. Church is the natural expression of someone who follows Jesus in the same way that the natural expression of a hand is to be attached to its body. I might be able to be persuaded that a hand I found wriggling around on the floor detached from a human arm might belong to some real human nearby, but I'd want to rush both the hand and the body off to the hospital pretty quickly for surgery. In fact, I wouldn't feel in good spirits about the prospects unless I found a really good surgeon. Even then, the outcome would be dicey.

Going to church means going to a local church that calls itself a church. This is not the same as listening to an iTunes podcast of praise music in pajamas with a Bible balanced nearby and a coffee at your elbow. There's nothing wrong with doing that, but it's not going to church. Going to church is not the same as hanging out with a bunch of evangelical Christian students in a dorm reading a Bible study with real passion and commitment, and a totally radical mission, and ignoring the older people down the road who desperately need you to come along to encourage and serve them. It is not being so self-absorbed that you can't

How Church can Change Your Life

meet someone outside of your own age group who might have an IQ of less than 120.

If there are good biblical, Jesus-preaching churches nearby, if you are not physically sick and are able to get there, and if you say you follow Jesus, then if you are not a member of one, I have my doubts as to whether you really are following Jesus. You might be just a look-alike, a fake part of the body, rather than a dismembered hand that desperately needs reattaching.

In short, if you don't go to church, even if you prayed a sinner's prayer at a camp retreat, I think you are in danger. Don't you think that hand that's cut off is in danger of dying, too?

Being a member of a church does not mean simply putting your name in some electronic database and getting annoying mailings and emails. It means expressing in a formal way a personal commitment to a local body of Christ. It's like a wedding ring. In some cultures men do not wear wedding rings; in our culture they do. The formal expression of membership will vary from culture to culture, but the essence is the same. When you become a member and sign on the dotted line, you are making certain commitments, and the formal process is like a wedding ring, showing that you've made that commitment to other fellow believers in the church.

Should you go to a church if you are a Christian? Yes.

A story

Jane had somehow fallen out of the habit of going to church. It had not been through any conscious decision, as such. But, bit by bit, she realized that she was attending less and less. At first she felt guilty about it. She was busy with

Do I Need to Go to Church if I Am a Christian?

her work, and when it came to Sunday morning, she did not feel like getting up and dressed, then making her way to church. It seemed like too much hassle some weeks. When she had missed a couple of weeks in a row, she realized that there were other things to do on Sunday morning—and some of them were quite fun. She went out to brunch with a friend at a nearby café. There was a whole group of people there, none of them seeming particularly evil. They were eating, chatting and reading newspapers. She and her friend connected really well that morning, and it became a new routine.

Jane still read her Bible from time to time. But church became an occasional chore for when her friend was out of town, or when she found there was some programme or event at church that particularly caught her attention.

Gradually, a strange dynamic started to take place. Jane no longer felt guilty when she was away from church. In fact, she felt quite liberated. She signed up for a local running club and got fit again, and she began to go on 5K runs for fun. She was making friends and feeling less exhausted on Monday morning because she had taken the whole weekend off to relax and recharge.

No, she did not feel guilty when she stayed away from church. Actually, now she started to feel guilty when she went to church. It wasn't that the minister's messages were particularly heavy or guilt-inducing. It was just that when she was there, she felt like everyone was looking at her saying 'Why aren't you here more often?' That made her feel bad. Jane did not like to feel bad, so she stayed away more frequently.

Things would have stayed like this, in all likelihood, for the rest of her life had she not happened to go to that friend's wedding.

It was a fairly typical wedding: not overly fancy, but done right, in a church, with all the bells and whistles. Jane was actually a bridesmaid. She

How Church can Change Your Life

wasn't married herself yet, and so she was going around thinking about all the preparations and what things she would and wouldn't do when she got married. She liked the bridesmaids' dresses (a revelation: every other wedding she had been to, the dresses for the bridesmaids seemed mainly designed to make the bride look good by comparison). The flowers were not her kind of thing; the music was interesting, different, well done and had some tunes that were drawn from some of her favourite bands playing in the background.

All in all, Jane was having a pretty good time. That is, until the sermon.

The preacher read from Ephesians 5, where Paul says that marriage is a visual image of Christ's love for the church.

That made her think. For some reason she had never really noticed that the church was Jesus' bride.

That was a whole different level of seriousness, significance and conviction. Now she didn't feel guilty about going to church. She also didn't feel guilty about not going to church. She realized that she desperately needed to get back in touch with this bride of Christ.

Jane emailed the pastor's wife when she got home. 'Can we get coffee?' was the subject headline. She realized she didn't need to 'go' to church; she needed to become a part of the church.

For Jane, it started with coffee.

Questions for discussion

- 1.** Why do you think some people reckon they can be Christians without being involved in a local church?
- 2.** What does Jesus think when people say they follow him, but they ignore his bride?
- 3.** What could your local church do differently in order to present itself as a body and not just as an organization or institution?
How could you help make that happen?
- 4.** Do you think the idea of 'going' to church needs to be replaced with a different metaphor?
- 5.** How could you be more involved with your local church?
- 6.** All families are a little dysfunctional. How can you love the more dysfunctional aspects of your local Christian family, the church?

Christian Focus Publications

Our mission statement –

STAYING FAITHFUL

In dependence upon God we seek to impact the world through literature faithful to His infallible Word, the Bible. Our aim is to ensure that the Lord Jesus Christ is presented as the only hope to obtain forgiveness of sin, live a useful life and look forward to heaven with Him.

Our Books are published in four imprints:

CHRISTIAN FOCUS

Popular works including bio-graphies, commentaries, basic doctrine and Christian living.

C H R I S T I A N HERITAGE

Books representing some of the best material from the rich heritage of the church.

MENTOR

Books written at a level suitable for Bible College and seminary students, pastors, and other serious readers. The imprint includes commentaries, doctrinal studies, examination of current issues and church history.

CF4•K

Children's books for quality Bible teaching and for all age groups: Sunday school curriculum, puzzle and activity books; personal and family devotional titles, biographies and inspirational stories – Because you are never too young to know Jesus!

Christian Focus Publications Ltd

Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, Scotland, United Kingdom.

www.christianfocus.com