

The Church | A Woman Of Valour

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

This article is dedicated to the memory of William Tyndale (c 1490-1536), an active and passionate Christian writer and translator, whose historical influence on the translation of the Bible into English cannot be overstated. Tyndale was convinced that the Bible alone should determine the practices and doctrines of the church and that every believer should be able to read the Bible in his own language *“The church of Christ is the multitude of all those who believe in Christ for the remission of sins, and who are thankful for that mercy and who love the law of God purely, and who hate the sin in this world and long for the life to come.”* – William Tyndale

In my recent article, [‘The People Of The Kingdom’](#), I noted that **the church is the tangible evidence of the kingdom of God**. Church people are kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that *“are literally connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity”* ([Ecclesiastes 3:11](#)) (Matter Of The Heart). By looking more closely at how the Bible describes the church, we will also see what the advancement of this kingdom of God looks like, in reality, demonstrated in the lives of those men and women who gather together as the church.

What Does ‘Church’ Mean?

Our English language Bibles were translated from manuscripts written primarily in two languages; Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament). The translative history of the Bible is a fascinating journey, from an academic and historical perspective, and is well worth

exploring. You can [read more about the translation process here](#).

In the New Testament, the word translated into English as *church* is not actually a translation or even a transliteration of the original Greek word. The translators of the first English language Bibles generally elected to use the English word *church* (which had emerged first as the word *kirk* and finally evolved through the centuries into the word *church*), as an English equivalent of the original Greek word. The first usage of this word 'church' in English was as a building in which religious meetings were held, but eventually it came to be used for the people in the building too. By the time translators began translating the Greek manuscripts into English, it had been in accepted use in English for a long time. In all truthfulness, however, it wasn't an accurate translation of *ekklesia*, which is the original Greek word.

The original Greek word used in the New Testament – *ekklesia* – is a compound of “*ek*” (out of) and “*klesis*” (calling), a derivation of “*kaleo*” (call). A literal meaning would be “*a calling out*” or “*the called out.*” An *ekklesia* was originally a select civil body, summoned or convoked for a particular purpose and the word, in and of itself, didn't have any religious meaning attached. In Acts, the word *ekklesia* is used of a riotous mob (Acts 19:32 and 41) and also used to refer to a lawful gathering in Acts 19:39.

Ekklesia should perhaps be more accurately translated in English as *assembly* or *congregation*. However, the King James Version, the 'authorised' (and most commonly read) translation for many years, renders it *church* some 76 times, *churches* 36 times, and *assembly* three times. Most other translations follow the KJV's example. Essentially, the translators chose to replace *ekklesia* for another Greek word (*kuriakon* which, by this time, had already made its way into English as 'church').

Despite this, it would be true to say that the word *church* is

now an extremely established and recognisable word in our modern English, and it has been used for centuries as the English equivalent of *ekklesia*, however erroneous the original translative methods were.

But What Does Church *Really* Mean?

Today, most people would understand the word *church* to mean one or all of three things:

1. A **place of worship** (the original meaning of the word *kuriakon* ('*belonging to the Lord*'))
2. A particular **denomination or religious group** within Christianity (when attached to a name, for example, an *Anglican Church*)
3. A **body of Christian believers** (*the church*)

The primary goal, when trying to understand the use of the word *ekklesia* (in the context of the Bible's original meaning) is not necessarily to reinstate a truthfully accurate translation of the original word (although that would, of course, be a more proper process of translation) but to correctly understand the **meaning** of the original word. We know that words change meaning over time and also that it's not the word itself that is important, but how we understand and use that word. Do we talk about and describe the church in the same way, today, that the first-century authors did? (For the sake of continuity, we will discuss the biblical meaning of *ekklesia* in this article using the established English equivalent *church*).

The Bible never speaks of the church in the sense of a building or organisation. Neither does it speak of the church in the sense of a particular denomination. The biblical definition of church is actually about the people – those who place their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation (John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13). These people are the global community of believers who gather together in 'local expressions of

church'. The Apostle Paul describes this community like the human body, a living thing – made up of real people (1 Corinthians 12:12). The New Testament authors don't describe many churches but one, simply expressing that '*where two or three are gathered in my [Jesus'] name, there am I among them.*' (Matthew 18:20).

In the early years of the church, these gatherings were known, for example, as *the church that met at Corinth* (1 Corinthians 1:2), or *the church at Ephesus* (Ephesians 1:12), communities acknowledged to be the one body of the Lord 'scattered abroad' (Acts 8:1-4, 1 Peter 1:1). The church is about people – **the people are the church, the *ekklesia*** – called out, connected in relationship by Jesus Christ and assembled together for a purpose.

There's a very real sense that many Christians are returning to this original meaning behind the word used by the New Testament writers; that is, to view and speak of the church as an *organic identity*, made up of 'people who are called and gathered together as a community in Jesus'.

A 'Called Out' Community

In the first few chapters of Acts, we read of the birth of the church in a rush of wind and fire; a pivotal moment in history where people begin responding to the call of the gospel and the announcement of Jesus as the risen king and saviour. Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-36 'cut many of the listeners to the heart' and his life-changing teaching regarding Jesus caused many to receive his words with gladness, believing that Jesus was both the risen Lord and [Christ](#) (Acts 2:36). This belief and repentance of their sin was demonstrated by them being baptised – 3000 people in one day!

Acts 2:42-47 describes how these individuals began gathering themselves together as a community 'called out to follow and serve King Jesus'. We begin to get a sense of the reason for

the use of the word *ekklesia* by the apostolic writers to describe the formation and purpose of this one body of believers.

Throughout Acts, there are examples of the believers meeting together as a community and the purpose of these gatherings can generally be summarised by five key elements:

To honour God and His Son – ‘**worship**’

To grow community – ‘**fellowship**’

To develop personally – ‘**discipleship**’

To provide service to others – ‘**ministry**’

To share the Good News – ‘**evangelism**’

Being ‘called out’ is a common theme in the New Testament:

- Jesus came to **call** sinners (Matthew 9:13, Mark 2:17, Romans 8:30).
- By God’s [grace](#) and mercy, He **calls** people from among Jews and Gentiles to be His people (Romans 9:24-26).
- The believers in Corinth were **called** into fellowship with Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9).
- God **calls** believers to [peace](#) (1 Corinthians 7:15).
- The **calling** is by the grace of Christ (Galatians 1:6).
- The believers in Galatia were **called** to [freedom](#) (Galatians 5:13).
- Paul implored the saints at Ephesus to walk in a manner worthy of their **calling** (Ephesians 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:12).
- The believers at Colossae were **called** in one body (Colossians 3:15).
- God **calls** believers into His own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12).
- God **calls** believers to conduct their lives in holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7, 2 Timothy 1:9, 1 Peter 1:15).
- God **called** the believers in Thessalonica by the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14).
- God **calls** believers out of darkness and into His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9).

These passages all cite the original greek word *kaleo* ('to call' or 'called') and have to do with a believer's relationship with God and their connection to His eternal purpose. We can also see the connection here with the use of the Greek word *ekklesia* to describe the collective community of 'called out' people – believers that assemble together.

Metaphors For The Church

Other metaphors are used throughout the Bible to describe the community of believers, one of which is that believers form a spiritual 'house' – living stones to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

Another metaphor is the human body, a living thing – made up of real people (1 Corinthians 12:12). Paul devotes a whole chapter in the book of Corinthians to the principles and purpose of 'church' and how each 'member' of the body is to be valued for the diversity and contribution they bring to 'the body'.

This metaphor of a body is further expanded as yet another metaphor, that of a particular kind of body, the body of a bride; the fiancée and intended wife of 'the lamb' (John 3:29, Revelation 3:12). We are given to understand from Ephesians 5 that the relationship between Jesus and the church wasn't modelled on the first marriage but, in fact, it was the other way around. God had the church in mind from the very beginning and our understanding of marriage is therefore modelled on the relationship that would exist between Jesus and his bride. Therefore, if we want to understand how the church, as the bride, relates to Jesus, we are to look to marriage and the examples given in both the record of creation in Genesis and Paul's writings in the New Testament. Marriage is our human way of experiencing and understanding how we, together as one body, relate to Jesus as his church.

“A wife should put her husband first, as she does the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife, as Christ is the head and the Savior of the church, which is his own body. Wives should always put their husbands first, as the church puts Christ first. A husband should love his wife as much as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. He made the church holy by the power of his word, and he made it pure by washing it with water. Christ did this, so he would have a glorious and holy church, without faults or spots or wrinkles or any other flaws. In the same way, a husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself. A husband who loves his wife shows he loves himself. None of us hate our own bodies. We provide for them and take good care of them, just as Christ does for the church, because we are each part of his body. As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother to get married, and he becomes like one person with his wife.” This is a great mystery, but I understand it to mean Christ and his church.” | Ephesians 5: 22-32, CEV

The Birth Of The Church

We are to think of the church – this community of believers – as a woman, a woman whose very life and existence were framed by the death and resurrection of a man. Through this man’s death and sacrifice, she is created and at his resurrection, she becomes a living creature. We see the obvious echo in the story in Genesis of the creation of Eve from Adam’s side:

“The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion for him who corresponds to him.” The Lord God formed out of the ground every living animal of the field and every bird of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them, and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man named all the animals, the birds of the air, and the living creatures of the field, but for Adam no companion who corresponded to him was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a

deep sleep, and while he was asleep, he took part of the man's side and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the part he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." | Genesis 2:20-23, NET

What an eloquent phrase: *'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'*! Adam looks at this new creation and exclaims *"this is my very own self, from my very own body"*. She is man's counterpart, not merely in feeling and sense – his flesh – but in his solid qualities. We also have another significant phrase – *'taken out of'* – echoing *'the call'* that goes out in Acts 2. Here in Acts, we read of people being *'taken out of the dominion of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of light and life'*; visible proof of the power of the Gospel to bring about a new creation. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, there would be no church, no new creation, no bride. The insistence of the critical reality of the resurrection of Jesus being connected to the fulfillment of the gospel promise was the firm teaching of the first century Apostles and this remains the solid framework of the existence of the church today.

"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel." | 2 Timothy 2:8, NIV

The woman in Genesis is the man's possession, not in the sense of ownership, but rather in the sense of belonging. She is from him and of him, they belong together and are as one body. Paul comments on this being *'profound'* and that ultimately, he is referring to the church's relationship with Jesus (Ephesians 5:32).

A Woman Of Valour

The word used of Eve at her creation is the Hebrew word *ezer*, which is translated as '*helper*' in English. However, our understanding of *helper* falls far short of the original sense of the word, which is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe God as a helper to His people or of a king to his subjects. The primary idea of the word lies in '*girding*', '*surrounding, hence defending*', to '*protect or aid*'. The counterpart, therefore, to the man is "a *woman of valour*, whose worth is incalculable" (Proverbs 31:10).

We have this extraordinary *woman of valour* fleshed out in more detail in Proverbs 31:10-31; a famous passage celebrating 'the virtuous woman (or wife)'. We would perhaps understand *virtuous* to mean '*having or showing high moral standards*', but the original Hebrew words *eshet* and *chayil* used in these verses don't convey virtue or virtuousness in the same way we would understand '*virtuous*' today. The Hebrew word *eshet* is the construct form of *isha* (woman) and *chayil* connotes bravery (Psalm 76:5); capability (Proverbs 12:4); triumph (Psalm 118:16); or strength (Psalm 84:7). In the 17th century (when the first English Bibles were translated) *virtuous* still suggested the French '*virtu*', which at the time meant '*manly*' or '*brave.*' A better translation of the Hebrew words *eshet chayil* is '*woman of valour*' (as translated by the Tanakh Jewish Bible (1917). This *virtuous woman* is the same woman who is also, in the King James translation, '*clothed in strength and honour*' (Proverbs 31: 25).

If marriage is modelled on the church and her relationship to Jesus, then it's not such a stretch to recognise the ideal woman in Proverbs as a detailed portrait of what the well-functioning, organic body of the church looks like.

"She obtains wool and flax, and she is pleased to work with her hands. She is like the merchant ships; she brings her food from afar. She also gets up while it is still night, and

provides food for her household and a portion to her female servants. She considers a field and buys it; from her own income, she plants a vineyard. She begins her work vigorously, and she strengthens her arms. She knows that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out in the night. Her hands take hold of the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor and reaches out her hand to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all of her household are clothed with scarlet. She makes for herself coverlets; her clothing is fine linen and purple. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and honour, and she can laugh at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and loving instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed, her husband also praises her..."
| *Proverbs 31: 13-22, 23-28*

What a remarkable description of the capable, industrious, joyful reality of the organic church; a living, breathing *woman of valour*, of which every believer is a member and valued part.

The Bride And The Lamb | The Story's Resolution

Yes, Christians are stones making up a house (1 Peter 2:5).

Yes, Christians are branches connected to a vine (John 15:1-7).

Yes, Christians are subjects and citizens of a kingdom (Ephesians 2:19).

Yes, Christians are children of a heavenly Father (1 John 3:1).

Christians are all these things. But these are still metaphors for the individual. It's only when we consider marriage, as a metaphor of the church and the king being brought together, as one, that we understand that the Christian life isn't intended to be experienced as individuals but as a collective community. The church – the *woman of valour* – is created from the body of Jesus, who was crucified, buried and raised the third day, just as the first woman was taken from the first man. Together, Jesus Christ and the church are one body. She, the church, is the bride of Jesus and He, Jesus, is the spotless lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:22-23, Ephesians 4:4, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Acts 20:28, Colossians 1:24, Revelation 13:8).

The first two chapters of Genesis are where we first discover God's eternal purpose for humanity. The last two chapters of Revelation tell us of the glorious resolution of God's story. And Paul's words in Ephesians assert the *"supremacy and centrality of Jesus Christ in all this, together with his counterpart, the church, which should dominate our understanding of everything physical and spiritual."* – Frank Viola

"Christ did not die just to save us from sins, but to bring us together in community. After coming to Christ, our next step is to be involved in community. A church that does not experience community is a parody, a sham. Simply put, the purpose of the church is to stand for God's eternal purpose. In short, wherever the church gathers together, its guiding and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ." – Frank Viola, *Reimaging Church*

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready." | Revelation 19:7, BSB

"The heart of her husband has confidence in her, and he has

no lack of gain. She brings him good and not evil all the days of her life.” | Proverbs 31:11-12, ESV

Author’s Comment: A Further Brief Note Regarding The Translation Of ‘Church’

The English language was first spoken as a Germanic dialect, known as Old English or Anglo-Saxon, beginning in northern England some years after the Anglo-Saxon conquest (circa 449 AD). The earliest written Old English, however, did not appear until approximately 800 AD. Probably sometime around 500 AD, the people in northern England started referring to a building erected for worship as a *cirice*, later, *chirche*, and finally, a *church*.

By the time William Tyndale translated the New Testament from Greek to English (known as the “Tyndale Translation”, 1525 AD), the word *church* had been in use for centuries. Throughout these centuries, the state church had maintained its power over the people through bloody crusades against resistance groups for the sake of “doctrinal purity.” It was claimed that the Apostle Peter had started the church (based on Matthew 16:18); and therefore the church should be lead by a clergy and not placed in the hands of any “congregation or assembly.” Not only that, prior to the fourteenth century, a complete Bible in the English language, for the common people, didn’t exist. Even for modestly educated clergy, the Bible was mostly inaccessible – available only in the Latin language and in large folio copies of two or three volumes. These Bibles were ridiculously expensive, limited in number and difficult to access. For the most part, the clergy had to rely on the small portions of scripture that were included in prayer books.

In his translation of Matthew 16:18, Tyndale rightly translates the Greek word *ekklesia* as *congregation*, as opposed to the word *church*, signalling a return to a correct understanding of the organic reality of the church. Tyndale’s accurate translation of this one word threatened the power and

control of the entire state church system. Knowing Tyndale's translation was soon to become public, to be read by the common people in their own language, presented a real threat to the power of the religious institution of the day. Tyndale was told to amend his translation. Despite being threatened by the religious leaders of his day, William Tyndale would not revoke his translation of the word *congregation*. Ultimately, he was betrayed, sentenced to death, and burned at the stake in 1536.

In 1604, King James of England and Scotland commissioned a new translation in response to perceived problems or flaws with earlier translations which did not "*conform to the ecclesiology and reflect the episcopal structure of the Church of England and its beliefs about an ordained clergy*". Instructions were given to the translators that the new version would conform to the ecclesiology of the Church of England (which, by now, had broken with and was directly in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church). As such, certain Greek and Hebrew words were to be translated in a manner that reflected the traditional usage of the church, now long-entrenched and in common use. Ecclesiastical words such as *church* were to be retained and not to be translated as *congregation*.

The King James Authorised Version was published in 1611 and quickly grew in popularity. It still remains a significant and popular English translation today. Unfortunately, however, the inaccurate use of the word *church* to replace the original *ekklesia* became firmly embedded in most translations with many readers unaware of the problematic nature of its translative history.

Can we unravel and reverse nearly 500 years of linguistic and cultural understanding that now surrounds the word *church*? Can we edit and reprint millions upon millions of editions of the Bible in English, which, in truthfulness, used a word that was an inaccurate representation of the original? Should we withdraw every copy of errant English Bibles from circulation, simply because it contains the word 'church'? Is it possible to determine what was genuine translative prerogative or

suspect ecclesiastical bias, then or now? The answer is clearly 'no' to all these questions.

A better solution, perhaps, and one worthy of investing our energy and resources to, is to rediscover the original meaning that the New Testament writers had in mind – the organic reality of a community of believers – and to speak, think and believe this of the church today, recognising that wherever the church gathers together, its guiding and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ.

Is Church-Going Still Relevant?

Despite Christianity still being Australia's largest religion (61.1% compared with 7.3% of all other religions combined), the proportion of Australians identifying as Christian has been steadily declining over the past century. Compared to 1911, when 96% of people identified as Christian, the 2001 census recorded the figure of 68% and the latest Census, taken in 2011, recorded a drop to 61.1%.

New figures released in 2017 show that some 7 million Australians (30.1% of the population), said they did not identify with any religion at all, a figure that's up from around 4.8 million (22.3%) in 2011's Census.

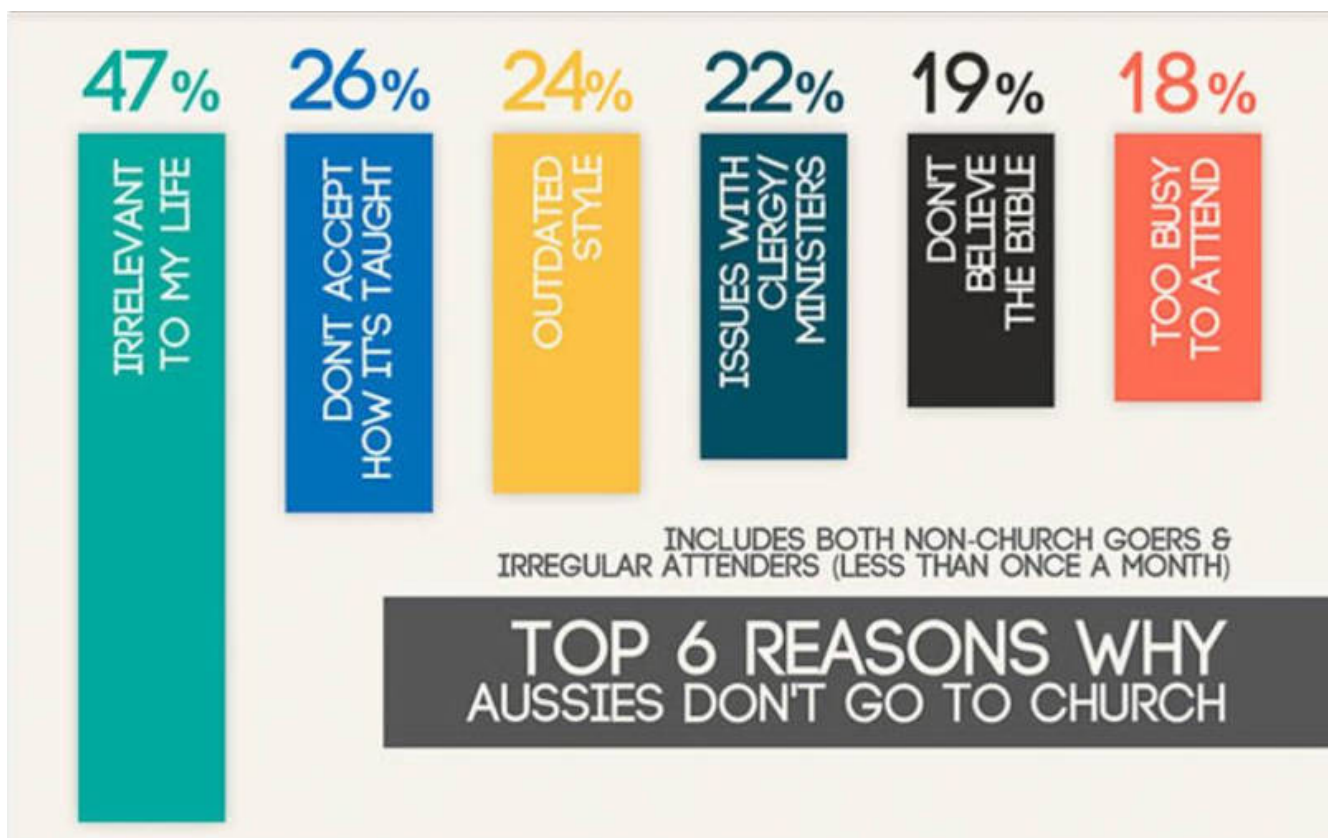
The average church attender's age has increased to 53 years and while the 70+ age group is still strongly represented, the younger generation is increasingly underrepresented. For example, 20-39 year olds make up about 34% of the national population but only 21% of church attenders.

Australia has more churches (13,000) than schools (9,500) yet church attendance has also declined. Those attending at least

once per month has dropped by more than half when compared to [statistics](#) taken in 1972 (from 36% to the current attendance rate of 15%). Less than one in seven of the Australians who ticked “Christianity” on their census form regularly attend a church.

Six Top Reasons Why People Don't Go To Church

For many people (as much as 47%), church is considered to be irrelevant to their life. The following diagram shows the top six reasons why Aussies aren't going to church. This is a survey of both non-church goers and irregular attenders but these reasons are perhaps also relevant for those once-regular attendees who have dropped off.



Is Church-Going Still Relevant In 2019?

Nearly 50% of Australians believe the answer is 'no'. It's interesting to note in the following diagram that out of a

list of 13 facilities and services that people agree a community needs, a local church comes in at 13 and 9 respectively (only scrapping ahead of English classes and migrant support, in the case of the latter). Clearly, for many people, church-going is not only personally irrelevant, it's also considered practically superfluous to a community's needs.



Church-going has become less relevant for Christians and non-Christians alike. Considerations such as meaningful engagement, purposeful worship, approachable ministry or authentic beliefs are all issues for people questioning the

relevance of church and church attendance in their life.

Does Church-Going Make Me A Better Person?

It depends.

Similar to the colloquial, often humorous question “*how long is a piece of string?*”, the answer is; it depends. *It depends on how you measure it.*

Church-going, in and of itself, doesn't make a someone a better person (or Christian, for that matter). No-one would suggest that hanging out in the local soccer club means you'll become a better soccer player. Or that spending time every week in a car sales yard will make you a better driver. Attendance at church, in itself, really means nothing at all.

And, in fact, it could be argued that if you are attending because of the wrong motivations, then church-going could actually be detrimental for you. Going to church, just to keep your spouse or family happy, because you feel guilty if you don't, or because you feel a sense of religious obligation, are never meaningful reasons to attend. Religious obligation – a ‘works-based’ mindset – is often one of the major causes of [church burnout](#).

But when the *purpose* of church and church-going are both considered, we can measure the outcomes in a different way and get quite a different answer.

Church Is About People

The Greek word *ekklesia*, which has been translated as ‘church’ in our English Bibles, is found 114 times in the New Testament (the original word is actually translated *assembly* three times, *church* 74 times, *churches* 35 times, and *congregation* twice). The original definition is of an *assembly*

of people convened at a public place, often for the purpose of deliberating.

The root meaning of *church* is not that of a building, but of people and it was used by the New Testament writers to describe the community of believers gathering together. These believers would meet in various places, such as homes (Romans 16:5) or the temple (Acts 2:42). It wouldn't be incorrect to express their meetings in this way; that the early believers 'churched together' (or assembled together).

The word *church*, in time, also came to be used to describe the building in which Christian believers would meet and so 'church' is now understood to be either the people, the building or both.

Yet the biblical definition of 'church' is actually about the people – those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation ([John 3:16](#); [1 Corinthians 12:13](#)). These people are the community of believers who gather together and the Apostle Paul describes it like the human body, a living thing – made up of real people ([1 Corinthians 12:12](#)). In fact, he devoted a whole chapter in the book of Corinthians (in the New Testament) to the principles and purpose of 'church' and how each 'member' is to be valued for the diversity and contribution they bring to 'the body'. In essence, church is about *relationship*.

“Church is not an event you go to. It's a family you belong to.” – Rick Warren

What Is The Purpose Of Church?

The purpose of church (believers getting together) can be briefly summarised as follows:

- To honour God and His Son – 'worship'
- To grow community – 'fellowship'

- To develop personally – ‘discipleship’
- To provide service to others – ‘ministry’
- To share the [Good News](#) – ‘evangelism’

These purposes are all outworked in the context of *relationship* – with God, His son and with each other. Church-going is about ‘giving’ and ‘getting’. Church life is designed to enrich our lives, ease our burdens, and provide supportive relationships for hard times. It develops character growth and maturity so that we can support others, when needed. Service within a church should be something that fills a person with joy and deep personal fulfillment – the natural outworking of a life based on being a certain kind of person, not doing certain kinds of things. Church life – life with Jesus – is for those who are weary and burdened – because in Jesus we find rest.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls....” – Jesus, Matthew 11:28-29

Church-going provides opportunity to undertake all the purposes that a community of believers consider to be important aspects of their Christian life.

So if we ask the question again – does church-going make me a better person? – the answer is *yes* – *depending on how you measure it*.

If going to church makes you feel like you have a place to belong, gives you support and encouragement, fosters a sense of individual growth and development ‘in Christ’, without judgment, and provides opportunity for you to extend God’s love to others, then yes, church-going can help you be a ‘better person’.

In this context, church-going is definitely still relevant

and, it could be argued, essential for healthy, well functioning communities. Church – true church – helps people grow in the ways that matter most – in their relationship with God and Jesus and their relationship with others. This is the Bible’s definition of true happiness and a flourishing life.

“In the biblical sense, true human flourishing [happiness] and well-being can only be found in relationship with God and through alignment with His coming kingdom..it is important to see that this flourishing can never occur fully apart from a proper relationship with the creator God. All of the Bible’s vision of human flourishing both now and in the age to come either assumes or explicitly states this fact.” – Jonathan Pennington, PhD, [A Biblical Theology Of Human Flourishing](#)

Overcoming Negative Experiences Of Church

For many people, however, church is not the experience they hoped or thought it would be. Rigid expectations, subtle (or not so subtle) spiritual manipulation, a performance-driven culture or unhealthy theology all combine to ensure the experience of ‘church’ is one of failure, disconnect, disappointment and isolation, from both community and God. This is a sad but nonetheless true fact and the experience of many people.

God’s gift of freedom, found in His [gospel of grace](#), is easily perverted and often squandered by men or women placing religious burdens and [rituals](#) on their fellow man. Jesus condemned the religious leaders of his day for exactly this, commenting that *“they tie up heavy, burdensome loads and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them...”* ([Matthew 23:4](#)).

God – and by extension, church – should not be an impersonal force to be used to make people behave in certain prescribed ways. God is a deeply real and loving Father who invites us

into a personal relationship with Him and whose love and acceptance should be manifested by those who 'church together' in His name.

So, Is Church-Going Still Relevant?

"Christians need relationships to grow. We don't grow in isolation; we develop in the context of fellowship" – Rick Warren

Communities also need relationships to flourish and grow, to provide stability and support, and to offer compassion and encouragement. Church can play an important part in people's lives, both Christian or non-Christian, to facilitate these endeavours. Not only that, with the weight of life's pressures and the uncertainty of life's big questions bearing down on people, church is often the place people will turn to '[find God](#)'.

Church is (or should be) the place where the Good News of God's salvation is joyfully lived and unconditionally offered – a place of support and fellowship for those who believe and a place of [welcome and hope](#) for those who don't. Discovering that God has a plan and purpose for you – if you want it – is the most empowering, life-changing realisation in the world!

"God's way is not a matter of mere talk; it's an empowered life." -1 Corinthians 4:20

God's love is demonstrated to the world through a Christian's application of it to others (John 13:35), and this love in operation becomes concrete evidence of [the power of God's message](#), as given through Jesus, to transform lives. 'Church' (a community of believers gathering together) provides a powerful opportunity to do that, and benefits believers and non-believers alike.

“If it isn’t good news, it isn’t the Gospel. The Gospel is about what God has done for us and what we can become in Christ; it’s about Christ being the answer to our deepest needs. The Good News offers lost people what they are frantically searching for: forgiveness, freedom, security, purpose, love, acceptance and strength. It settles our past, assures our future, and gives meaning to today. It is the best news in the world.” – Rick Warren, A Purpose Driven Church

If your experience of church or church-going has been one of hurt, you are not alone. Many people have experienced the disillusionment and distress of discovering that church is not perfect. Church is made up of humans; damaged and sinful by their very nature. In fact, it would be surprising to *not* find hurt within a church, given this fact. Not every church hurts people, but most churches have hurt someone at some point, simply because churches are made up of imperfect people. This reality can leave people reluctant to re-engage, afraid of being hurt again, wanting to protect themselves, and questioning the place of church or even God in their lives.

However, it’s important to separate human failure from the love and freedom that God offers. Take time to recover from your negative experience. Let yourself heal. And then find a church where you are able to live freely, with a light heart in response to the [freedom and forgiveness given by God](#).

Be mindful though; if you are looking for another church because you don’t feel you can really be “spiritual” without it, or you believe attending church makes God love you more, you really need to examine what true spirituality is and (re)acquaint yourself with what the [grace of God](#) means. If, however, you long for warm, accepting fellowship, spiritual encouragement and growth, and the opportunity to serve others in love, then you’re on the right track.

While this approach should not minimise your experience or negate your feelings of hurt or pain, it does enable you to move past the burden of bitterness, which, in the end, will destroy peace, joy, freedom and life itself.