

New Beginnings

God is all about new beginnings. We see the story of humanity starting out in Genesis with a new beginning; light and order being formed out of darkness and chaos.

And we see this theme of light and order echoed in the [new beginning that Christians find in Jesus](#). In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul the Apostle confirms that *“if anyone is in Christ, they have become a new person, a ‘new creation’. The old life is gone, a new life has begun. And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ.”* (NLT)

This is, of course, one of the key aspects of the gospel message of good news.

The Gospel Initiative

In the beginning, God made humans in His image, to be in close, harmonious relationship with Him – His family – and be His perfect image-bearers on this earth. But the first humans, Adam and Eve, sinned and in doing so, caused damage and disruption to the relationship between God and humanity. They were no longer able to be God’s perfect image-bearers, as He had purposed for them, and were now subject to mortality and death, which would separate them from God for eternity.

Much of the Bible’s message is subsequently taken up in telling the story of God’s efforts to address the problem of sin, and its consequent outcome, on our behalf. God began this firstly through a single man [Abraham](#), in whom He promises to bless the whole world (Genesis 12:1-3), then through a chosen people, the nation of Israel, who were Abraham’s descendants (Isaiah 43:10), and then finally, through His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, the greatest of all Abraham’s descendants (Revelation 3:14).

No one who came before Jesus was able to live a perfect life.

Then Jesus arrived on the scene, a new kind of human, who fulfilled God's law and lived the perfect life as God's ideal image bearer. He willingly gave himself on behalf of the world as [a perfect sacrifice for sin](#). He died on the cross for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2) and was raised to life again three days later in a glorious new beginning (John 20:16-18). He was the first of many whom God promises will be just like him, if they confess Jesus as Lord and saviour (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). By [being baptised](#) "into Jesus", a person becomes a new kind of human – "a new creation"- and a whole new life begins.

This invitation to confess Jesus as Lord, to repent of our sins and to trust in Jesus' sacrifice for our forgiveness, committing to a new life 'in him', following him in all things, is offered to everyone! (2 Peter 3:9). God doesn't want [anyone to be lost](#) – so if you are convicted in your heart of sin and want to be baptised into Jesus, don't hesitate! (If you'd like to speak more about baptism with someone, I'd love to chat! You can get in touch via my contact details [here](#)).

Once a person has made [a commitment](#) to a new life by being baptised, they become part of the family of God. It's a new start, a new beginning, with a whole new life ahead of them.

But, as with new year's resolutions, new beginnings have a way of losing their gloss and the excitement and determination can begin to fade. The Christian life is full of ups and downs and we can lose our passion, become discouraged, or forget the reasons why we even chose this life to begin with.

There are a couple of great examples of new beginnings found in the Bible that I believe can help us in this Christian life – whether we're just starting out or whether we've been at it for a while.

The Story Of Ruth

The first example is [the story of Ruth](#). You may already be familiar with the background of Ruth's story. She was a widowed Moabite woman, married to an Israelite man who had relocated to Moab ten years earlier. Upon his death, she chose to leave her country of birth and travel back to Israel, with her mother-in-law, both of them with little possessions and a very uncertain future. Her "new beginning", following on from the death of her husband, brother-in-law and father-in-law certainly looked bleak and her circumstances were very reduced. Her position in Israelite society would be expected to be marginal at best – the Moabites had been cursed in earlier times for their opposition and hostility to Israel (Numbers 24:9), and naturalised Moabites were forever excluded from the congregation of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3).

We might initially look at her story and assume she was to be simply an inconsequential outsider to the plan of God, peripheral to His purpose. Her 'new beginning' certainly didn't shine with the kind of hope and 'homecoming' we would expect.

Our lives can sometimes look like Ruth's story and we may struggle to see through the reduced circumstances of our current moment, viewing them as the end rather than the beginning.

But God loves a good plot twist. When we think things are hopeless and we cannot see a way through, He confounds us, perfectly weaving our own personal stories into the greatest story of all. What can seem like the end is really a different kind of beginning and those circumstances that seem hopeless are actually leading us to something beyond our expectations.

If you're in a season that feels like the end rather than the beginning, don't despair and feel that God has given up on your life. He hasn't.

If you're struggling with addictions, with issues in your relationships, with spiritual drift, or financial strain, don't feel that these things signal the end. God is still there and He is still working. You just need to believe that. The only thing that Ruth really had to go on was faith – faith that the end of her story would be worth the wait – and that's all you need too, even if your faith is only the size of a mustard seed!

Believe that God, who is Himself the beginning and the end of all things, is still intimately involved in your story, even if you're struggling to see the next chapter. The prophet Malachi tells us that the names of those whose lives honour God are specially written in His book – and that they are God's treasured possession. God's heart towards them is as a father of his son (Malachi 3:16). If all you take from today is this: remember you are greatly loved and God is for you!

The Story Of Nehemiah

The second example is the story of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. After being in exile for many years, the people of Israel had been allowed to return and had finally begun rebuilding the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. This occurred under the leadership of firstly men called Zerubbabel and Ezra, and finally, a man called Nehemiah, who was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, King of Persia. It was a time of great hope and fearless faith.

Rebuilding took place in three waves, with the building of the walls coming last, in the third wave under Nehemiah's leadership. This endeavour began with singleness of purpose and a spirit of reformation but after only 26 days into the project, people became discouraged and wanted to give up. Only 26 days in! Less than four weeks! They had become overwhelmed by fatigue, frustration, opposition, and fear.

Pressures from without, burnout from within, unreasonable

expectations, and fear of failure. Many Christians feel all these emotions and challenges, probably many times, at different stages in their Christian life. As with the people in Nehemiah's time, Christians need to be reminded of their purpose and reinvigorated with a sense of mission!

"If people can't see what God is doing, they stumble all over themselves" | Proverbs 29:18, MSG

If you're in a season of discouragement and feel like you're drifting or have lost your sense of purpose, this message is for you. Do not give up!

Although our purpose and mission may look different today from theirs back then, it's all part of the great story that God is telling. And we need to remind ourselves of this regularly, to maintain our focus and vision. New beginnings, even ones that start with passion and fearlessness, soon become simply 'the job at hand', and we need to be mindful of all the pressures, emotions, and challenges that come with it. ***It can be easy to lose sight of the fact that we're involved in the greatest, most radical project in all of history!*** What we do is important and *does* have value, even if we can't quite see through to the other side of the project right now.

The message from the story of Nehemiah is to make time to regularly step aside from everything that's going on in our lives and remind ourselves of the story that God is telling, and that we're now part of.

Humanity was always created with purpose, to be God's perfect image-bearers and the scope of this is so much greater than you or I, in our current moment. Remind yourself of the importance of the things you do every day, in pursuit of this purpose and mission, whether small or great. And realise that every contribution you make, in your ministry to God, has eternal significance.

How do you do this? Well, here's some ideas. Take 10 minutes out to read your favourite Bible chapter. Haven't got one? Make it your mission to find one. Have a coffee with a friend. Catch up with a mate after work. Invite another family around for dinner and reconnect over the good news in Jesus. Listen to a Christian podcast. Take a half-hour out for your own personal worship session with all your favourite songs – or make it bigger and include others! Take some quiet moments to think about your personal skills and gifts and consider what you can bring to ministry in your church. Start a new Christian book. Volunteer your time to help those more disadvantaged than yourself. Have a heart-to-heart conversation with God.

How about setting a reminder in your phone, in your diary, calendar, or notebook, and, using the story of Nehemiah as an example, remind yourself at least every 26 days to 'check-in and show up'. Go on, do it right now!

The New Covenant

Finally, I want to remind us of what has made all of this possible – the new covenant that came about through the death of Jesus Christ.

"In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.'" | Luke 22:20, NIV

"Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant." | Hebrews 7:22, NIV

"How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may

receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that He has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” – Hebrews 9:14-15 | NIV

God has personally dealt with the human condition of sin through the giving of His only Son. There is forgiveness of sins to all through this new covenant. By his blood and in his name, in his freedom we are free! There is no new beginning as awesome as the new beginning we find in Jesus Christ!

Amen!

This article was first published 13 January 2020

Christianity + Missional Living

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

“You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colours in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.” Matthew 5:14-15 | MSG

The Eternal Light Of Life

Light illuminates, not just dispelling darkness, but making visible that which is unseen. Jesus came into the world as the light and life of humanity, making visible the way to the Father (John 14:6), shining the glory and light of God and showing us the path home.

He was the way, the truth, and the life – that eternal life that was with the Father in the beginning and revealed to us in the Word-Made-Flesh (1 John 1:2, John 14:6). Whoever follows him is enveloped in his radiance and has no fear of stumbling or becoming lost in darkness (John 8:12).

While Jesus remained in the world, he was the light of the world. At his return to his Father, his light remained still, shining brightly in those who had seen and believed the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:4).

They are his ambassadors; the good news about the glorious, life-giving king placed in them like treasure put in jars of clay. They know their source of empowerment is from God, not themselves, and can boldly proclaim: *"We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."* (John 1:14)

They have seen God and He's not a secret to be kept.

Christians + Missional Living

As Christians, Jesus' earthly mission, to reveal the eternal life and light of God to the world, now becomes ours. We are tasked with the great commandment: *"love God, love your neighbour"* and the great commission: *"preach the gospel"*.

We are not just followers **of** Jesus, but are led by him out of the darkness into the light, to be witnesses **for** him. We are collectively commissioned people of his kingdom, reconciled to God and entrusted with this liberating message of

reconciliation – the message of light and life – for all people (Colossians 1:18-20).

The phrase *being on mission* or *going on mission* has commonly been used to refer to those who travel overseas, often to poorer countries, to preach and teach the gospel. They are sent into these areas by their 'home churches' to promote their faith or provide services such as education, literacy, social justice, health care, and economic development, as an outworked ministry of their faith. Primarily seen as evangelism, *mission work* is rarely described as something that is undertaken locally, rather, something a Christian would participate in or be involved with overseas.

Missional living, missional churches, or missional communities are also phrases that have become popular in recent times. You may have heard them used in podcasts, online sermons or discussed by various authors. You may have assumed these phrases are referring to a special kind of Christian living or community; one that operates differently to 'regular' or 'traditional' Christian life or church.

*However, the reality is that, as Christians, **we are all on mission, right here**, in our quiet, suburban neighbourhoods and in our bustling city streets.*

The word "mission" is derived from the Latin *missionem* (nom. *missio*), meaning "act of sending" or *mittere*, meaning "to send". The word mission (Latin: *missio*), as a translation of the Greek *apostolē*, "a sending," appears once in the English New Testament (Galatians 2:8). An apostle (*apostolos*) is one commissioned and sent for a purpose and we find the word *apostle* mentioned over 80 times in the New Testament.

The theme of *mission*, or *sending*, particularly in relation to God's mission, can be found all throughout scripture. His active involvement in humanity's story and His promise of reconciliation and redemption was finally realised in the

greatest mission of all, the *sending* of His son, Jesus the apostle (Hebrews 3:1)

“Just as You commissioned and sent me into the world, I also have commissioned and sent them (believers) into the world. I do not pray for these alone [it is not for their sake only that I make this request], but also for [all] those who [will ever] believe and trust in me through their message, that they all may be one; just as You, Father, are in me and I in You, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe [without any doubt] that You sent me.” | John 17:18, 20–21, Amplified Bible

Just as Jesus was sent into the world, to witness to the eternal life and light of God, so each Christian has been commissioned and sent as an ambassador for Christ. They have been authorised, by virtue of his saving work, to represent his kingdom and to carry the great treasure of the good message in their fragile, imperfect lives of clay.

They have been commissioned by Jesus himself, who declared *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age”* (Matthew 28:19–20; compare Mark 16:15, Luke 24:47, John 20:21–22, and Acts 1:8).

Jesus lives in and through them and God has placed each one of them like a city on a hill, to bring light to the whole world. They are to glow – with their open houses and generous lives – like homecoming beacons, drawing all humanity to the light that comes from Him, that in this, ‘His name is glorified’.

The reality is that *every. single. Christian.* is a missionary and *every. single. church.* is missional. It’s the very nature of our Christianity and an intrinsic part of our identity as people of the kingdom.

I am a missionary. You are a missionary. We are all missionaries. And we don't need to be anywhere else apart from where we are right now to *run on mission*.

Like Salt, Like Light...

'*Living on mission*', '*living missionally*' or '*missional living*' is simply the way in which we choose to order and arrange our ordinary, everyday lives; springing from a life framed by grace and pointed in pursuit of King Jesus. It means that we live out his life, his words, his actions and his love towards others; attempting to show *his* love by *our* actions and *his* truth by *our* lives.

Jesus first declared to his disciples, "follow me and I will make you fishers of men" Missional living, therefore, flows from 'following Jesus' and representing him in the world, shining in it like light and flavouring it like salt.

The people around us that we interact with, in a thousand ordinary ways, all experience the same joys and difficulties that we do, turning, as we are, on the wheel of life. They have the same questions that we do, the same challenges that we face, and, most importantly of all, are formed in the same image that we are, the image of God Himself.

Living missionally means showing genuine interest in other people, simply because they are *human*, just like us. It means being curious about them, their children, their lives, and their passions.

Like Jesus, we celebrate with them in all their joys and grieve with them in all their losses.

"On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples." | John 2:1-12, ESV

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit and greatly troubled. And he said, “Where have you laid him?” They said to him, “Lord, come and see.” Jesus wept.” | John 11:33-35

We are called to share the good message – that the gospel is able to speak to the heart of every human need – and, as missionaries (in our own backyards!), we look for opportunities to share this hope. In every relationship we encounter, we are acting as ‘ones sent’ for Jesus.

It means loving people well, being generous with our time and our resources, and open with our lives, that in doing so, we’ll prompt them to ‘open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.’ Our lives – our everyday, mundane, messy, uncomfortable, terrifying, joyful, and thoroughly human lives will be the greatest witness of all to the hope that lies within us.

So throw open all your doors! Be generous with your lives! Live bright and unafraid: remembering that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.

Missional Churches

All believers are ambassadors for Jesus’ name and the reality of the church includes not individuals simply gathered together in a building, but a collective kingdom and priesthood of people, worshipping and witnessing together to the astounding truth of the gospel narrative and the risen king.

What happens, then, when Christians, ‘living on mission’, regularly gather together? Each individual Christian is personally on mission – this is a key aspect of their Christian identity, but the truly exciting thing is that now,

collectively, these people become a 'church on mission'. The *being* and the *doing* of missional living doesn't change, it just multiplies!

Like the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Jesus' presence permeates their gatherings and multiplies the fruit of their labour. 'Like yeast through dough, or like stars appearing one by one as the night sky darkens', these local expressions of the church of Christ can cross all earthly boundaries, prevailing against even death itself. The world has never known anything like them. (Jonathan Leeman)

"I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."... | Jesus, Matthew 16: 18-19, BSB

"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, Reimagining Church

Missional Christianity = Intentional Christianity

Whether a church is a 'mega-church' or a 'home-church', has five members or 500, is only made up of over 50's or is an eclectic mix of ages, it should always, by definition, be 'missional'. That is: intentionally living as a collective community representing the king and his mission.

A Christians' individual life is no different. The great

commission to preach the gospel and take the good news of Jesus to all the world was given to all believers. We see this commission of witness declared firstly in [Matthew 28:18-20](#) and shown to be affirmed throughout the letters of the Apostles to the church.

Missional living, therefore, isn't a special kind of Christian identity. It's the *only way* of viewing our Christian identity and, by extension, our corporate church identity. Missional Christianity is being intentional in our Christianity, open to the work of the Spirit in our own lives and the lives of those around us, active in our communities, and purposeful in our involvement in the mission of God, the great ministry of reconciliation.

We carry, every day in our bodies, the death of Christ so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed (2 Corinthians 4:7-10). Through us, others can also be empowered and equipped to receive and live out the gospel message, demonstrating God's mission in all aspects of our lives, both personally and as church communities.

This is the essence of what it means to live a missional Christian life.

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved." | Acts 2:42-47, ESV

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.

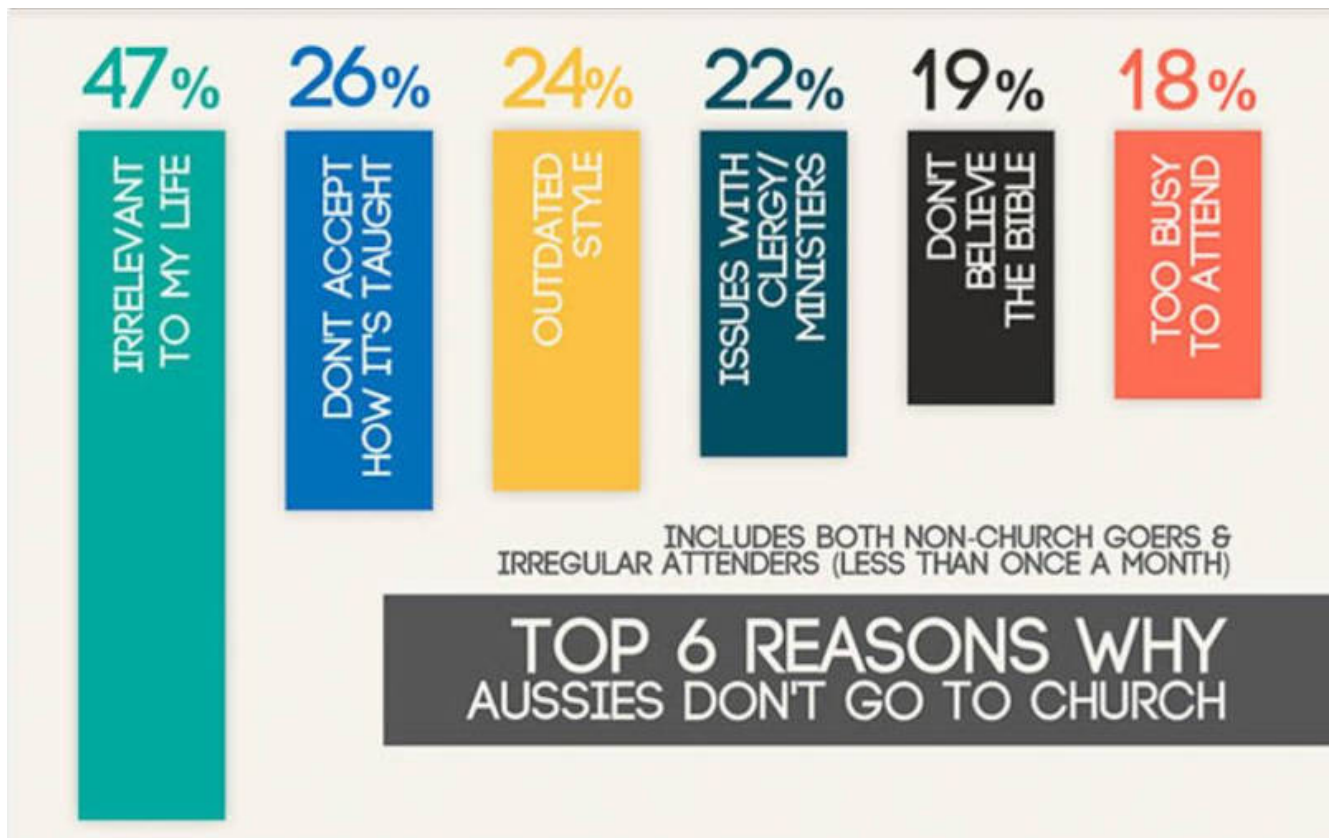
The average church attender's age has increased to 53 years and while the 70+ age group is still strongly represented, the younger generation is increasingly underrepresented. For example, 20-39 year olds make up about 34% of the national population but only 21% of church attenders.

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

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

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.