

A Renewed Vision of Worship Overcomes the Part-Time Churchgoer Syndrome

Geoff and Christine are thirty-something churchgoers who love Jesus and love their three kids. They consider themselves faithful members of New Life Community Church.

Their oldest is about to be in the youth group, and their youngest is finally out of diapers. Christine has been involved in the kids' ministry through the years. Geoff is a deacon.

But they are part-timers when it comes to church attendance, and they never set out to be.

They are not alone.

[Recent statistics](#) show that an increasing number of evangelicals who are firm in their faith are flabby in their practice of actually gathering with their brothers and sisters in worship. It's the part-time syndrome, and it can sneak up on any of us.

Let's go back to Geoff and Christine. There are 52 Sundays a year, and last year, they attended a worship gathering on 28 of those Sundays. (That's an average of about twice a month.) What happened?

- **Vacation:** To maximize his allotted days, Geoff took the family to the mountains during the kids' spring break, stretching over two weekends (one of which happened to be Easter!). There was the summer beach vacation, another stretch of a week and two weekends, and then a fall getaway. Total = 5 Sundays.
- **Sports:** Their oldest son is on a travel soccer team. Many of the games are on weekends, and they believe it would be a better testimony to be among unbelievers on Sunday mornings rather than let down the team. Total = 9 Sundays.
- **Sickness:** With their youngest child going to preschool, the family seems more susceptible to illnesses than before, and sickness always seems to hit on the weekends. Total = 3 Sundays.
- **Guest Preacher:** When Pastor Jon is out of town, Geoff and Christine usually take the weekend off. They never like the guest speaker as much as Pastor Jon. Total = 3 Sundays.
- **Visiting In-Laws:** Christine's parents come twice a year to spend the weekend with the family. To maximize their time, they usually spend the weekends catching up and doing some shopping. Total = 2 Sundays.
- **Holiday:** Thanksgiving weekend, and the week in between Christmas and New Year's, the family is traveling. Total = 2 Sundays.

Geoff and Christine may be a fictional couple, but their situation is true for many of us. Recently, a church leader told me their most faithful attendees are only in church 2-3 times a month. They **basically expect churchgoers to be "hit or miss" every week.**

Danger #1 – Guilt You Into Going

Now, there are two wrong ways church leaders might address this issue. The first is to go all Hebrews 10 on everyone and emphasize the importance of the worship gathering, so as to whip people into shape and guilt them into church attendance. Sorry, but this isn't a gospel-centered approach.

We should never take the command of Hebrews 10 about neglecting the church and isolate it from the preceding verses (about the privilege of coming before God in a community of faith that holds to a confession of hope). That's giving the imperative ("Go to church!") without the indicative ("You are welcomed into the throne room of grace with your family in Christ.").

This approach also stresses church as *a place* we go, rather than church as *the people* with whom we gather. It reinforces the idea that the church is a building and leads people to think holiness happens by being present every week.

Lastly, this method could cause people to have a checklist mentality, where we pat ourselves on the back for being in church 48 weeks a year, while neglecting other important matters – like justice and love. Churchgoing isn't necessarily a sign of spiritual health. How many times do you think the Pharisees were absent from the temple?

Danger #2 – Avoid the Issue

The second danger is to be so concerned with the first that we fail to address the imperative in Hebrews 10 at all. In doing so, we ignore the importance of the church as the family of Christ, the people with whom we are to gather and hear the gospel.

Because of our strong distaste for legalistic checklists, we might minimize the counterfeit gods that creep into our lives and vie for our free time. In the desire to avoid legalism, we never mention that a ball can become a Ba'al for some, or that leisure and comfort can become idols that keep us from worshipping the true God with other believers.

In an effort to not guilt people into church attendance, we never make people aware of the fact that *grace* is presented week after week. Guilt is the result of not going to church – not because you feel bad for not living up to God's expectations, but because you're not hearing the message of gospel grace pounded into you week after week.

A renewed vision of worship

The best way to respond is not with guilt or with a false grace, but with the reminder of the purpose of worship. You aren't there to fill up at the gas station (after all, you can get some sort of spiritual sustenance by reading or listening to your preacher's podcasts apart from the body of Christ). This is a distorted view of the purpose of gathering.

The author of Hebrews clues us in. Being with your brothers and sisters is where you are able to stir one another up to love and good deeds. It's the place where the confession of hope is

celebrated and put before you and where you are urged to cling to it tightly.

It's not just the content you receive every week that is so formative; it's the act of being together and making the Lord's family your priority. It's similar to a family that gathers every evening for a meal. The value is not in the specifics of your conversation, but the very act of demonstrating your love for each other.

We don't go to church because of guilt. We are the church because of grace.

That's what Geoff and Christine, along with you and I, need to remember.