

At Least They're Going to Church

Franklin Church of Christ
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AM Assembly

Introduction:

Have you ever heard someone discussing a friend, family member or co-worker and all the sin in which they have been involved, all the error they believe and all the problems in their life but they end by saying, "But at least they're going to church"? This may even be accompanied with all the things the person finds wrong with the church being attended, "But at least they're going to church." Let's wave aside the problems generated by the phrase "going to church." Aside from that, I recognize there is a valid point made by this statement sometimes. Certainly we should be pleased with baby steps. When dealing with someone who has been totally out in the world, the fact that they are even giving consideration to anything spiritual is a great step in which we should rejoice. I do not wish to minimize that. Further, if Paul can speak of those who preach the gospel out of envy and rivalry saying he will rejoice that "whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed" (**Philippians 1:18**, ESV), then I recognize at times we can also rejoice that someone is merely attending the assemblies of a congregation, no matter which one. However, I fear that sometimes this statement goes way beyond these points. I fear that at times, we want to comfort ourselves so much what we end up meaning is "Despite all the wrong they are doing and despite all the wrong being done in that particular church, they're really alright, because at least they're going to church." That is not the right attitude to have. No doubt, for some we should be thankful for the baby steps in the right direction, but we must never become satisfied when someone is stalled out even if their last steps have been in the right direction. Like a child, we may rejoice when a 14 month old starts to pull up on the furniture, but falls when he tries to walk. But we are not satisfied for it to stay there. Consider some biblical principles that need to make us stop and think before we say, "But at least they're going to church."

Discussion:

- I. Attending assemblies doesn't equal faithful Christianity.
 - A. Sadly, I fear for many "going to church" equals Christianity. They think if they check assembly attendance off their to-do list, they are doing all they need to serve the Lord. That simply isn't true. Yes, assembling with a congregation is part of faithful Christianity. **Hebrews 10:25** drives that home. It is not, however, the sum of what it means to be Christian. If I am living the rest of my life in sin, attending the assemblies doesn't help me. **Hebrews 10:26-27** drives that home. Consider **Romans 6:15-23**. The wages of sin is death. Paul wrote that to people who were "going to church." If they continued to live in sin, they would receive their wages of death.
 - B. Do not misunderstand. I am not saying unless you live perfectly, assembling with a congregation does you no good. I am speaking of those who lead double lives, not those who are struggling to grow in Christ. Let us not be happy when people are "going to church." Let us be happy when they are adding to their faith, virtue and to their virtue knowledge...(**II Peter 1:5-8**). Let us be happy when they are seeking first God's kingdom and righteousness (**Matthew 6:33**). Let us be happy when they are crucifying themselves with Christ and living by faith (**Galatians 2:20**). Let us be happy when they are making themselves a living sacrifice (**Romans 12:1-2**).
 - C. Let's not just think about other people. What about us? What about me? Do I ever think I'm ok, because I assemble regularly? Let me not be satisfied with mere attendance. Let me strive for continual growth and victory in Christ.
- II. Their worship is vain if they are teaching manmade doctrines.
 - A. When you look at the landscape of modern supposed Christianity, you find a hodgepodge of faiths. I have a book in my library called ***The Handbook of Denominations*** that describes almost 250 different kinds of churches (and this was the seventh edition from 1981). These churches do not teach the same things. They vary widely even on fundamental issues like salvation and worship. Logic alone tells us something is wrong with this picture.
 - B. Jesus really addresses this issue in **Matthew 15:8-9**. When people teach manmade doctrines, their worship is in vain. That means all their worship, whether with a congregation or on a personal level. The reality is if someone is teaching man's doctrines instead of God's or they are merely attending a congregation that is teaching man's doctrines instead of God's, then "going to church" is not helping them at all.

- C. Consider **Matthew 7:21-23**. Here were some very religious people. They believed they had done many wonders in the name of Jesus. They had supposedly prophesied and cast out demons. Is there any doubt these people were “going to church”? Yet, they were working lawlessness. They were neither doing, nor teaching the will of God. They called Jesus Lord, but they did not do what He said (cf. **Luke 6:46**). “Going to church” did not help them.
- D. Again, we can’t simply talk about everyone else “out there.” What about us? From where does our teaching come? We have to make sure what we teach always comes from the word of God. We must make sure what we teach and practice is authorized in Scripture or we may find our worship is vain. We may find it doesn’t do us any good to assemble.

III. Lukewarm churches benefit no one who attends.

- A. In **Revelation 3:14-22**, Jesus wrote a letter to the church of Laodicea. He had absolutely nothing good to say about them. Their main problem was being lukewarm. They were neither cold nor hot, so Jesus said He would spew them out of His mouth. I believe we could all recognize that “going to church” in Laodicea didn’t do anyone any good.
- B. What does lukewarm mean? The common explanation is hot means on fire for the Lord and cold means totally opposed to God with lukewarm in the middle. With this picture, some suggest God would rather us be completely cold to Him than only halfway there. Frankly, that interpretation has always bothered me. I would like to suggest a different picture. Hot drinks provide warmth and comfort on cold days. Cold drinks provide refreshment and satisfaction on hot days. What happens, however, when I set my coffee or iced tea on the counter for a while and forget about it? When I come back later, I take a swig and find it tepid, lukewarm and, frankly, disgusting. I immediately spit it out. What was once a hot drink that provided warmth and comfort does nothing. What was once a cold drink that provided refreshment and satisfaction does nothing. But what was really wrong? How did that which was once cold or hot become lukewarm? They were affected by their surroundings. The cool air makes the hot drink lukewarm and the warm air makes a cold drink lukewarm. Once the drink reaches the same temperature as its surroundings, it will cease to change temperature. What does it mean to be lukewarm? It means to be governed by the surroundings. That was Laodicea’s problem. Instead of being the influencer in Laodicea, the church had been influenced. Essentially at this point, being a member of that congregation didn’t really make a person different than not being a member.
- C. Sadly, that is happening with too many churches today. Churches today are allowing the truth on marriage and divorce to slide. They are allowing the truth on abortion to slide. They are allowing the truth on drinking, gambling and morality to slide. They are even allowing the truth on homosexuality to slide. The fact is, being a member of some churches really doesn’t say anything about the member other than they are a member. The church looks like the world. They even use worldly methods of entertainment to draw people in. Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not speaking against churches that try to draw in the most sinful people to help them overcome their sins. I think we should be that church. I’m talking about churches that draw people in by simply not expecting much out of them. They may even try to provide some kind of biblical excuse for this teaching saying it is all about God’s grace and mercy. When churches simply allow members to be like the world, they have become lukewarm and “going to church” doesn’t help.
- D. One point I find interesting is that in the seven letters, every church except this one has something good said about them. Even in Sardis, the church with a reputation for life while it was dead, still had people in it that had not soiled their garments (**Revelation 3:4**). But not Laodicea. When a church has become lukewarm, it doesn’t do a bit of good to assemble there.
- E. Finally, we look to ourselves again. How different from the world are we as a congregation (**Romans 12:1-2**)? Are we influencers or are we the influenced. Does being a member of this congregation mean anything? Can people tell we are different from the world? If we are only lukewarm, then nothing we are doing matters.

Conclusion:

Again, I do not wish to minimize the positive steps anyone in the world has taken in the direction of serving the Lord. However, I do want to make sure we never think that everything is alright just because we are “going to church.” Let us never just “go to church.” Let us serve the Lord.