

Dear Friends,

'I am going to church now.' I thought it was a phrase that I had heard all my life when I remembered that my Mother would always say, 'I am going to chapel'. That sounds really old-fashioned, perhaps only something that we would hear in the more rural parts of Methodism but it does make an important distinction.

'I am a Christian but I don't go to church.' If I had a penny for every time I have heard that I would apply for early retirement. Most of us have heard the expression, perhaps some of us have even taken to saying it ourselves, but what is it saying about being a Christian and the role of 'going to church' in a Christian's life?

'I can worship anywhere—walking on Dartmoor, on the coastal path, in my back garden—I don't need to go to church.' I have heard that expression many times and I am sure you have too. How are we to respond to family and friends who say these things? Are they right? To put it bluntly, if they are right, why are we bothering?

In the Bible, an important part of what believers do is to 'congregate'. What we must understand is that we are congregating with a purpose. I think most people would say that the main reason we congregate is to worship (meaning to pray and to sing) but I am not sure that is true. I think our congregating is to hear the Word of God and to be thankful.

Someone rightly observed that standing in a garage does not make a person a car so how could going to church make a person a Christian? You can't argue with that. However, it is important to understand that it is not '*going* to church' that is the responsibility of the Christian but '*being* the church' - the church being the body of Christ in the world.

I have taken to being a little more robust with people who tell me they can worship anywhere. I can too—but I don't. I love walking in the fields and in the woods with my dog but I don't read my Bible as I go (though I suppose I could at a push) and I don't gather around the Lord's Table with other fallible human beings to celebrate the love and grace of God.

The commission of Christian people is not so much to go to church as to be the church but an important part of being the church is to congregate. We know we can praise God anywhere but we also recognise that it is important to have focal times to worship God (to pray and sing) and to gather around his Word and around his Table. As the hymn says:

Here are symbols to remind us/Of our lifelong need of grace  
Here are table, font and pulpit/Here the cross has central place.  
(HP 653 'God is here' *F. Pratt Green*)

On Sundays including Palm Sunday and Easter Day, on weekdays, including Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, Christian people will be gathering together to celebrate the mystery of faith: Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again. God bless you as you celebrate and proclaim Jesus Christ the Saviour, crucified, risen and coming again.

*John Haley*