

Why Face to Face Church?

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0:00] Well, COVID has created all sorts of new habits, hasn't it? I don't think I've ever sanitized my hands so many times in one day, or ever carried a mask wherever I go, or ever had the habit of shaking elbows.

Even though we're told to cough into the elbow, then shake elbows. But COVID has also created some new habits for church as well.

I like watching an online service in pyjamas, Zoom Bible study groups and morning teas, all of which, let me say, have been a great blessing during the pandemic.

But we're told that vaccines are now on the way, with the vulnerable and the healthcare workers set to receive them in a few weeks' time. We're also told that as of yesterday, our whole country, I think I checked this morning, I think it's from this morning, 14 consecutive days of zero new local cases.

And in our state, 25 consecutive cases of new local COVID cases. They're just the Australian Open players in hotel quarantine. So it seems like we are emerging out of this pandemic.

[1:13] We're not there yet, but we are on the way. And so my goal today is to encourage those for whom they haven't quite got the habit yet to kickstart the habit of face-to-face church.

And for those who are here, to remind you why face-to-face church is better than online services. Now, I say online services because the word church means a physical gathering.

In fact, in Acts chapter 19, on the next slide, there's a crowd rioting to get rid of Paul. And it says the assembly was in confusion, this crowd who were rioting.

Some were shouting one thing, some were shouting another. But in the original language that the New Testament was written in, which is the Greek language, the word for assembly is exactly the same word as church.

And so you could actually say on the next slide, the church was in confusion, which sadly is true in some churches today. But the point is the word church means an assembly, a physical gathering.

[2:23] And so the phrase online church is actually a contradiction. You cannot have a physical gathering online, can you? It's a virtual one.

And so it's online service, but face-to-face church, if you like. Now, of course, let me say there are good reasons why people cannot make it to church, like poor health, whether it's yours or a loved one's whom you're caring for, or helping others to watch an online service who wouldn't normally watch an online service because they're not a Christian yet.

Or perhaps you're on holidays and so on. But the question for us is why not continue with this new habit of online services forever?

Why bother redeveloping the habit of face-to-face church? After all, face-to-face church is harder, isn't it? It's harder to find a car spot.

It's harder to get the kids ready. It's harder to get yourself ready. Well, to answer that question, I'm going to break with my usual pattern of working through one passage of the Bible.

[3:30] And helping you to see it for yourselves. You should always be able to go home and open the passage from church that day and be able to explain it to someone else. So that's always my goal, so that people hear what God says, rather than opening the passage and going, Oh, I can't really get it.

But the preacher said God is way more important than the preacher. But I'm going to break with that habit. And we're going to do a bit of a topical today. We're going to move quickly through our passage in the pew sheets.

And I'll show you some other verses on the screen. And hope that after 10 years here, you'll trust me to represent the Bible faithfully. So why face-to-face church? Why is it better? Well, firstly, it's better for growing our faith.

Point one. Let me give you the context in our reading. Verse 17, the first line there. It says that they were separated. Paul and his companions were separated from the Thessalonian Christians in face, that is in person, not in heart, for some time.

It wasn't COVID that caused the separation like it was for us. It was Jewish persecution that drove them from the city of Thessalonica. You can read about that in Acts 17.

[4:42] And notice in verse 18 here that Paul tried to see them again and again. But he says Satan blocked their way. He's referring to the fact that the city officials stopped him, banned him from coming to the city.

And that's Satan's goal is to stop churches growing. And so he attributes it, rightly so, to Satan. And then verse 19, Paul is desperate to see them because they are, verse 20, his glory and joy.

Not in a boasting way, but like a child is its mother's glory and joy. So the Thessalonian Christians are Paul's. Which means, chapter 3, verse 1 and 2, Paul sends Timothy to strengthen and encourage them.

And verse 5, to find out about their faith. Because Paul is worried that somehow they may have been tempted to give up following Jesus, perhaps because of the persecution.

But verse 6 in the next paragraph, the good news that Timothy brings back is that they long to see Paul just as much as he longs to see them. And even more than that, verse 8, they are standing firm in the Lord.

[6:00] And so Paul is stoked. And yet, verse 10, notice what Paul prays. Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith.

In other words, he still wants to see them physically to grow their faith in whatever way they need. Whatever way they are lacking or they could do with growth in. But here's the question, why?

I mean, Paul has sent Timothy to grow their faith already. He's heard that they're standing firm in the Lord. And he sent this letter to grow their faith.

So why bother going face to face? Because he knows it's better. Now, true, we don't see that in the passage.

But we know it too. And yes, Paul didn't have the internet or Zoom like we do. But I bet even if he did, he'd still be praying night and day to see them face to face.

[7:06] Because there are some things we just can't do online. In fact, even kids know face to face is better. After doing online learning for so long, kids were over it.

You may have seen this photo before on the next screen. There is one kid, 40 minute Zoom call. He's out for the count. And I love the girl's face. Not again. I couldn't wait to get back to school.

Not just to see their friends, but even their teachers. To learn in their classrooms. And for teachers, online learning limited what they could teach.

It was better than nothing. Yes, students still grew. Yes. But for most students, not as well. In fact, I believe they even had to make some VCE concessions for year 12.

You see, student growth is better when teaching is face to face. And it's the same for Christians. Even though Zoom small groups are easier to get to, it's not as good.

[8:05] You know, the internet would occasionally drop out. You know, how many times have people had to say, unmute your mic? Or you'd interrupt each other.

Or your eyes would get tired from screen fatigue of all these heads looking intensely at you. Yes, Christians still grew. But it's not as good as face to face.

And even though we have online services that are easier to get to. And someone even said that it felt more personal. Like the preacher was speaking directly to you. It's not more relational.

Because we can't see you. Or hear you. Or hear how you're going. It's one-sided relationship. We are built for two-sided relationships.

Even introverts. Some massive introverts I know couldn't wait to get back to church. In fact, one person, one man from the nine o'clock service.

[9:02] The first time we had a nine o'clock service. I went to do the elbow thing. He just got up and hugged me without realizing it. Never done that before. And then we realized, oh, social distancing. Because we are built for relationships.

Which we were deprived of during COVID. And it's these relationships that facilitate growing our faith. It's not about just listening to the sermon online or in church.

It's about relating to one another. Talking and encouraging one another. Because as we relate, we can hear how each other are going. You can receive a smile or a wave that encourages you.

Have a conversation that leads to someone praying for you. Or sharing a hardship that leads to another providing for you. You don't get that with an online service.

It's why we actually had to try and complement the online services with more phone calls and emails and Zoom sessions to try and make up for the lack of relating.

[10:09] Now, yes, Christians still grew and we even reached people overseas. Yet as good as online services are, face-to-face church is better for you. For growing.

Because it's also better for spurring. Point two. Here we come to Hebrews chapter 10. Some well-known verses, I think. So on the next slide, the writer writes, Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.

That is, to live Christian lives. And how does the writer say we spur one another on to live Christian lives? Verse 25. Well, by not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another.

And all the more as we see the day of Christ's return approaching. You see, the writer knows the best way to spur one another on to live Christianly is to meet together physically so that we can encourage each other relationally.

To try and spur one another on without meeting face-to-face is much harder. It's a bit like trying to spur your footy teammates on to play footy over the internet.

[11:24] Or to spur your basketball teammates on to play basketball via Zoom. Like this video with some famous basketballs. LeBron James and Stephen Curry and a not-so-famous amateur.

Have a look. Hey, LeBron. Hey, Steph. Welcome to Zoom basketball practice. All right. Let me spur you on to play. You ready? Catch. Sorry, Mom.

It doesn't work at so many levels. But there are just some things you can't do online, isn't there? Yeah, we can send emails, messages, phone calls.

But as I said before, it's not as good as someone being there with you to feel for you in your situation and to speak encouraging words to you, to spur you on to live Christianly.

A face-to-face is better for growing because it's better for spurring and better for serving. Point three. Here we come to Ephesians 4. Paul writes on the next slide that Christ gave apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers to equip his people for works of service.

[12:37] Why? So that the body of Christ may be built up. Here the body of Christ is, of course, the church. And we are to equip you so that you can serve in order to build the body.

And one way to serve in order to build the body is explained later on as speaking the truth. So a few verses later on the next slide. That's it. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of Christ, who is the head.

Verse 15 says, speaking the truth in love. That is, speaking God's truth is a way of encouraging each other to grow in maturity into the likeness of Christ.

And again, the word speaking there in the original is plural. It's something that we are all to do. We pastors are to equip you people with God's truth so you can speak it to one another and encourage each other with God's promises in order to build the body.

But serving also includes playing our part. So the very next verse, Paul goes on to continue to say, From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work.

[14:03] Notice at the beginning of verse 16, it's from Christ, whom we are to remain connected to, that we grow. But we also supported by these ligaments, one another, and we grow as each part does its work, as each person serves in some way or some role at church.

But again, here's the point. It's hard to serve in church if you're not at church, isn't it? We tried for online services.

We tried to equip people to serve by reading the Bible or praying from home. And it worked most of the time. We had some technical issues sometimes. But serving online is simply more limited, isn't it?

There's just fewer opportunities to serve there, aren't there? Yet serving is a key part of being a Christian. And here, it actually not only helps us grow, it helps the body grow, the church.

So face-to-face church is simply better for serving. And it's better for showing, point four. Earlier in Ephesians, Paul writes about people coming together through the gospel.

[15:17] So on the next slide, in chapter 3, verse 6, he says, Now, we know this because we've had 2,000 years of church history to get it.

But the early church found this really hard to understand, particularly Jewish Christians. Because Gentiles were non-Jews. They weren't supposed to be part of God's people. But what Paul is saying is, now, this mystery that you guys didn't know about before, what's been made known?

And through the gospel, the good news of Jesus, people can come together, no matter their ethnicity. No matter if they're Jew or Gentile. For us, it means, through the good news of Christ, we are united together, whether we're Chinese or English, Indian or Sri Lankan, Korean or African.

We are all united together as one family of God, one body of Christ. That's why I wish we could have had more of a combined service here today, like we normally do, with more of the other services, including the Chinese services, so that we can reflect that unity we have in Christ.

But even as those who speak the same language, we are still different people with different backgrounds and different interests. People who perhaps wouldn't normally hang out with each other.

[16:46] And yet we are here at church. Because through Christ, God has united us together as one. And so when we gather as one, it actually shows God's brilliance in being able to do this.

And so a few verses later, in verse 10, Paul writes, God's intent was that now through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

You see, the church is God's masterpiece. It shows his great wisdom, his brilliance, that he is able to unite together people who wouldn't normally hang out with each other, but unite them together as family.

It shows his great wisdom to the heavenly realms. And so when we meet together face to face, we are showing God's wisdom to the heavenly realms.

The very act of gathering face to face glorifies God, did you realize? And you just can't do that online. Not like we can do here. And so why church face to face?

[18:00] Well, because it's better for growing, better for spurring, better for serving and better for showing. It's just better for you. In fact, as I said at the start, without physically gathering, it's technically not church.

And all this is why we tried to kickstart face to face church as soon as possible. Earlier than many other churches, actually. Now, don't mishear me.

Let me say again, there are still good reasons why you cannot come to church, like poor health, whether it's yours or a loved one's you're caring for, or you're helping others watch a service online to encourage them, or holidays.

And yes, we're not completely back to normal yet, but we are on the way. And so as we kick off a new church year, can I encourage you, whether you're here today anyway or online, to kickstart the healthy habit of face to face church.

Now, I realize for some this may take some time because you're still nervous about the virus, or find it hard to do face to face church when your mask covers your face. I get that.

[19:09] But can I say we have cleaning protocols in place? We have health authorities who say it's safe. We don't have to wear masks all the time. We're not in the UK, the US, or China.

And so while it remains safe here in Melbourne, and I realize it could change, but while it remains safe, we need not let fear prevent us from being who we are, a gathering in Christ.

Rather, we can meet carefully, but not fearfully. Now, I don't want to leave anyone behind. As I said, it may take some time for some people.

And so my plan is to keep online services going until probably around Easter, all things being equal. If things continue to be safe and the vaccines continue to be rolled out, then we'll probably stop the online services around Easter time, except for the nine o'clock Doncaster one, so that those who are shut in and who can't make it at church, even without COVID, still have access to it.

I mean, that's a good byproduct of COVID. But COVID may end up being like the flu, where we all have to just learn to live with it. Either way, we ought to be careful, but not fearful, meeting together.

[20:22] And for those who've already started making that a habit this year, since we've been back, I think this is now our sixth week of face-to-face church, fifth or sixth week.

That's terrific. But can I encourage you to remember why it's better? So that you might firstly be regular. For some of our services, our average number of attendance is twice a month.

That's a service here at Doncaster. That means people miss out on six months of church a year. It's not really regular, is it?

And at that rate, it's hard to spur or serve or be spurred on and serve, isn't it? I've heard people say that they feel disconnected from church or are finding it hard in life, and they think the solution is to withdraw and give up meeting together.

But it's actually the opposite. It's to meet even more regularly with people, to keep working at relationships and being open to people encouraging you and caring for you, sharing with people so that they might help you.

[21 : 35] Remember why it's better so that we might be regular. And second, remember why it's better so that we might practice those things. And so this year, will you seek to grow together, not just by listening, but also relating and asking after one another?

And will you spur one another on to live Christianly, encouraging each other? And as you're able, will you serve, whether it's by speaking God's truth or doing a role to build the body?

I'm sure your congregational pastors will be more than happy to hear from you. Even if it's simply asking for someone's name that you can pray for each week.

I had a member from the nine o'clock service ask me a couple of weeks ago, her health is deteriorating, and she just asked me for a couple of names that she could pray for each week. Isn't that brilliant?

What a way to serve. And will you show God's wisdom by expressing the unity he's created in Christ? And not just physically, by coming together each week, but also relationally, by bearing with one another, even those you find difficult or annoy you.

[22 : 53] That's where the rubber hits the road, isn't it? But as the psalmist said in our first reading, how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity, physically and relationally.

Because won't that show God's great glory? Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we do thank you that we are, at the moment, able to meet together face to face.

We thank you that we've been so fortunate in this country and doing so well compared to so many other countries in terms of COVID.

And so while it's safe, we pray that you would help us to have the healthy habit of face to face church. Coming together to grow relationally, to serve and to spur and to show your great glory.

Help us in this, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.