



Volume 11 Issue 3

West Suffolk Baptist Church West Suffolk Epistle



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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

Why Does Anyone go to Church?

There's been a lot of chatter lately about the causes and the effects of dechurcing in the United States over the past 25 years, prompted by an informative book by Michael Graham and Jim Davis, *The Great Dechurcing*, which contains research on why people have left the church and includes suggestions for how to woo them back. I interviewed Graham, Davis, and Ryan Burge for an episode of my podcast *Reconstructing Faith* on the dechurcing phenomenon because this is a hot topic among the pastors and church leaders I meet across the country.

In all the talk about dechurcing, there's a related question that deserves more attention: Why does anyone go to church? Often, we're so interested in figuring out why people don't attend that we forget to probe the reasons they do. What's in it for them?

Why Do You Go to Church?

Just as there isn't a simple answer to why people leave the church (as *The Great Dechurcing* demonstrates), neither is there a one-size-fits-all answer to why people attend. If you were to survey your congregation or engage in deeper conversation with your fellow church members, I bet you'd be surprised at the variety of reasons given.

It's easy for church leaders to think everyone on a Sunday morning is there for lofty, theologically robust reasons. They want to hear a Word from the Lord. They know they'll encounter God through our stimulating worship experience. They're here to bring glory to God by obeying his instruction to gather for worship. In reality, the reasons people go to church are often more down-to-earth.

The Regulars

One reason people attend church is out of sheer force of habit. In an article for *The Lamp*, Matthew Walther argues that "the most common reason" Catholics go to Mass "is that it is simply what one does, like voting in presidential elections or serving turkey on Thanksgiving." You go to church just like you go to the grocery store, or to the mall, or to your local high school's football games. We go to church because, well, that's what we do, and that's what we've always done.

There are still pockets in the U.S. where church membership is assumed, where asking someone in the neighborhood, "Where do you go to church?" isn't unusual or off-putting. The Regulars see churchgoing as a habit, an important routine for social cohesion and family stability. If the trends are correct, the Regulars are getting older. Fewer young people fit this category. These are the parents and grandparents who show up on Mother's Day or Father's Day with children and grandchildren in tow, hoping the routine will rub off on their heirs.



West Suffolk Baptist Church

West Suffolk Epistle



Why Does Anyone go to Church?

Continued from Page 1

The Responsibles

A *second* reason people go to church is because they're involved in some way. I call these the "Responsibles." They're ushers or deacons, or they teach Sunday school, or they keep the nursery, or they sing in the choir, or they volunteer for parking duty, or they belong to a small group where their absence would be noticed. Why do they go to church? Because they've got a responsibility to fulfill.

In an episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond*, Ray is shamed by his parents and family for not attending Mass. Eventually, he reconsiders his reluctance toward churchgoing and decides to follow in his father's footsteps and start attending again, only to discover his dad really goes to church every Sunday because he collects the offering and enjoys time with his church buddies when they do the counting.

The Respectables

A *third* reason people go to church is for the social benefits that accrue to family life. I call these "The Respectables," because they believe the church is there to help them and their children develop and maintain a moral instinct. Church is a place of moral respectability, a connection to like-minded people who share the same values.

Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk's *Handing Down the Faith* features extensive research into families where the parents have successfully transmitted the faith to their children. In their interviews, again and again, words like "grounding" and "base" and "foundation" came up. The Respectables believe churchgoing is what gives their kids a moral grounding that will set them up for a good life. It offers something that helps them be good, moral, decent people. (This is why parents will frequently send their teenage children to youth group meetings and church camps when they rarely attend themselves. They think they've already undergone the moral formation the church is there to deliver.)

The Reachers

A *fourth* reason some people go to church is that they're searching for truth. Every week in churches across America, you'll find people who are spiritually seeking but not yet committed to the faith. They're reaching for something beyond themselves. They're interested in the Christian faith and its teachings. Most of them visit when invited by someone in the other categories, but some will wander into a church on their own or take the step of attending after doing some research online.

The Reachers are the smallest category here, simply because churchgoing is often a later step in their spiritual journeys, not one of the first. But we'd be remiss to overlook them.



West Suffolk Baptist Church

West Suffolk Epistle



Why Does Anyone go to Church?

Continued from Page 2

The Resolute

Last but not least, you have those whose faith is marked by firmness and determination. These are the churchgoers whose lives most obviously bear the fruit of regeneration, whose hearts are alive in an evident way to the work of the Spirit through his people.

In stressing the passion and commitment of the Resolute, I don't mean to imply the people in the first three categories are all unbelievers. The human heart is complicated, and it's safe to say no one attends church solely for biblical reasons. But the Resolute are the most devout in terms of seeing churchgoing through a biblical lens.

The Resolute gather with believers because they love Jesus and his people, because the New Testament commands it, because they long to hear God's Word preached, because they yearn to meet Christ at the Table, because they need the God-centered reorientation that worship can provide, because they cannot conceive (rightly) of a life of following Jesus that doesn't include his Bride, because they know the family of God is essential, not optional, for spiritual formation.

Too many pastors and church leaders think the majority of people attend for the reasons most closely associated with this devout group. It's more likely a congregation includes people from all five categories, at varying levels of spiritual maturity. People may also belong to multiple categories: the Regulars who are also Responsibles, and so on.

Future of Churchgoing

What does this mean for the future of churchgoing?

We'll likely continue to see a decrease in the Regulars category, simply because a generational shift is taking place and fewer "churched" people go every week as they've always done.

Among the Responsibles, we can expect continued decline, simply because as dechurching continues and as our society grows more isolated, there are fewer needs to address, fewer services and activities taking place, and, therefore, fewer places to plug in and fulfill an obligation.

Among the Respectables, a good chunk will leave the church if the social price is too steep, when holding to Christianity's moral vision puts them out of step with mainstream society. But there's a sizable number here who, in response to the craziness of contemporary culture, may dig deeper roots into their faith and see the church as a source of moral sanity, and therefore draw closer. The sexual revolution will have its casualties in need of healing.

Among the Reachers, we could see an increase in the spiritually curious attending church, but this depends on the warm and hospitable spirit of believers and the intentional ways churches and leaders acknowledge the Reachers' presence and provide wisdom and guidance.



West Suffolk Baptist Church

West Suffolk Epistle



Why Does Anyone go to Church?

Continued from Page 3

The Resolute will remain, and if cultural shifts continue, this group may become the majority at some point. The question is, Will they be successful in reproducing themselves in the next generation? Will the Resolute find and invite more of the Reachers who are open to considering Christianity?

Good News for Church Leaders

All this is preliminary thinking as we consider why people attend church. I welcome others to build on or critique these categories.

For now, a word for pastors and church leaders. If you're disappointed to discover that the reasons some people attend your church line up more closely with the first three categories, don't miss the silver lining. They're in your church. That's a start! Meet people where they are and then shepherd them toward the Resolute category. To do this, we must trust the work of the Spirit through the power of the gospel. Through the gospel, the Spirit convicts and compels nominal Christians and brings about genuine conversion. Through the gospel, the Spirit makes obedience not just a duty but a joy. Through the gospel, the Spirit frees our hearts for service, not from a place of self-importance but from neighbor love. Through the gospel, the Spirit enables us to stand without fear when the world jeers at our beliefs. Through the gospel, the Spirit matures and sanctifies us so our reasons for gathering with God's people increasingly align with his.

The more our communities give off the fragrance of Jesus, the more it'll make sense for someone to say, "I want to go to church." ~ *Trevin Wax - Vice president of Research and Resource Development at the North American Mission Board and a visiting professor at Cedarville University.*

Our Duty To Bring Children to Christ

How do we bring our children to Christ today? Before they are born, we should bring them to God in daily prayer; after they are born, we should present them for baptism and reception into the fellowship of the visible church. As they grow, we should engage our children in daily family worship and bring them to church each Lord's Day, training them to take part in the public worship of God. And we must not give up when faced with the many discouragements that will emerge along the way, persevering in our pleading with Christ for the salvation of our children and asking the Holy Spirit to bring our children into saving union with Christ. We must persevere in bringing our children to Christ despite opposition even from fellow believers who argue from an overly intellectualized view of the gospel that children must attain a certain age, stage of mental development, or level of education before they can repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here are ten aspects of our duty to bring our children to Christ:

1. Be fully convinced that our children need Jesus and His salvation. We can send our children to Christian school, take them to church, and even teach them the rudiments of the Christian faith, but the heart of these efforts must be this message: "Children, you need to be born again; you need Jesus." As offspring of Adam, our children are conceived and born in sin, are "children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3), and therefore cannot enter the kingdom of God unless they are born again (John 3:5).



West Suffolk Baptist Church West Suffolk Epistle



Our Duty To Bring Children to Christ *Continued from Page 4*

2. Realize that our children belong to the Lord. Like Hannah we must be conscious that our children are gifts from God to us (1 Samuel 1:20). On the one hand, we must never presuppose our children's regeneration. On the other hand, we must see that our children are born into a position of advantage: hearing about Christ from birth, being raised in a godly home, and growing up in the fellowship of the church and under the sound preaching of the word. In other words, we give our children back to God, who gave them to us.

3. Surrender our children to the Lord. When we rise in the morning, we bring our children to Jesus Christ, commending them into His hands. Throughout the day we lift up their names to Him in prayer, asking Him to keep them from sin, preserve and protect them at school, and draw them to Himself. When they come home in the afternoon or evening, we receive them with thanksgiving in His name. When we go to bed at night, we bring to God everything our children have done that day, surrendering their sins, our poor family worship, the blots of our entire day, asking for Christ's forgiveness and cleansing from sin and God's continued protection (Psalm 66:8-9; 121:7).

4. Speak to and live with our children in a Christ-centered way. *"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh"* (Matthew 12:34). It is important that our children know that *"the abundance"* of their parents' hearts is faith in Christ, love for Christ, and desire to live for Christ. If we fail at this point, we fail in all, for we show that we are only blind guides and hypocrites who *"say, and do not"* (Matthew 23:3). Let us model a continual coming to Christ, so that when hard times come, our children will see us seeking Him for *"grace to help in time of need,"* and when good times return, our children will see us walking by faith (Hebrews 4:16; 2 Corinthians 5:7, respectively).

5. Strive to make a godly impression on our children with our lives. The Puritans used to compare children to softened wax that takes the image impressed on it by a metal seal. Our children absorb the pathos, ethos, emphases, and realities of who we are—for better or worse. May our lives impress on them the likeness and image of Christ.

6. Show our children reverence and joy toward God. When we commune with Jesus Christ, heart-stirring joy should mingle with godly fear (Psalm 33:18). Our attitude should convey to our children that there is joy, peace, freshness, and reality in our relationship with Christ—not something stale or drowsy, but stimulating. We should instill in our children that the Lord's Day is the high point of the week, that prayer is a delight, and that singing psalms fills us with spiritual joy.

7. Teach our children the whole counsel of God, both law and gospel. We must teach our children the law to convict them of sin, but we must also show them the fullness of the gospel. The best way to do this is to begin in family worship—eventually reading through the whole Bible with them, instructing them daily in the Word, and looking for situations in daily life to reinforce our biblical teaching. In particular, we should let both the law and the gospel determine the way we administer discipline in the home.



West Suffolk Baptist Church

West Suffolk Epistle



Our Duty To Bring Children to Christ

Continued from Page 5

8. Offer our children Christ-centered views of current events. In calling attention to world crises, our community's needs, and developments in popular culture, we should ask our children, "What does Christ think of that?" We need to let our children speak freely, even if their ideas are childish or wrong, so that we can know what is in their hearts. We can then help them learn the difference between empty worldly values, motives, and endeavors and godly ones that are of real profit. As they are bombarded with negative influences from peers and electronic media, we must teach them by our own choices what is good and profitable and what is at best a waste of time or harmful.

9. Lovingly warn our children about being outside of Christ. Our children must know that even if they are straight A students, the best athletes, good looking, and popular but are without Christ, they have nothing of abiding value and are on their way to hell (Psalms 49:20; 73:27-28). We must lovingly tell them, from the depths of our souls, *"You must be in Christ or you will perish."*

10. Become spiritual mentors for our grandchildren. Perhaps your children are grown and out of your home and you are filled with feelings of helplessness about bringing them to Christ, let alone your grandchildren. Take comfort in God's promise to be merciful to those who fear Him generation after generation, even to their children's children (Psalms 103:17; 128:6). Teach your grandchildren the ways of the Lord, and who can tell but that their coming to Christ will lead your children back to faith. It is never too late to have an influence for Christ on your children. ~ *Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

Latest Update from Our Indigenous Missionary to India

Dear my Brothers and Sisters,

Greetings to you all in the blessed name of our Savior Jesus Christ. I trust that all of you have received my report and the attached photos of our first OBI being held from Feb.13-16. Thank you for your continued valuable prayers for us. We returned to Kathmandu on the 16th P M and we had three days' rest before we could start the next OBI in a place called Lalitpur which is very close to the capital Kathmandu from 20-23. During our days of rest, three groups of servants of God came to meet with us from various parts of Nepal and also a couple of them from an Indian border area at three different times. It was a great time for us to listen to their testimonies and the persecutions and problems they are facing in their mission fields. We had the opportunity to share words of encouragement and pray for them.

The conference started on Tuesday evening and ended on Friday noon. The three of us took our turn to share the word of God, bringing encouragement and comfort to the pastors who came from various districts of Nepal, a few came from a very fat distance, travelling for about 18 hours by bus. Some of them shared the opposition and persecutions they are facing in their mission fields. One pastor, a convert from a high-class Hindu family, shared his ordeal when the Hindu right-wing people vandalized his church building and the life threats they have faced recently. They still live under a certain measure of fear. The Lord empowered all three of us and we were able to see the work of the Holy Spirit of God during our sharing of the word. The meetings went very well and we were able to feel the touch of God in every one's life. The servant of God who translated all our messages is an amazing character with special God given gifting in the interpretation of messages.



West Suffolk Baptist Church



Latest Update from Our Indigenous Missionary to India

Continued from Page 6

On Friday I shared the word in the first session and by 11.30 a.m. I had to leave for the airport to catch my flight at 3.00 p.m. So, I could not attend the final session. It was a long journey via Mumbai. The flight from Mumbai took off very late at 1.40 a.m., arrived at Cochin, my last destination at 3.45 a.m. and I reached home at 4.45 a.m on Saturday. It was a great and special time for me to have blessed fellowship with Reverend Jerry and Brother Eric during the OBIs.

Once again, I want to thank you for your prayers. I count on that so much. God willing, I will have to be in a place called Balasore in the state of Odisha for the pastors training class from March 13-15. So, I will be away from home from 12-16.

Your Brother in His Grace,
A.M





West Suffolk Baptist Church

West Suffolk Epistle



What Is Dispensationalism?

Dispensationalism is a popular and widespread way of reading the Bible. It originated in the nineteenth century in the teaching of John Nelson Darby and was popularized in the United States through the Bible Conference movement. Its growth was spurred on even more through the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible, which was published in 1909. Scofield's Bible contributed to the spread of dispensationalism because it included study notes written from a distinctively dispensationalist perspective. The founding of Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924 by Lewis Sperry Chafer provided an academic institution for the training of pastors and missionaries in the dispensationalist tradition. Some of the most notable dispensationalist authors of the twentieth century, including John F. Walvoord, Charles C. Ryrie, and J. Dwight Pentecost, taught at Dallas Seminary.

Dispensationalist theology is perhaps best known for its distinctive eschatological doctrines, particularly the doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church. According to this doctrine, this present church age will be followed by a seven-year period of tribulation. Before the tribulation begins (thus "pre-tribulation"), the church will be caught up to heaven where believers will be with Christ until the second coming, which occurs at the end of the tribulation. At that time, they will return with Christ, who will then inaugurate His millennial kingdom (dispensationalists are thus also premillennialists).

Although dispensationalism is best known for its eschatological doctrines, at its heart is the distinction between Israel and the church. Every other distinctively dispensationalist doctrine rests on this idea. What this distinction means for dispensationalists is that there are two peoples of God. Israel is one of these and consists of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The church is the other, and it consists of all those and only those (whether Jew or gentile) who are saved between the Day of Pentecost and the rapture. Part of the reason for the pre-tribulation rapture is to remove the church from earth so that God can begin dealing with national Israel again.

Dispensationalism differs from Reformed covenant theology in a number of ways, but the most significant is this idea of two peoples of God. Covenant theology affirms that there is one people of God and thus continuity between the people of God in the Old Testament and the people of God in the New Testament. Covenant theology is not, as some dispensationalists assert, "replacement theology" because in covenant theology, the church is not technically replacing Israel. The church is the organic continuation of the Old Testament people of God. (For a helpful introduction to covenant theology, see Stephen Myers' *God to Us*.) The oneness of the people of God is evident by an examination of several New Testament texts.

Consider first the olive tree analogy in Romans 11. In this passage, Paul is addressing gentile believers and urging them not to be arrogant toward Jewish believers. He uses the illustration of an olive tree to explain. Note that in the illustration there is one good olive tree. Paul explains that branches were broken off this olive tree and gentile "wild shoots" were grafted into it. The one olive tree represents the people of God that has long existed. Unbelieving Jewish branches (e.g., Pharisees) have been broken off this tree by God, leaving only believing branches (e.g., Jesus' Apostles). Believing gentiles have been grafted into this one tree so that it now consists of believing Jews and gentiles. This tree is the church. If Paul were illustrating the dispensationalist doctrine, we would have numerous gentile trees and one Jewish tree (Israel). God would then plant a new tree (the church). He would take believing Jews from the Israel tree and believing gentiles from the gentile trees and graft them into this one new tree. Paul says nothing like this. The one tree that existed in the Old Testament continues, but now God has removed unbelieving Jews and grafted believing gentiles into it.



West Suffolk Baptist Church

West Suffolk Epistle



What Is Dispensationalism?

Continued from Page 8

In this light, consider what Paul says to gentile believers in Ephesians 2:11–22. Paul first tells these gentile believers what they used to be: “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (v. 12). If that’s what they used to be, the implication is that the opposite of each is true of these gentile believers now. They are now part of the commonwealth of Israel and partakers of the covenants precisely because they’ve been grafted into the one tree representing the one people of God. But there’s more than implication. Paul goes on to say explicitly in verses 19 and following that these gentiles are “no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.”

Dispensationalists have a difficult time grasping this because of their idea that the seed of Abraham is only the physical offspring of Abraham. Again, Paul begs to differ. In Galatians 3:16, he explains that “*the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring.*” He then explicitly identifies the offspring as Jesus Christ. But note what he then adds a few sentences later in verse 29: “*And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.*” Paul defines Abraham’s seed in terms of Jesus Christ. Christ is a literal physical descendant of Abraham. However, because believers, whether Jew or gentile, are united to Christ, we too are Abraham’s offspring if we belong to Christ.

Does Paul continue to use the terms Israel, church, and gentile in the New Testament? Of course. But not in the way that these terms are used by dispensationalists. He continues to speak of ethnic Jews and ethnic gentiles, both inside and outside the church. But he does not do so in a way that results in two peoples of God. There is one tree in the Old Testament that consists primarily of ethnic Jews, although some gentiles (e.g., Ruth) are brought in. This is the one tree that exists when Christ comes. He doesn’t chop it down, and He doesn’t plant a new tree. He prunes the unbelieving Jewish branches off, leaving only the believing Jewish branches. He then begins to graft believing gentiles into this one tree. This tree with ingrafted gentile branches does not “replace” the old tree. These gentiles are now part of the old tree by faith in Jesus Christ.

If the biblical teaching regarding the one people of God is allowed to stand, all of the distinctive dispensationalist doctrines that rest on the doctrine of two peoples of God are left without any foundation. ~ **Dr. Keith A. Mathison - Professor of Systematic Theology at Reformation Bible College in Sanford, Fla.**



West Suffolk Baptist Church

West Suffolk Epistle



Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

If you have a birthday or anniversary in March that is not posted here or is listed in error or you do not want to be published in this newsletter, please contact Walt or e-mail him at gwlcf10415@gmail.com.

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner March 2024

Birthdays

Rory Alexander H. (4)
Jared E. (5)
Marlow S. (12)
Rose M. (15)
Les T. (19)
Hannah L. (20)

Benjamin P. (21)
Hannah E. (23)
Daniel K. (23)
Peggy G. (25)
Jonathan F. (26)
Tom S. (29)

Anniversaries

Marlow and Wilma S. (15)
Rick and Peggy G. (31)

The River of Life Revelation 22:1 - 5

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb **2** through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. **3** No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. **4** They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. **5** And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.



West Suffolk Baptist Church Leadership

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Please submit information to the editor by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions from the contributors to this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of West Suffolk Baptist Church or it's leadership.