

Dear members and friends of St. John,

Have you ever thought about why you attend church? That may sound like a silly question, but I'd like you to stop, for a moment and think about it. If I were to ask you to pick from these five answers, the **most important reason for your attendance in worship**, which one would you choose? (Remember, you can only choose **one**).

1. I grew up in the church. My parents or grandparents always attended church. I know that church attendance is important, because that's what I was taught from a young age.
2. My children need to grow up in the church, just like I did. They need to hear the Law, and learn how to live a moral life. They need to learn about Jesus' love for them, how He died for them. It's an important foundation for the rest of their lives.
3. Church means being in an extended family. I have established friendships in church that mean a great deal to me. My Christian family provides a solid foundation for my faith life, and I look forward to seeing them each week.
4. I enjoy praying together, singing the hymns, and praising God for all that He's done for me! I love the feeling of being in the presence of God, of having a closeness to God that is hard to put into words.
5. I need what church offers, because I'm a sinner. God's word leads me to repent of my sins. God's word leads me to turn from sin and see the cross for what it is: God's grace and mercy poured out on me! I need to hear the word, because, on my own, I would surely perish.

First of all, let me say that all of the answers, listed above, are **good** answers. They're all valid, because there's an element or elements of truth in each one. But **only one of these answers** should be your number one pick. Let's examine each one.

Answer 1 – we learn a great deal as children, watching our parents or grandparents. We see the things that we want to emulate. Some of us have very positive memories of being in church with them, and we want to hang on to those memories. There's nothing wrong with holding on to memories about life with mom, dad, or grandparents. But are memories of family enough to sustain our relationship with God? Satan will try to use these memories to turn you away from worship and God. How? By tricking you into believing that what's happening in church today would not be acceptable to your parents or grandparents, if they were still alive. Changes in worship (worship forms, or hymns) may lead you to conclude that church is not what you remembered when you were young. It won't be long before you will drop out of worship in an attempt to preserve the good memories that you want to keep forever.

Answer 2 – there's little argument among people about the state of the world today. Raising children in this environment is difficult. It's absolutely true that Sunday School and Vacation Bible School are important for your child's entire life. Children need the law. They need to learn it, to be able to see what God expects of them, as members of His family. They need to hear the Gospel and know that, even though we can't keep the law perfectly, we have a loving God that forgives us, through faith in Jesus Christ. What a wonderful gift for our children! But is it enough to sustain **your**

relationship with God? What do they see when they watch you in worship? Do you care, or does it appear to them that you're just going through the motions - for them? Children can sense phoniness. Look at Answer 1 and you'll see why this is important for their future.

Answer 3 – what an important thing, this mutual consolation of the brethren! The Bible tells us to be there for our brothers and sisters in Christ – to help each other in our time of need. Our church family is important, because relationships are important! But what happens when your closest friends move away? What happens as you get older and your friends pass away before you do? Will church simply become meaningless? That's the danger of not building your relationship, **first** and **foremost**, with **Christ**. In Christ, we learn how to extend His love to others. We learn that, as friends depart from our life, we can be a friend to the new family that just joined. We can support that elderly person that recently moved into our area, and doesn't have anyone to talk with. In short, we can be Christ to them! We see our extended church family, not as an isolated few that we know and care about, but as everyone that joins with us in worship. And we are a blessing to them, as God uses us to help them in their time of need.

Answer 4 – God gives us emotions and feelings as a precious gift. We may often experience a sense of true joy, or peace, or even sadness, as we attend worship. Good Friday is a time when I am frequently at a loss for words. I'm struck by how my sinfulness has led to my Lord's punishment and death on the cross. A profound sense of sadness comes over me. Other times, I leave church with a song in my heart! Maybe it was an uplifting hymn or sermon. Maybe it was receiving the Lord's Supper, and knowing that Christ has come to *me*, and has forgiven me *my sins*, through His own body and blood. Wow! But emotions can mislead us. Satan knows that some days we won't *feel anything* in worship. When I look to my emotions as proof that Christ is alive in me – when I depend on an inner feeling to provide me with the strength I need to carry on, through the tough times – then, I'm on a slippery slope that leads away from the truth. The truth is that Jesus died on the cross, nearly 2000 years ago, with my sins intact. The truth is that through Confession/Absolution, the Lord's Supper, and the Gospel – I am forgiven! Even if I don't *feel* forgiven! Why? Because God says so – and He never goes back on His word.

Answer 5 – is the only answer that has **the basis for a lifelong relationship with Christ**. Jesus charged his disciples to go out and teach repentance and forgiveness of sins, in His name (Luke 24:47). That same command holds true for us today. The reason is that we are sinful and in need of what Christ so desperately wants to provide us: Forgiveness. Too many Christians think this is a one-time-only occurrence. They reason that they were baptized into the faith, and therefore have no need for on-going repentance and forgiveness of sins. But Satan, the destroyer, is always trying to sift us like wheat (Luke 22:31-32). If the devil can tempt us to treat church like a duty that must be fulfilled, or something that will benefit our children, and not us, or as if it's a social club meeting, or a time for our emotions to carry us along – he will sift us like wheat in the end. We need God's on-going grace that comes from His means of grace. We need our burdened consciences relieved, so that we can effectively carry out the work that He sets before us. The Old Adam needs to be struck down, so that the New Man can emerge in us. God sanctifies us in His truth: He grows us, from

spiritual infancy, to spiritual adulthood, so that we can separate out the good from the bad, and not be misled by deceitful schemes and false teachings (Eph. 4:13-16). All of this makes worship critical for believers.

What I've witnessed over the past six years is that each time someone has walked away from worship at St. John, they've had an attitude about worship that falls into one of the first four answers. **If you chose one of these four answers, pray that God will help you to reconnect to Him through His word during worship, so that you receive the blessings that He has for you.** Let me know how I can help you. It's so critical for your spiritual life.

Starting this month, the extra articles in *The Messenger* will be on specific elements of worship. It's my prayer that you will read these and grow in your appreciation for all that our Lord does for us in worship.

Pastor Travis