

## **CHURCHGOING IS NOT ENOUGH**

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In the 2001 Census 72% of respondents described themselves as Christians – yet only some 7.5% of the population go to church every Sunday. Although I recognize that most of the 72% are what we might term ‘nominal’ Christians, I find it nonetheless an encouraging statistic. It means, for instance, there is still a substantial church ‘fringe’ which might be open to attending Alpha courses and the like.

But what about the 7.5% of church-goers. Are they the committed Christians as over against those who are Christians only in name? From a traditional Baptist perspective, the answer is ‘no’. For we have always maintained that there’s far more to Christian commitment than simply going to church – it involves commitment to Christ, which in turn involves commitment to his people. And just as our commitment to Christ should be whole-hearted, too should our commitment to his people be equally whole-hearted.

That whole-hearted understanding of commitment to Christ and his people is expressed by Baptists in church membership. Furthermore, when people become members of a Baptist church, they don’t simply ‘join’ a church, they actually enter into a covenant with the people of God. As I say every time I welcome people into membership: “In a Baptist church membership involves entering into a dynamic covenant relationship with one another – a relationship in which we commit ourselves not only to work together to extend Christ’s Kingdom, but also to love one another and stand by one another, whatever the cost”.

A church covenant is a bit like the covenant we make in marriage. In the wedding service we commit ourselves to one another: “all that I am I give to you and all that I have I share with you”. The same too is true of church membership. In the words of Richard Sider, a covenant relationship involves “an unconditional availability to and unlimited liability for the other brother or sister emotionally, financially and spiritually”. Furthermore, just as in the wedding service we take one another “for better, for worse” – so too in the church. I never understand people who bale out when the going gets tough – commitment is the name of the game!

Rightly understood, when at a church meeting we vote upon applications for membership, we are not declaring that the applicants have come up to our ‘standard’ and are therefore ‘worthy’ to become members of our church. The fact is none of us is worthy – the moment we believe otherwise, that moment we are not fit to belong to the church of God. No, in voting we are committing ourselves to stand by our new friends, come hell or high water.

Or to put it another way, a committed Christian is a person who takes seriously the “new commandment” of Christ “to love one another” just as he has loved us. Simply going to church is not a sign of commitment.

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