



**VILLAGE**  
**CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Do I Have to Go to Church to be a Christian?

SCRIPTURE:  
1 John 4:7-11

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July 17, 2022 — Sermon by Rev. Sally S. Wright

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A couple weeks ago, I walked out of the building with a church member whom I had never met before. It started with that normal but awkward moment when you and someone else are walking down the same hallway and you don't really know each other and yet you recognize each other's presence. As I held the door to the outside for her, she introduced herself. "I am a long-time member," she said. "This is my first time back in worship in two years. What a difference being in this place makes," motioning toward the sanctuary.

"Yes," I replied. "There is something that happens when we are together, singing the same songs, hearing the same words. It can be a powerful experience. I hope to see you soon," I said, while waving at her.

Over the past two years, all of us in different ways, have been asking the question, "What purpose does church, this place and this time, have in our lives?" Some of you have said to me, "I'm so glad to be in the sanctuary again." I have heard others of you say, "I simply love worshipping online." And others, I know, have not returned. Today we are going to talk about what happens when we gather together to worship.

During the height of the pandemic, one of you sent me an article describing just this—what happens when we gather. In July of 2021, Dr. Adam Grant from the Wharton School of Business described the happiness that occurs when we gather as 'social effervescence.' It's a term coined by sociologist Emile Durkheim to describe the sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose. He goes on to cite, "Research has found that people laugh five times as often with they are with others than when they are alone. Even exchanging

pleasantries with a stranger on a train is enough to spark joy," he writes. "Peak happiness lies mostly in collective activities."

I wonder if we come to church only to experience what Dr. Grant refers to as 'social effervescence.' Or are we longing to experience something bigger and deeper?

In May, Village Church celebrated one year of being back in in-person worship (not solely offering online worship). Some say that we are presently in a post-COVID world, one in which COVID has and will continue to spread for the foreseeable future. Yet, we are not locked down like we were during 2020 and 2021. For a whole year and two months, we were part of a permeable, extended, online worshipping community. It might be tempting for us to think that our generation is the first generation to grapple with the inability to worship at church together. Yet, I want to share with you the story of John, the story of the writer of the Biblical book of Revelation. In the first century, John went into political exile on the Greek island of Patmos. He, too, worshiped on Sundays even though he was not with a gathered assembly of Christians. He worshiped alone knowing that he was worshipping with other Christians in other places and times. He trusted that all of them were connected through the body of Christ.

Liturgical theologian, Gordon Lathrop, paraphrases how John understood worshipping in exile this way. He writes, "In the Spirit of the Lord's day (Rev. 1:10), the day of Christian assembly, this exile encounters the Risen One. But this encounter is not a lonely engagement with the divine. It is also, from the outset, full of the presence of the churches—the church in the midst of the Risen One stands, the churches held in his hand, the church to which the letters [in Revelation] are then

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addressed (Rev. 1:10-20).” Our buddy John had simply to know and trust that he was connected to the larger worshipping assembly of God’s people—worshipping the risen one together.

In our current age, we might not be political exiles but we can feel separated from our worshipping community. I visit our homebound members frequently who feel separated physically from the church but not spiritually. Some feel connected through our online worship or our telephone-call worship times. Some are not able to access these and so, like John on Patmos, they trust that they are still connected through all their years of prayers, relationship building, and through the body of Christ itself. Some of you are separated by geography. Some of you are home with babies or caring for parents. Some of you might even be working.

Yet, one of the truths passed down to us from history and the tradition of John on Patmos still remains true: When you are worshipping the living God, whether in-person, online or stuck on an island, the worshipping assembly is gathered around you. Because with this assembly, you are witnessing the presence of the risen one.

You might live in Maryland, but feel closely connected to this assembly. Village has a second worshipping campus on Antioch, so we are always worshipping with our southern Johnson County brothers and sisters. Whether we have two campuses or 10, it is not by our own power that we are gathered into one assembly, although in all truth, a lot of work goes into making worship happen. It happens by the connecting power of God. It is God’s work, not ours, that connects all of us into the body of Christ.

No matter how or when we gather, we practice God’s love. But why does God connect us? What is the purpose?

Let me tell you about my household on a few Sunday mornings this last month regarding the idea of church. You might know that I am married to a pastor. My children were baptized in the church she pastors, Southminster Presbyterian Church. My children are regular worshipers at my wife’s church.

A few weeks ago, as I left to be worship leader

here at our Mission Campus, I realized, sitting in my car, that I had this overwhelming sense of sadness. It is normal for me not to worship with my kids because they worship at Southminster—just right down the street. My wife was recovering from surgery and my mother was here to help us. There was still a question about where the kids were going to go to church that day and even if they were going at all. What I felt sad about was not that they weren’t going to church with me. What I felt sad about was that my kids were not going to experience the risen one through the gathered worshipping assembly that morning. They were not going to participate in a group claiming with their very lives that our loving God is breathing among us and showing God’s love through each other. Does that sound a little idealistic for an ordinary Sunday morning?

It turns out that when I arrived home about lunchtime, my children had watched church online and even drawn pictures to correspond with the Children’s Time. I could not have asked for a more engaged way to encounter church.

So, the next week rolls around. My children know how to sit in church; they have been doing so since they were three weeks old. We have been practicing being church and being in church for a long time. Yet, to my shock, last week they were terrible in church. No one sat still. Both kept talking to me, especially during prayers. There were whines and wimpers. At points, both my children had their shoes on the pew and they were laying down, flopping around. Our well-trained pastors’ kids were just not having it that day. The shame I felt was bitter in my mouth. And I wondered how I could have been sad that these two were not in church last week—especially if this is how they act.

Then my daughter leans over to me and whispers, “Momma, are we having communion today?” I say, “No, not today.” The disbelief in this six-year-old’s face was stunning. It was clear to me that no matter how these children act, the practice of being and doing church sinks in. The power of being in the room—letting the words, hymns, and prayers fall upon these kids—is steady and powerful. And as soon as the worship service was over,

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one person in the balcony, who had clearly seen the struggles coming from the pew the Wrights were in, came over, touched my elbow gently and whispered, “I’ve been there, too. Just keep going.”

Whether you are three weeks old, six years old, or 106 years old, the practice of being church together is not just something we put on our calendar; it is a pattern and a way of living that seeps into our bodies and souls. So when life gets really tough, we remember that soon there will be a meal that nourishes us through the sacrament of communion or Wednesday night dinners. There will soon come a supporting word to uplift us from a song, a friend, or from scripture. And we remember that soon there will even be a time for us to return that care.

What are we pointing to? Pastor, go ahead and answer your own question: Am I a Christian if I don’t go to church? You are a Christian if you profess Jesus as your Lord and Savior. No one, none of us, are here to police what happens between you and God. God is the one who makes things happen.

Yet, it seems there is something at stake for us

when we worship the living Lord together. And as sappy as it may seem, what is at stake is love. Love. Love made manifest, love made human, love made real. One way of showing and receiving Christian love is simply by showing up. It is in showing up that we claim with our very bodies and voices that God’s love is the most powerful force in this universe—shown through each other, through baptism and communion and through the power of the whole body of Christ.

Would you believe that when we gather, it is not just something powerful that happens—it is metaphysical, even theological. We are stating with our own bodies that there is something in this world that we are claiming. We are claiming God’s love for the world. This is no small thing. And as Christians, when we gather, we are always gathering with other Christians in every time and place, with all the saints that have come before and all the saints that will come after, to proclaim God’s love.

We pray all of this in the name of the creator, the risen one, the divine love that surrounds us all. Amen.