**WHAT YOU SHOULD 'GET' OUT OF CHURCH**

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There are a variety of ways to assess our experience when we come to a church service, or we visit maybe another congregation, but the most common question that summarizes the whole thing usually is, "What did you get out of it?" Some people leave congregations and they seek out new ones with the excuse, "I just wasn't getting anything out of it." Obviously this suggests that people have certain expectations about their church life and even if they can't describe in detail what it is that they need, they do know that they need something from church and if they don't receive it, they will quit and go somewhere else.

The usual answer and I've also been guilty of giving this answer, has usually been, "you don't come to church to get something, you come to church to give something." Well this is partly true. Church life is about giving but it's also about getting as well. In this lesson, I'd like to share with you some of the things the Bible says that we should **get** from church.

**1. A Sense of God's Presence**

People come to a church service because they believe in a God that they can't see and they want in some way to have an experience of Him. I know that Hebrews 10:25 tells us not to forsake the assembling of the saints, but this is not a reason to come, it's just a warning not to quit coming. Habit or fear is a poor motivator for coming to church because it almost guarantees that we won't experience God, we'll only experience our habit and our fear.

The Roman Catholics had the idea of this. They built huge and magnificent church buildings in the middle ages, and even to this day. Their point was that upon entering some towering edifice with gold and other worldly decor, you would have an experience that was unlike any other experience in your life. You left feeling that God was majestic, mighty and mysterious.

Of course they had the right idea, but I believe they had the wrong method. Paul says:

...think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.
Acts 17:29b

You cannot produce an experience of the spiritual using human, physical things. Remember, "God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24). The biggest issue in Christianity today revolves around how to have the God experience.

Some try to produce it with the "art" of music, drama and dance. Others rely on the old Catholic method of spectacular architecture and still others try to generate a high emotional reaction through crowd manipulation and hysteria.

It's interesting to note that the first century church had no fancy buildings, they did not use instruments or organized events for worship, they held no public rallies in the style of the modern faith healers, and yet their experience of God was such that they were ready to die for their faith, and many did.

They, like us, came to church in order to experience a sense of God, and their deep conviction and martyrdom tells us that they did. I believe the reason for it was because they were close to Jesus Christ.

* They were close historically in that Jesus had lived and died and resurrected many of them in their generation, some of them may have even seen Him (I Corinthians 15).
* They were close to His teachings because the apostles themselves were their teachers (Acts 2).
* They were close to the past and very much aware of their sins and Jesus's forgiveness. They had lived in total darkness and paganism and Christianity was such a light and such a relief, such a great hope that they never had before (Romans 5).
* They were close to the future because many first century Christians believed that Jesus's coming and the judgment would literally take place in their lifetimes, and so they lived like a people who might be judged and go to heaven next week.

The reason that God became the man, Jesus, was to permit us an experience of Him.

Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?
- John 14:9

Our church experience should include an experience of the Father, but it's not an experience manufactured through architecture, or through emotionalism. It is accessible in the same way now as it was in the first century, and that is through drawing nearer to Christ through His body, which is the church. For example,

* The death, burial and resurrection is not in our generation, but the commemoration of it through communion keeps the memory and the meaning fresh in our minds.
* The teaching of the Apostles are preserved in the Bible and our conviction grows as we learn and as we apply it to our lives.
* The blood of the cross shed so long ago is as effective to wash away our sins today as it ever was and the joy that comes from forgiveness is as fresh and hopeful as it was in the first century.

If we don't have the "God experience" it may be because we've moved away from Christ

* away from taking the communion regularly
* away from seriously obeying the teachings of the apostles
* away from dealing with and forsaking our sins

If you want to experience the presence of God in church, you must remain in the presence of Christ throughout the week.

**2. A Sense of Direction**

There are a million books out there that will try to tell you what to do with your life, but there's only one book that tells you what God wants you to do with your life. When a person leaves a church service, that person should have a sense of where he or she is going. I suppose what I'm saying here is aimed more at those who serve as elders and ministers and teachers because they're charged with ministering the Word of God to the church.

When I was in college, my professors would insist that sermons and lessons have a point, that sermons and lessons have a "so what," an instruction to the hearer about what he or she needed to do, or understand, or change. The reasons for this are evident.

* When Jesus taught, He taught with a purpose that His hearers would either believe, or they would repent, or they would follow, or they would be comforted, or any number of reasons.
* When people come to church, they're coming for answers, they want direction, they want confirmation, they need encouragement, even need discipline. And when they don't receive any, they feel that their time was wasted.

Paul says that:

16All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.
- II Timothy 3:16-17

We come to church to be equipped. Sometimes the equipment we're lacking is comfort because we are in pain, or we're suffering. But sometimes the thing that we need is a rebuke, to be told stop doing what you're doing, it's wrong, or start doing this over here because it's the right thing to do.

Leaders, ministers and teachers need to make sure that their lessons as well as their lives provide the "so what," provide the direction that the church needs in order to be sure of the way that they should walk as Christians.

God has given:

* to the government - the right and responsibility to keep order and protect society (Romans 13:1)
* to the family - the right and responsibility to establish homes and to raise children (Genesis 2).

But only to the church has God given the task of saving souls and providing a moral compass to direct the way that God would have us live. In I Timothy 3:15 Paul tells us that the church is the pillar and support of truth.

We should make no apologies for providing clear and emphatic direction and instructions for Godly living, it's what God has given us to do, and it's what the church expects when it comes on the Lord's day to gather.

**3. A Sense of Belonging**

In a survey about religion in America, it was noted that the number one thing that people want to get when they come to church is a sense of belonging. This is not surprising considering the present condition of our society.

* The traditional extended family is gone. There's no more grandparents living with you, and relatives around you for a lifetime.
* People move on an average of every four to five years. Meaning you have to make new friends and get used to a new place regularly.
* One out of two marriages are ending in divorce meaning that there are a lot of single moms and single dads or blended families out there.
* More people are single longer, widowed longer, living by themselves longer than ever before.
* The internet is becoming the fastest way to make new virtual friends.

So it's not surprising that what people want to "get" when they come to church is a sense of belonging, that for whatever reasons they have not managed to feel in their normal lives.

This is a great opportunity for the church because God designed it to be a place where everyone could belong.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
- Galatians 3:28

Through faith expressed in repentance and baptism, a person enters the church regardless of his past, or wealth, or culture. However, in order for a person to feel like he belongs there, the church needs to do several things:

1. **Make the person feel welcome** - We need to get to know, offer hospitality and greet them warmly. You know you are welcomed if you feel it, if you feel welcomed then you are welcome.
2. **See to people's needs** - Physical, emotional or spiritual needs. Meeting a person's needs is the surest way to say to them that we want you here.
3. **Make people feel useful** - Integrate a person into our work and into our lives. People feel they belong when they are serving others within the group.

The Jerusalem church, did all of these because in the book of Acts you see them:

* eating at each other's home
* selling goods and sharing the profits to whoever has needs
* teaching each other
* people sent to preach and feed the poor
* deacons being appointed

For many people, the church is the only real family that they have, for a growing segment of the population, it's the family that they're looking for. When people come here, they have to feel that they belong here and that they're welcome, or they won't stay.

**Summary**

I think there are some legitimate things that we should "get" out of church when we come, and if we don't get these things well, there's no reason to stay.

1. We should get a sense of God's presence that in this place, I come closer to God than at other times, or when I'm with other people.
2. We should also get a direction for our lives. We might not always agree, but at least the way that we should go has been clearly marked by the preachers and the teachers and the elders.
3. We should get a feeling that we belong here, just as much as everybody else, we should never feel like we're an outsider if we are part of the body of Christ.

The question is how do we make sure that everyone gets these things when they come? A few suggestions and the lesson is yours.

1. Experiencing God's presence requires my obedience to His Word and my drawing closer to His Son. Not new music, or new preacher, or new building. Those are all needed things as the time arrives, but these are not things that draw us closer to God. A new attitude about my Christianity, that will draw you closer to God. The more we as a group dedicate ourselves to Christ, the more we will experience God's presence, not only in our worship service, but in our everyday life as well.

2. Direction requires leadership and in the church, leadership requires much prayer, study and preparation. People want direction, but we have to be sure that as leaders and teachers and ministers, that the direction that we give is according to God's Word, and nothing else. There are many directions in life, but we will be judged if the directions we give don't lead to Christ and His kingdom.

3. Belonging happens when each person begins to sense ownership and responsibility for the church. A warm welcome, a meeting of immediate needs and something to do, says that we want you to belong, but that sense of belonging won't happen until you yourself begin to care about what happens to this church.

* care enough to welcome others
* care enough to support it with money
* care enough to maintain and serve it
* care enough to want others to belong here and care like you do

You belong when you care for others like others cared for you when you first came. Do these things and you'll get what you need out of church. Of course, one thing everyone needs to get whether they come to church, is the chance to be right with God.

And as in every service, we offer that opportunity now. If you're not a Christian and would like to be right with God, and have your sins forgiven, and receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, then we know the water is ready, and we encourage you to come this morning repenting of your sins, and be immersed in Christ that you might belong to His body.

And if you are a Christian that needs a new start, or a prayer for forgiveness, or a word of encouragement, a prayer of encouragement, well, our elders are ready to serve you now, we encourage you to make your way forward, or let your wishes be known as we stand now and as we sing our song of encouragement.

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