

# HOW TO WALK INTO CHURCH

TONY PAYNE



If you've been a churchgoer for more than just a few Sundays, walking into church probably doesn't seem like it deserves its own 'how to' manual. Right? In fact, it most likely seems like a pretty straightforward and trivial weekly activity.

But things are rarely as simple as they seem, and how you walk into church reveals a great deal about what you think church is, what it's for, and what you think you're doing there.

In *How to Walk into Church*, Tony Payne helps us think biblically about church. Along with giving plenty of other practical advice, he suggests a way to walk into church that beautifully expresses what church is and why you're there—a way that every Christian can master.

If you go to church, this Brief Book is for you.

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ISBN 978-1-922206-72-5

  
9 781922 206725

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TONY PAYNE

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Matthias Media

(St Matthias Press Ltd ACN 067 558 365)

Email: [info@matthiasmedia.com.au](mailto:info@matthiasmedia.com.au)

Internet: [www.matthiasmedia.com.au](http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au)

Please visit our website for current postal and telephone contact information.

Matthias Media (USA)

Email: [sales@matthiasmedia.com](mailto:sales@matthiasmedia.com)

Internet: [www.matthiasmedia.com](http://www.matthiasmedia.com)

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ISBN 978 1 922206 72 5

Cover design and typesetting by Lankshear Design.

*Look carefully then how you walk, not as  
unwise but as wise... EPHESIANS 5:15*

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# 1. HOW TO WALK INTO CHURCH

I suppose it must have happened upwards of 2000 times by now.

I exit the car, usually with a wife and various kids in tow, and amble in the front door, tossing off a quick greeting to whomever is handing out the folded sheets of paper that in church-speak are called ‘bulletins’<sup>1</sup>

After a quick scan of the seating situation—who has already parked themselves where, who I might want to avoid and so on—I choose a spot not too near the front and sidle into the chosen row, smiling feebly at the person sitting on the other side of the seat that I’ve politely left vacant between us.

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1 Or ‘handouts’. Or ‘newsletters’. Or ‘outlines’. Or...

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And there it is. I've walked into church.

Not exactly a taxing or impressive feat, and hardly worthy of having a book written about it, even a very short book like this.

But things are rarely as simple as they seem.

It doesn't take very much thought to realize that walking into church is a much more complicated and important subject than it first appears.

In reality there are countless different ways to walk into church.

For example, if it's your first time walking into a particular church then you might be wondering what sort of place it is, whether you'll recognize anyone, and whether it will be possible to avoid that enthusiastic-looking usher making a beeline for you. You might walk in hesitantly or apprehensively, with a murmuring hope in your heart that you'll find answers today to the questions that haunt you. You might be walking into church for the first time in a very long while.

On the other hand, perhaps you've walked into church every Sunday for so many years that any sense of apprehension, expectancy or searching has long since evaporated. Perhaps you walk into church with the same kind of resigned sag to your shoulders



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that you have when you walk into the office. You don't have high expectations, and they are quite likely to be met—as they were last week and the week before.

Or perhaps your walk into church will be like mine often was during those years when our five children were all under the age of twelve. After a week of long days and short sleeps, followed by the chaos of getting everyone out the door on a Sunday morning, and culminating in a circus of noise and infighting in the car, I didn't really walk into church. It was more of a stagger, followed by semi-collapse into a seat, followed by lengthy periods of zoning out.

Then again, some of us often walk into church in a manner not too different from walking into a stadium, or a shopping centre, or a movie theatre. We walk into church expecting to participate in some larger experience, or to gain some tangible benefit—something that will inspire and uplift us, something that will help us in our lives, and that will repay the investment we are making by being here on Sunday morning instead of sleeping in.

Of course, many Christians also walk into church with a sense of joyful expectancy. Perhaps that is you most Sundays, or at least a decent number of them. You're looking forward to meeting with God,

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and with your brothers and sisters in Christ. You're looking forward to the warm encouragement you get just from being with them; to the stimulation and challenge of the preaching; to the joy it is to sing together in praise of God and all that he has done.

How do you walk into church?

The answer to that not-so-simple question will partly depend on what sort of church you're walking into—whether it is one riven by division and quarrels, for example. It will also be significantly influenced by how things are going in your own life and whether you got a decent night's sleep the night before.

But most importantly, how you walk into church will be determined by *what you think church is, and what you think you're doing there.*

If you think church is a bit like going to the movies, you might walk in expecting to be entertained or inspired.

If you think church is an opportunity for personal devotion and worship, you'll probably walk in not wanting to interact too much with anyone else.

If you think church is something you have to do in order to 'do the right thing' or stay on God's good side, you'll walk in with a determination to do what needs to be done (and then leave as soon as possible).

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But if you were to understand what the Bible says about church—about what church is, and why we go there, and what we're supposed to do while we're there—then there is one particular way of walking into church that you would want to master.

This way of walking into church beautifully expresses what church is and what it's meant to be, and why we're all there.

It is this: we should walk into church *praying about where to sit*.



Why is praying about where to sit the best way to walk into church?

The answer to this somewhat unexpected question is simple: because it expresses perfectly what sort of thing 'church' is, and what we're doing there.

**Firstly**, whenever we pray, we express the bedrock truth that is the foundation of church and of everything: God is the gracious sovereign God, and our lives and purposes are in his hands. He is the Lord whom we serve, and his is the power that upholds the universe.

Whenever we pray, we declare our belief in this sovereign loving God. When we pray, we acknowledge our need, and we put our trust in the God who made

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us and redeemed us, who rules all things, and who has a purpose for each one of us.

This is just as true for church as for any other part of our lives. When we pray about where to sit in church, we're expressing our trust in God for what will happen in church today. We are looking to him and calling upon him as the Lord of the church.

We are also acknowledging that God is in charge of every aspect of church, and that our ideas and preferences and dreams about what church should be like come a distant second. We all have expectations or desires about what we will do at church, and what we will get out of it. But the church is God's, not ours. The church is saved and assembled and ruled by God through the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who calls us together, and in whose presence and for whose glory we meet.

If we walk into church praying, we're putting ourselves in the right posture or frame of mind towards God. We are turning our hearts to the one who is the centre of everything, including church.

**Secondly**, when we pray about where to sit, we're also putting ourselves in the right frame of mind towards *each other*. We have started to think about church as being about someone *other than me*.

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This can be quite a mind-shift, but it's a vital one. We come to church not only to be loved and blessed by God, but also to love and bless others around us. We come not to spectate or consume, nor even to have our own personal encounter with God. We come to love and to serve. As we'll see (in a few chapters' time), this focus on loving and serving and encouraging those around us is a prominent theme in the Bible's teaching about our role at church.

So when we pray about where to sit, we're trusting that what we do at church really matters; that God has something important for us to do—in particular, someone he wants us to sit next to, talk with, listen to, pray for and encourage.

Praying about where to sit... who would have thought that such a simple act would have so many benefits?

But so far we've only just scratched the surface of what the Bible says about church and our role at church. We need to dig a little deeper.