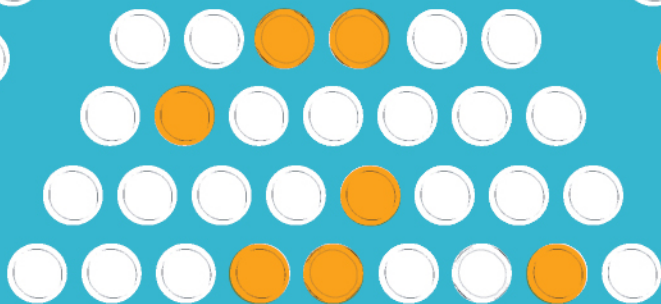


UNMISSABLE CHURCH

Why you need church
and church needs you



Richard Sweatman &
Antony Barraclough

I have been eagerly anticipating this book ever since I heard about the research of one of the authors into evangelical church attendance. I am thrilled to see it published. Somehow Barraclough and Sweatman have taken a potentially boring and guilt-inducing topic and turned it into an uplifting, real-life resource for pastors, individual Christians and (I strongly suggest) church small groups. Their challenge is clear and thoroughly biblical: *What good reason could there be for a follower of Jesus to miss church?* But the challenge comes from two experienced and gentle pastors, who deeply sympathize with the complexities facing Christians today. The result is a compelling case—and a practical path forward—for *consistent* church attendance. As our world emerges from a pandemic, this is a timely and important book. I highly recommend it!

John Dickson

Author and historian

Host, *Undeceptions* podcast

Jean Kvamme Distinguished Professor of Biblical
Evangelism, Wheaton College, IL

This is an unmissable book to read for all Christians, but especially those who are prone to consider churchgoing as an optional extra in the Christian life. The authors of *Unmissable Church* have provided a rich resource of careful research, evidenced-based observations and insightful biblical theology to address the decline in church attendance that we are currently experiencing. While Covid has had its impact, nothing substitutes for the joy of meeting “face to face” (2 John 12). The authors have not fallen into the trap of making church a mere obligation; they champion the grace of God that transforms us and issues in the obedience of faith, as church on earth becomes a foretaste of the heavenly assembly that lies before us.

Dr Glenn N Davies

Archbishop, Anglican Diocese of Sydney, 2013-2021

This book is a very helpful reflection on an aspect of the Christian life that we don't often think about: going to church. This is such a fundamentally Christian activity that we rarely think about *how* we do it. Barraclough and Sweatman encourage us to be more careful and intentional as we think about church, and they deal with many of the motives of our hearts that tempt us away from commitment. I've been a Christian for many years, but I still found myself rebuked and given a renewed enthusiasm to be more thoughtful as I attend church. The book is insightful, interesting, humorous and highly recommended!

Peter Orr

New Testament Lecturer, Moore Theological College,
Sydney

Unmissable Church is a fantastic book! It combines biblical teaching about church with stories of real people and an understanding of some of the real challenges in going to church, while also dealing with some of the excuses we might use to not go to church. This is a great book for every Christian to read, both pastors and church members—I especially love the practical tips for both pastors and church members as we think about church attendance. The reflection questions at the end of each chapter also help the reader to process what they've read, and would be great to use in discussion with a friend.

Kelly Landrigan

Membership Pastor, St Paul's Anglican, Carlingford and
North Rocks, NSW

Is it hard for you to be at church, and easier to skip it? If you want to go to church more regularly and would like help doing that, you have to read this book. It dives deep into the reasons we are tempted to forego church and how we can shift to see church as unmissable. Avoiding guilt and simplistic cliches, Barraclough and Sweatman go back to the Bible and Jesus, to tell

a better and surprising story about church. One of the great strengths of the book is the way they pastorally apply great theology to the messy reality of life—what if, for example, you have anxiety or bipolar disorder? What if you feel guilty? What if the service is boring? How can you talk to people you don't know? It is both hard and vital for Christians to keep meeting together. Here is the book that will help us do that better.

Michael Kellahan

Executive Officer, GAFCON Australia

I've been on staff at my church for more than ten years now, and this little book captures so many pastoral conversations I've had over that time. It's biblically rich, practical and full of pastoral wisdom. I was helped by it in my own discipleship as a follower of Jesus as well as in my ministry of discipling others. It's a must-read for us all to help us push back against the tide of individualism and remember that church truly ought to be unmissable if we see it as God does: the thing he holds up to a watching universe to reveal his wisdom and glory.

Ray Copland

Membership Pastor, EV Church, Central Coast, NSW

As a Christian, you cannot read this book without having a vested interest in what the authors have to say about church, because church involves you. As the authors point out, church is both God's activity in gathering his people, and the activity of God's people. *Unmissable Church* asks some uncomfortable questions about our attendance as it uncovers our thoughts and attitudes towards church and underlines the gospel reasons for why church is, indeed, unmissable.

Michael Dicker

Principal, Youthworks College, Sydney

We can all think of many alternatives in our contemporary world to plain old churchgoing. And yet, what more vital thing could there be for the people of God to do? *Unmissable Church* is a book that combines survey research, biblical wisdom and practical tips to help us unravel the complex business of why we do and don't attend church. I very much appreciate how pastorally sensitive it is, especially with regard to mental health issues, but also towards the busyness of ordinary life in the modern world.

Michael Jensen

Rector, St Mark's Darling Point, Sydney

In a culture awash with individualism, regular church attendance can feel like a demand too great. But Barraclough and Sweatman show us that consistent, in-person gathering isn't simply a n aspiration; it's a necessity. They don't guilt-trip us into gathering, but warmly apply gospel grace to bring down the barriers that keep us away. This is a book that I want to put into the hands of every church member.

Adam Ch'ng

Senior Pastor, Cross & Crown, Melbourne

In some ways this book is like holding a mirror up to ourselves as we consider where church fits in our weekly priorities. At times it's uncomfortably challenging as the writers help us re-engage with the biblical reasons for being part of a local gathering of God's people. Yet at the same time they acknowledge genuine and significant reasons that make it hard for people to come to church. Whatever reason you or someone you know is hesitant about church, or resistant to regular church attendance, this book seeks to provide clear and compassionate help.

Kara Hartley

Archdeacon for Women, Anglican Diocese of Sydney

When two church leaders write a book about church attendance, you would hardly expect them to say anything other than “More people should attend church more often”. But Baraclough and Sweatman have provided us with an explanation of *why* gathering is so vital for Christian discipleship. Their sociological study and observations provide important insights into the cultural milieu, but it is the application of their biblical study that is most compelling and helpful. Added to that, the helpful summaries and discussion questions throughout the book make it a useful book for groups to share. It is a challenging, timely and helpful work.

Chris Edwards

Bishop of North Sydney, Anglican Diocese of Sydney

This book is built on the foundation that church is good—actually, unmissable! Yet it recognizes the factors that can easily keep us away before providing a range of helpful suggestions to get us where we need to be. At first, I thought ‘unmissable church’ was just an aspiration, but I’ve realized it’s a reality. This book warmly and helpfully shows us why church really is unmissable. What’s more, it provides helpful suggestions to address the obstacles that can easily keep us away.

Gary O’Brien

Director of Ministry Training and Development, Anglican Diocese of Sydney

One blessing to come from Covid is that many Christian churches and leaders are recognizing the core need for discipleship across the church. This book provides a wonderful platform for this need for discipleship to be addressed and examines the blessing it is when disciples of Christ gather to *be* the church of Christ.

Peter Mayrick

Executive Director, Partners in Ministry, Sydney

This much-needed book is an honest search for the reasons people are not going to church. Through research surveys and their own experiences, Barraclough and Sweatman have probed our individualistic culture in relation to what God's word tells us about meeting together in Christ. It is our prayer that many who read this book will be helped to consider carefully what they have discovered in this 'unmissable' book.

Peter and Mary O'Brien

Parishioners of All Saints Anglican Church, Petersham, NSW

Unmissable Church is the book that every minister, staff team, church council and church member needs to read. While the research results on church attendance are initially confronting, *Unmissable Church* uses this research as a springboard for the rest of the book. The authors develop a strong theological argument as to what church is and then address research-based reasons why people miss church. Throughout these chapters, they also outline biblically grounded and practical strategies to help people overcome these reasons. This is why the book is a must-read. *Unmissable Church* doesn't just make assertions; it provides helpful, thought-provoking solutions in a pastoral way.

As a member of a church, I feel encouraged and rebuked by *Unmissable Church* and find myself eager to share it with others. As senior minister of a church, I plan to encourage all my church members to read this book and to spend time openly discussing it. My hope and prayer is that together we will heed the advice of Hebrews 10:25 and not neglect meeting together as we see the Day drawing near.

Mal York

Senior Minister, St Andrew's Anglican Church, Roseville,
NSW

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and church needs you

Richard Sweatman &
Antony Barraclough

 **matthiasmedia**
SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

Unmissable Church

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Antony

To Kate, my love, support and
partner in ministry.

Richard

And to the people of Hunter Bible Church,
Newcastle, for their encouragement
in the gospel.

Introduction

Imagine arriving at your local church this Sunday. You pause for a moment as you prepare to leave the familiar environment of your car and walk towards the church entrance. What's going through your mind at this point? Are you looking forward to seeing friends and meeting new people? Are you keen to sing and to learn from the Bible? Perhaps this is the highlight of your week. Or maybe you're there on autopilot, going through another part of the week's routine, like the grocery shopping or dropping off the kids at school. Are you dealing with negative feelings such as anxiety, guilt and resentment? Perhaps you think about putting the car back into gear and heading straight home.

Going to church is not easy. Even people who love going to church will have times when it is hard or impossible. Though we are both full-time pastors, we certainly have times of wishing we could just sleep in and stay home on a Sunday.

In the course of our ministry, we regularly talk with people who come to church only occasionally or have

stopped coming entirely. This phenomenon is not just playing out in the churches that we pastor. According to McCrindle research from 2017, only one in three Australians who identify as ‘Christian’ attend church at least once a month.¹ In the USA, according to a Pew Research Center report from 2019, approximately two in three Christians attend church at least once a month.² In both cases, that’s a lot of self-identified ‘Christians’ at home or not at church each Sunday. We have spoken with pastors and friends from many other churches, and they invariably share that this is an issue in their experience.

If there was ever a time that the average Christian went to church each week without fail, that time has passed.

Despite our own occasional reluctance, we believe that coming to church is a wonderful thing. More than that, we think it is absolutely essential for our perseverance in the faith, our Christian joy, and the good of others. Church really is unmissable. We long for people to come to church each week, and we grieve over people we love who have drifted from church and stopped coming.

We have written this book for people who find it hard to come to church for whatever reason. If that’s you, maybe you know exactly why it’s hard to be regular in

1 M McCrindle, *Faith and Belief in Australia: A national study on religion, spirituality and worldview trends*, McCrindle Research, 2017, accessed 12 October 2022 (mccrindle.com.au/uncategorized/faith-and-belief-in-australia-2).

2 Pew Research Center, *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An update on America’s changing religious landscape*, Pew Research Centre, 2019, accessed 12 October 2022 (pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace).

attending church. Or maybe you can't quite put your finger on why you lack enthusiasm or motivation for church. Either way, we want to help you to wrestle with the challenges that make church attendance hard and to see why church is worth the effort. We also want to remind you continually of how good Jesus is and how our Lord is at the centre of every aspect of church life.

Coming to church each week is, in one sense, a simple thing—we just go along. But once you start to think about it, you realize there is a lot more to it. We go because we hold certain convictions about church, or we stay home because of various obstacles or barriers. For this reason, we have written about both the goodness of church and the obstacles that many of us might need to overcome to be regular in attending church.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of the issue of declining church attendance, helping us to understand the seriousness of the issue and to be honest with ourselves that this is a real challenge in our day and age. Chapter 2 is an initial look at what church really is, particularly concerning the theme of *gathering*; chapter 3 builds on this theme by focusing on the Bible's metaphors for church. Chapters 4 to 7 then look at some of the common barriers that make coming to church hard: guilt, busyness, conflict, and mental illness. Chapter 8 is a deep dive into one of the Bible's most significant chapters about church: 1 Corinthians 12. We then wrap things up in chapter 9 by focusing on how one New Testament book, Hebrews, urges Christians to continue meeting together.

Throughout the book, we have included testimonies from ordinary church members and some short sections answering a couple of common and important questions about church. Finally, we've included some appendices. Appendix 1 provides tips for church members to make it to church each week (or most weeks). Appendix 2 offers tips for pastors on managing their own feelings around member attendance, along with ways to help promote regular attendance among members. Appendix 3 looks at some detailed statistics from Antony's research on the topic, and the final appendix considers the impact of Covid.

But first ...

A pastor turns up late for his regular meeting with other local church leaders. Bursting through the doors, he says, "Sorry I'm late guys, but I've had this huge problem with bats in my belltower. No matter what I try, I just can't get rid of them." The Catholic priest is the first to respond, saying, "Brother, I can help you there. I'll bring my incense over and stoke it up—I mean, to toxic levels, and we'll smoke the bats out." Then the Pentecostal pastor pipes up and says, "If that doesn't work, I'll come over and we'll cast them out in the name of Jee-sus!" The Presbyterian minister responds, "No, no, that wouldn't be proper. We'll form two committees: one to investigate the nesting behaviour of bats, and the other to report on the structural aspects of your belltower.

We'll devise a sure-fire plan to get rid of them within two months." Finally, the Anglican minister speaks up. "Friends, you have no idea what you're talking about. We'll baptize them and confirm them: you'll never see them again!"

Whether or not you recognize yourself in this joke, we know it's not always easy to get to church consistently. In fact, even considering this topic and picking up this book might make you feel a little apprehensive. But we would love it if, by the end of this book, you shared our belief that church really is unmissable.

1. Uncovering a Christian blind spot

What's happening to church attendance?

I (Antony) was recently attending an official dinner function for a church school, and I found myself chatting with the wife of someone in a high-ranking position. As we waited for our food in the self-service queue, I asked her about church: “Am I right in saying you’re at St [Blog’s] where your husband is an elder?”

She replied, “Oh, we haven’t been for a year. He kind of got booted off that role. You know how hard it is: kids’ sport, which is now always on Sunday mornings. Also, we need some down time—we have full-on jobs.” She then asked about me, and discovered that I was the minister of a nearby church. She was mortified by her frank admission.

It really is hard to be regular at church, even for a committed believer.

While the joke about the local church leaders’ meeting in the introduction may be an old one, it still has bite because it is just so true. Look around your own church gatherings and, with a little thought, you’ll be able to

think of people who used to come to church but don't anymore, or others who only come once in a while. Perhaps you recognize yourself in one of these patterns. Perhaps you've caught yourself thinking or saying, "I'm not sure I'm going to make it to church today".

Why is this so? What are the pressures on people that lead to inconsistent church attendance? Is it just 'life'? Is it slackness? Might an inconsistent church attendance pattern be detrimental to our spiritual life, or is it acceptable as long as we watch the sermon online at some point? Is inconsistent church attendance even a problem to be worried about?

We are both deeply convinced by Scripture that consistent, in-person church attendance is the Christian norm and the presumed biblical pattern for the healthy Christian. On the one hand, we know that one is not saved by attendance at church, and we understand that legitimate things happen to prevent people coming to church. But on the other hand, there is a worrying drift among modern committed Christians that leads us away from consistent church attendance.

We are not the only ones to observe inconsistent attendance patterns. Increasingly, ministers are talking about the issue, observing that whereas in decades past the committed Christian attended church twice on a Sunday, these days a committed Christian is seen as 'regular' if they attend church twice a month.

What happened to us, and why?

The stats³

Before we go more deeply into the reasons, let's look briefly at some statistics. How often are people coming to church, and what are their reasons for not coming?

As noted in the introduction, recent McCrindle research on the general Australian population found that only one in three people who self-identified as 'Christian' attended church at least once a month.⁴ Just a few years earlier, McCrindle reported almost identical numbers for church attendance and listed the main reasons for non-attendance.⁵ They were:

- irrelevant to my life
- don't accept how Christianity is taught
- outdated style
- issues with clergy/ministers
- don't believe the Bible
- too busy to attend.

Another researcher to make similar observations is Andrew Leigh, an Australian politician (and not a Christian). In his 2010 book *Disconnected*, he writes about social capital in Australia, noting the trend towards dis-

3 At the time of writing, Australia's most recent census was taken in 2021, with data being released during 2022. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Religious Affiliation in Australia: Exploration of the changes in reported religion in the 2021 Census*, ABS website, 2022, accessed 12 October 2022 (abs.gov.au/articles/religious-affiliation-australia). The research presented throughout this chapter is based on earlier census data but is broadly consistent with the most recent data.

4 McCrindle, *Faith and Belief in Australia*.

5 McCrindle, 'Church attendance in Australia', *McCrindle*, 27 March 2013, accessed 12 October 2022 (mccrindle.com.au/article/archivechurch-attendance-in-australia).

connected living and the decline in participation in all sorts of institutions—including union membership, clubs, going to the theatre, and membership of political parties. Regarding church attendance across the general Australian population, Leigh reports:

By the mid-1990s, the decline in churchgoing appears to have bottomed out. In 2007, around 13 per cent of Australians attended church on a weekly basis, and 17 per cent attended monthly or more. Organised religion now plays no regular part in the lives of four out of five Australians.⁶

He concludes:

To understand the fall in churchgoing, it is useful to separate out two major trends: the decline in religious belief within the general population, and the decline in religious participation among believers. Is Australia becoming Godless, or are the God-botherers just not bothering? ...

Clearly, part of the decline in churchgoing can be explained by the decreasing religiosity of the general population ...

Private observance seems to be waning. In 1966, 74 per cent of Australians said they prayed. The share who prayed in 1983 was 65 per cent, and in 1998, 64 per cent ...

6 A Leigh, *Disconnected*, UNSW Press, 2010, p 37.

The other factor affecting church attendance is the rate at which believers (those who report in the census that they are religious) actually attend church. Putting together data on religious affiliation and churchgoing, one can observe a steady decline. In the 1950s, more than half of those who said that they were religious attended church at least monthly. Today, about one-third of those who say that they are religious attend church at least monthly. Similarly, in the 1950s, 40 per cent of believers went to church on a weekly basis. Now just 20 per cent do so.⁷

So our problem is not simply that fewer people are identifying as ‘Christian’, but also that self-identified ‘Christians’ are attending church less often. When you are present at your church in any given week, the number of people in the room is smaller—potentially much smaller—than the number of people who consider themselves to be members of the church in some way.

McCrinkle and Leigh are noting trends among those who declare some sort of Christian affinity. But identifying as ‘Christian’ or ‘religious’ is not the same thing as having a personal faith in Jesus. What about those committed to church as a genuine expression of their faith—how often are they attending?

From 2016 to 2018, I undertook doctoral-level research

7 Leigh, *Disconnected*, pp 40-41.

focusing on these questions.⁸ I studied the issue of church attendance, both to quantify attendance patterns and to explore the reasons for these patterns. I asked hundreds of people across Sydney to report the frequency of their church attendance and, when absent, the main reason(s) for their absence.⁹ I asked them to report over a 4-week period and a 12-week period. I also asked their pastors to keep a record of how often the survey subjects actually attended during their reporting period.

Overall, committed Christians—those with a personal faith in Jesus and who express that faith in belonging to a church—self-report attending church at a rate of 81% of all possible opportunities in their 4-week period and 87% of all opportunities in their 12-week period. This is much higher than the general figures produced by McCrindle and Leigh, though bear in mind that my survey targeted committed Christians. Nonetheless, I was able to establish an inflated attendance bias when comparing the self-reported figures with the figures given by ministers who were tracking actual attendance. The over-reporting ranged from between eight to 23 points, with the average being a 16-point over-reporting bias—that is, the average self-reported attendance rate was 84% of all opportuni-

8 AGE Barraclough, 'A study of the Sunday attendance patterns of committed Sydney Anglican Christians' [Doctor of Ministry thesis], Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2018, accessed 12 October 2022 (proquest.com/openview/04a692b85b615efbdfaf169d299f5417/1).

9 My research specifically examined the Sydney Anglican context, deliberately sampling churches from each region of the city. It is reasonable to assume that the results would be similar in other Western cities.

ties, but the clergy-measured attendance rate was 68%.

In other words, these figures suggest that the committed (Australian) Christian is attending church at two out of every three opportunities, even as the self-reported attendance pattern is five out of every six opportunities.

These statistics identify two key issues. First, whereas previous generations of ministers considered regular church attendance to be twice on a Sunday (morning and evening), now the committed believer attends two out of every three weeks. This represents a major transformation in church attendance patterns—worryingly, one that matches that of the general population, where so many are losing their faith.

Secondly, there is a real bias among those who attend church to over-inflate their commitment. In other words, our perception is that we are more regular at church than we are. Not only are committed Christians disturbingly irregular in their church attendance; they don't even realize the extent to which this is happening.

The reasons

Why? What are the reasons for this phenomenon? Here are some of the main reasons given for non-attendance during my research (in no particular order):

- illness
- no friends at church or sense of isolation at church
- holidays
- tiredness

- busyness
- family activity
- grievance with a leader
- sport (including kids' sport)
- emotional state (e.g. stress, depression, anxiety)
- broken friendships at church
- business (including work-related travel)
- needs not being met at church
- unbelieving spouse
- shopping
- weather (e.g. too hot, too cold)
- attending a Christian convention
- divorce (and its shame and/or complications)
- not saved by church attendance, so don't have to go
- the church is full of hypocrites
- sins (especially unconfessed sins)
- school function (e.g. working bee)
- car-club outing.

Perhaps you recognize some of these as reasons that you've not been willing or able to make it to church. But isn't it simply 'life' getting in the way of our church attendance? Or has something changed in our society that has caused us to think differently about our competing priorities?

We need to go deeper. Why is it that self-described or committed Christians are becoming less frequent attenders at the same time as nominal Christians are leaving the church altogether? This trend has taken decades to

fully manifest itself. So what are the forces upon us in our day and age that have produced a move away from church rather than a move towards it?

The world has changed in many ways over the past five to seven decades—consider the speed of our technological advances, the pill, the sexual revolution, the rise and fall of Communism, the increasing affordability of cars and TVs, climate change, and much more. But an all-pervading change in Western society is the rise of *individualism* as the dominant paradigm for life and thought.

One of the best minds to describe modern life is philosopher and academic Charles Taylor. In his book *A Secular Age*, Taylor suggests that the era since the Second World War has emerged as the ‘Age of Authenticity’.¹⁰ By this term he means the spirit of ‘be true to yourself’ or ‘be yourself’ as opposed to ‘be the person society expects you to be’. He means much more than ‘this is the age where it is good and valuable to be an authentic person’; he is referring to the spirit and mood of our times, when the self—or, more specifically, the ‘true self’—is king.

Taylor suggests that the secular age, spawned and fostered through the 1960s, comes in reaction to the staid, conformist past era. Self-expression is the new zeitgeist. The church, which represents the old order and preaches restraint in the area of sexual expression, is consequently seen as out of touch. The package of values of the Age of Authenticity are self-expression, sensual release, equal

10 C Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, 2007 (especially chapter 13).

relations and social bonding. It's about making sure you get the most out of yourself, "which means putting yourself in a job which is spiritually fulfilling, socially constructive, experientially diverse, emotionally enriching, self-esteem-boosting, perpetually challenging, and eternally edifying".¹¹ In this kind of culture, church—including regular Sunday attendance—will come off second best unless it can somehow cater to the new mood. This paradigm of thought pervades the age. Taylor observes: "our self-understandings as sovereign peoples haven't been displaced by this new individualism. But perhaps there has been a shift in emphasis."¹²

Taylor then connects this shift in emphasis to church attendance and explains the implications of the move from a conformist to an individualistic era:

It was perhaps inevitable ... that some of the rigid measures earlier seen as essential, such as absolute temperance, or total Sabbath observance, would appear irksome to the descendants of those who had put them in place. There was always a certain resistance to evangelicals, on the alleged grounds that they were puritans, spoil sports, sowers of division.¹³

With that, Sunday observance became redundant and optional, and the nominal Christians left the church. So what happens to the committed Christian living in this

11 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p 477.

12 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p 483.

13 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p 292.

age? Taylor does not concern himself with this question. But it would be nearly impossible for the committed Christian to resist the spirit of the age when they have been born, brought up, educated and saved within her nurture. In my own research, I was able to correlate those who attended church less often with those holding a stronger sense of individualism or making choices to suit ‘the self.’¹⁴

Does this make average Christians into theological monotheists but functional pluralists, or perhaps into those who love Jesus as long as he helps us ‘reach our full potential’? Christians certainly believe in Jesus as the only sacrifice of atonement for sin, but this does not mean he is always the love of our life; sadly, he’s often merely one love among many.

Even the Christian who can spot the error of these pseudo-gospels is often blind to his own idolatry. He will go to church because Jesus is Lord, but he will not *always* go—because family is important, work requires long hours, he is busy chasing the kids around myriad activities each weekend, and he believes that he needs ‘me time’ to recharge away from the hyperactivity of the connected world. In the end, good things compete with the best thing—Jesus—for primary place in our lives. The

14 For example, those who most agreed with the statement “I’m concerned about what I get out of church” self-reported attending church at a rate of 72% of all possible Sundays in the 4-week period, whereas those who least agreed attended 85% of the opportunities. Likewise, but more marginal, those who “want[ed] church to be entertaining” self-reported attending at a rate of 79% over the 4-week period, whereas those who least agreed with the statement attended 85% of the time. (Remember that self-reported rates are inflated figures.) See appendix 3 for more detail on these statistics.

mix of idols in our hearts has us playing a spiritual version of the amusement park game ‘Whac-A-Mole’ with church, family, work and rest.

In short, we have heard and believed the gospel, but we still need to put away our idols of the heart. And it’s showing up in the attendance patterns of committed Christians. We really must heed the teaching of the apostle John, who, after reassuring the faithful that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13), nevertheless instructs God’s people: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (5:21).

Conclusion

All of this is to say that the issue of church attendance is very complex. There are personal issues as well as powerful societal forces at work. The result is that it really is hard to be regular in attending church, even for a committed believer—and it’s very difficult to even see the issue accurately.

Houston, we have a problem.

As we’ve seen, on average a committed Christian is likely to miss a third of all possible opportunities to be at church. Try that on your daughter’s netball or soccer coach: “Coach, she’s committed to the team, she really is—but she’ll only be playing two thirds of the games”. Your daughter would probably be dropped from the team. Try it on your boss: “Thanks for the job, but put me down as absent every Wednesday plus an extra day off a fortnight—I just have too many other demands on my

time”. Now try it on your Maker and Saviour, the Lord Jesus. It won’t fly. Yet this is the rate at which we are giving up meeting together.

The solution begins with preaching the gospel to ourselves again—understanding afresh what Jesus has done for us and in us, so that we live rightly. The gospel must have an impact on our hearts, our priorities and our time. We may well need to repent over some of these issues. This book is not simply a ‘get yourself back to church’ kind of message; that would be legalism. Rather, we need the gospel to drive us to rethink our Sunday church attendance.

The rest of this book, then, takes us to the gospel again and again, and to the glories of what God has done for us in Christ and in the creation of the church. It also spells out the implications and effects of weakened church attendance. We urge you to read these chapters prayerfully and honestly, examining your heart and life in the light of the gospel.

Summary

- Research (along with anecdotal evidence) suggests that regular church attendance is declining, even among those who identify as being committed Christians.
- Not only is regular attendance declining, but evidence suggests that Christians are prone to significantly over-inflate their own attendance rate. In other words, most Christians don’t realize the extent of the problem.

- Our culture's attitude of self-expression and individualism is a significant contributor to the decline in church attendance among Christians.

Reflection

- How would you estimate your church attendance over the past four weeks or the past twelve weeks? What reasons can you recall for any non-attendance?

- Can you identify any ways in which the attitude of self-expression and individualism has affected your own attitude towards church and regular church attendance?

Pete's story

I grew up in a family that went to church fairly regularly, but I took a 'break' when I had the opportunity to work a Sunday shift at KFC as a teenager (paid time-and-a-half). I then got back into the habit of going to church after I became a Christian and went to uni. I remember at that time that many of us at church were using factors such as uni holidays or exam study as reasonable excuses to miss church. Our pastors challenged us to be regular at church—not just in theory but in reality. And not just at any church, but at our home church.

We now have five kids, and sometimes it's hard missing things such as family gatherings, friends' birthday parties and Scout camps because of church. We will go to these things very occasionally, but the week doesn't feel the same without church. I also find it discouraging if my friends begin to regularly miss church.

Honestly, church is the best part of my week, as close as we get to heaven on earth—meeting together as Christians, singing God's praises, hearing from God's word, being encouraged to keep going and being challenged about how we live.

I also love being with other Christians—they're my favourite people to hang around with. I'm always a little disappointed when the fellowship comes to an end for whatever reason. When I was at church at university, we had to be out of the venue (a lecture theatre) by 10 pm; a few of my friends and I were regularly still there at

9:50 pm, and the pastor told us that we needed to leave (some people just took their conversations outside). One week was particularly cold, rainy and generally miserable. Most people had left early, and there were just a few of us there at 9:30 pm. The pastor said, “We all have homes to go to—let’s go there”: a not-so-subtle hint!