

MERE CHURCH

Expanded and edited by Bob Young

[In this article, I reflect upon and expand a recent article by Mike Cospers, *The Antidote to Celebrity Church Is Mere Church*, in *Christianity Today*, October 2020]

During the pandemic, our family, along with many other families, has gathered weekly to worship and share fellowship in Christ. We have been blessed with visitors from time to time. In the early days of the pandemic, we chose to participate in various online options, but eventually we settled into a simple routine of prayers, Scripture readings, familiar songs, the Supper, and sharing insights from God's Word. We found renewed spiritual insights and strength in the simplicity. Mere church, simple church.

As we enter a third year with the pandemic still a reality, I reflect on the past two years. I share some personal reflections and also some of Cospers's thoughts. Church attendance is still depressed. What is God teaching the church? What can we learn? Numerous Christians were doing the same thing that our family was doing during the pandemic—gathering in small groups. Research now shows that many have been slow to return to the busyness of public church services, opting to continue in small groups or house churches. Perhaps we should ask ourselves, "Why?"

Research suggests that the decrease in church attendance is affected by multiple dynamics. Some of those who have not returned to in-person church meetings have concerns about public gatherings due to age, health, and personal factors. Two other groups have a clearer message to the church. Some who have not returned to public church services are strong disciples who have found a refreshing option in the simplicity of small group worship. Others who have not returned are "attractional" attenders and religious consumers. Both of these groups provide lessons for the church.

Cospers observed that "a mature believer is easily edified." Mature disciples, guided by personal faith, are easily encouraged in the simple practice of sharing the Word and worshipping Jesus. Cospers points us toward rediscovering "worship that works without our help." While mature Christians survive in the midst of public assemblies that are shallow, programmed, and presentational, they often are more comfortable with simpler, more familiar expressions of faith. This describes many in the group who have opted to continue in smaller, more personal worship settings, even while using online resources.

A second group that has not yet returned en masse to inperson worship is composed of those who are enamored and attracted by what they receive by attending. Attendance may be sporadic. Choices of where to attend are made based on the "products" available, thus the description, "consumer Christians." Some of this second group are waiting for a return to normal and others have already decided to attend elsewhere. Both groups have a singular message for the church: the need to rethink what it means to be the church. How does one "do" church?

In what we hope is an "almost-post-pandemic stage" comes an opportunity to ask ourselves, what were we communicating to our youth, new Christians, and visitors? What impact were we having on their faith, their expectations of church? Eventually, experiences shape expectations. I share some of Cospers's thoughts.

"The allure is clear—the church must compete! We live in a world of cell phones, immediate communication, intriguing information, short attention spans. Our phones give access to quality presentations, songs, and worship services. All around us, churches are drawing crowds with new options, fresh activities, trying new things. The allure of publicity, visibility, crowds, impressive music, and perfect details beckons us. If we don't compete, they will not come, or they will leave.

"With the continuing growth of attractional church, with everything done perfectly, perhaps we need to remember that God is glorified not by grandeur but by faithfulness and fruitfulness. God often speaks most loudly through small, quiet, unremarkable voices. God's work advances more rapidly when disciples are formed

and go forth for Jesus than in assemblies that attract many. What we see as unremarkable, God often sees as remarkable.”

“Perhaps the contemporary church should try to understand why many are finding fresh hope and Spirit in simply gathering to experience sharing, to hear God’s Word, to share bread and wine, and to go forth filled afresh with God’s Spirit. Worshiping God is not orchestrated or artificialized. Worshiping God is the response of hearts focused away from the ways of the world by a fresh, personal struggle with the Word of God.

“The modern tendency to define church by what happens on Sunday—pastoral visibility, professional presentations, performance music, video production and technology—has been widely adopted and is clearly seen in large churches. Even smaller churches have tried to duplicate the experience. How many churches no longer gather together except on Sunday morning?”

Those of us who are committed to the authority and teaching of Scripture should be among the first to acknowledge that the Christian life will not always be exciting and uplifting. Such thinking is not biblical. The way the contemporary church approaches worship is seductive. I do not expect many churches to soon redefine or rethink the gathering or assembly. But I do hope that these reflections will not be too quickly cast aside – when the gathering is restored to its biblical role as preparation for going forth into the world, the church will find new life and vitality. Christianity will not be defined only by what happens at the church building. Some activities traditionally associated with the building may happen in smaller groups scattered across a city. And faithful discipleship will be measured by what happens during the week in the lives of the scattered assembly.

In going forth and sharing discipleship in our homes and neighborhoods, we may find that there are multitudes of people who long for mere church!