



September 21, 2025

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BIG IDEA – “Back to Church” really means “Back to Being Community.” God’s love changes us, but it also changes those around us.

Scripture Focus – 1 John 4:11-12 Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.

Welcome to Back to Church Sunday!

Over 31,000 churches are expected to participate in Back to Church Sunday in 2025.

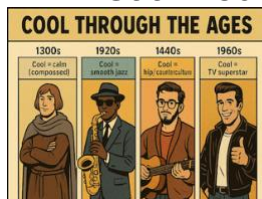
Let’s talk about CHURCH. But first I wanted to start with a little wordplay.

Have you noticed that words can change meaning over the years.

Words change meaning, but words still matter!

When did the word, “cool” go from climate to consent?

- Cool = cold (Old English).



- Cool = calm, composed (Middle Ages).
- Cool = stylish, excellent (Jazz culture, 1920s).
- Cool = countercultural, Mainstream youth slang (1940s–50s).
- Now global slang for approval or acceptance.

The word “Church” has also gone through tremendous change over time.

The history and usage of the word Church is fascinating, but also points out **how small changes, made a large impact on how we think about God’s design today!**

Let me just point out how the English word Church has morphed into what we believe it is today.



In the 1st century, the word Church started out in the New Testament as the word, “[ekklesia](#).” And, like many words, this one was a commonly used Greek word that meant a solemn assembly – literally, the “called out” ones to an assembly of the people convened at the public place. The emphasis being on the citizens being called, not the place they were meeting.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:18 & 18:17 are translated into Greek, are specifically referring to a community of followers rather than a physical building or institution. “I will build my ekklesia...” And, “if they refuse to listen take it to the ekklesia.”



There was also another word, far less used and not common at all. It is the word **kuriakon**. In fact, it was only used twice in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 11:20 and Revelation 1:10. The word means, “of the Lord” or “belonging to the Lord,” because it has the word “[kurios](#)” within it. Oddly enough, it is this word that began to be used in this sense: **The day belonged to the Lord.**

By the 3rd–4th centuries, the place where believers met together came to be called “the Lord’s house” using the term **κυριακὸν** (kuriakon), which is the neuter version (literally, “the Lord’s thing”).

Later in the same timeframe, **it was this word that made its way into both German (“Kirche”), Anglo Saxon (“circe”), and Middle English (“chirche”).** It is interesting that when Luther translated the New Testament into vernacular German, he did not use the word “Kirche” to translate *ἐκκλησία* (ekklesia), he used the German word “Gemeinde”, which means something similar to the English word “community”. However, many Germans still refer to the “church” as the “Kirche.”



By the 4th Century – Constantine’s Era

Translated from Middle English “**chirche**,” The word “church” increasingly came to mean the **place of worship** as well as the people. But by the late 4th century, the idea of “**going to church**” as **going to a building** was well established in culture.

FYI - Spanish, French and Latin still use a form of the word “église”, or “iglesia” from the original Greek.

From “ekklesia” to “kuriakon” to “chirche.” Why does it matter?

No matter what we say or do, the word Church became forever bound to a building, not the people gathering!

Maybe I am making a bigger deal out of it than necessary, but to me there's a big difference in talking about the people that are the **"called ones"** of God gathering because this how God works among us in community.

It would be like asking where your family is and instead of you showing me a family picture - you show me a house on Google Street View.

Robin and I have moved homes several times, but those places never defined us as family!

Back to Church Sunday isn't about filing people into pews; **and it's not about making a commitment to a building!**

It's about making a commitment to the community of Jesus followers and about the joy of showing up where God shows up. And when we meet with Him together amazing things happen!

God's love spills out, changing us—and the people around us.

What happens when we are not in community, not gathering together?

There's an old phrase that says, "absence makes the heart grow fonder." Does distance really make our heart grow fonder?"

I don't think it makes our hearts towards each other grow fonder at all!

Distance from others, in the body of Christ, makes our heart grow colder.

People say they can "DO" Christianity just fine without going to Church.

I ask this: Can we BE a follower of Jesus without being a part of the body of Christ? I don't think it's possible. And, do not think it's Biblical!

Being the Church isn't at all about getting more people into a building.

It's about the anticipation and mystery of meeting with God – together. And experiencing God together means that as God's love changes us, it also changes those around us. That is worth celebrating!

The Apostles Peter & John address the question of "Why Do We Need Each Other?"

After all the discussion about the difference between living souls that gather and a building, **Peter uses an interesting phrase that's worth discussing.**

He writes, “Jesus is the living cornerstone of God’s temple.”

1 Peter 2:4-5 NLT

You are coming to **Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God’s temple**. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor.

Hmmm... a living building?

This carpenter’s illustration is great because it took advantage of what people knew at that time. The cornerstone is the first and most important stone to lay down.

If it’s not right, the entire building will not be right. If it’s crooked or not level, then all the stones after will be affected by it. It’s not that Peter is saying Jesus is a physical stone in a temple, but that He is metaphorically the **chief stone** in God’s building of all things – specifically humans in the Kingdom of God.



Peter says that believers are LIVING STONES

1 Peter 2:5 NLT

And **you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple**. What’s more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God.

Church Attendance “**Jesus is the LIVING Cornerstone of the Church, and we are LIVING STONES . . . being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5). As the building materials of God’s “spiritual house,” we naturally have a connection with one another, and that connection is evident every time the Church meets together.**

– whether that’s in a house, a storefront, a cathedral or under a big shady tree.



Peter says that believers are CHOSEN PEOPLE

1 Peter 2:9-10 NLT

But you are not like that, for **you are a chosen people**. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God’s very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. “**Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God’s people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God’s mercy.**”



John says that believers are LIGHT BEARERS And that means we fellowship with each other – fellowship is a Bible word for participation, a partnership with each other.

1 John 1:5-7 NLT

This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are **living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other**, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin.

 **John also says that believers are TRANSFORMATIONAL. In other words, God's love changes us, and it also changes those around us.**

What happens when we are loved? Last week we talked about belonging. Being known and growing towards knowing others. But what happens when we are loved?

1 John 4:11-12

Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. **No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is brought to full expression in us.**

John uses this Greek word [Teleioó](#) (teleos) – which means to complete, or perfect us.

John makes the case that God's love is so powerful, so thorough, it not only reconnects us to Him, but it also reconnects us to others.

God wants us to **come together to experience His love and His presence as His Church (ekklēsia).**

John's point is that as God's love grows and changes us, it becomes necessary for that love to be given away to grow and change our relationships.

Togetherness is better-ness, because God uses each of us to complete and perfect us!

Gathering together means that we not only help each other to get through LIFE – we help each other become more like Christ, becoming the image bearers of God's love.

Application.

BEING instead of **ATTENDING Church** means that

- **I gain the edge** in my battles.
 - **I gain connection (spiritual networking)** in gains and losses.
 - **I gain accountability** to not let something become a **foothold pulling me off mission of following Jesus** all the days of my life.
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Next Steps

- **Making a commitment to follow Jesus.** If you have not given your life to Jesus, saying yes to making him Lord and Savior, this is your moment.
- **Making a commitment to BE the Church** means making a commitment to **gather with other believers, not just to GET but also to GIVE of your life.**
- **Making a commitment to BE a disciple and MAKE a disciple.**

As we move forward to both **BE and MAKE disciples**, I'm asking everyone to complete a free **30-minute assessment** through [AssessMe.org](https://www.assessme.org) **click for information**. This tool will help you discover your **spiritual gifts**, plus give feedback on your **personality, leadership style, skills, and next steps**. **Bottom line**—it will help us **grow and mature together**, and it will help us better understand and encourage each of you in your gifts.

Just click the sign up now to start the process!

Sign up now

SCRIPTURES

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1 Peter 2:5 NLT

And **you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple**. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God.

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DIG DEEPER NOTES



How many Churches are there in the United States?

Approximately 355,000 Christian churches exist in the U.S.

U.S. Religion Census

- **1952:** 182,856 congregations
- **1971:** 182,335 congregations
- **1980:** 231,708 congregations
- **1990:** 255,173 congregations
- **2000:** 268,254 congregations
- **2020:** The U.S. Religion Census identified **356,642** total religious congregations (of which the vast majority are Christian).⁵

Top 5 Christian Denominations/Groups in the U.S. By Congregations and Adherents (2020)

Denomination/Group	Number of Congregations	Number of Adherents
Catholic Church	19,405	61,858,137
Southern Baptist Convention	51,379	17,649,040
Non-denominational Christian Churches	44,319	21,095,641
United Methodist Church	30,051	8,018,629
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	14,567	6,721,031

Trends in U.S. Christian Affiliation & Engagement

Metric	2007 (Pew)	2014 (Pew)	2023-24 (Pew)	Key Trend
% Adults Identifying as Christian	78%	71%	62% 15	Decline, recent stabilization
% Adults Evangelical Protestant	26%	25%	23% 15	Decline

Metric	2007 (Pew)	2014 (Pew)	2023-24 (Pew)	Key Trend
% Adults Mainline Protestant	18%	15%	11% 15	Significant Decline
% Adults Catholic	24%	21%	19% 15	Decline, stable since 2014
% Adults Monthly Church Attendance	~50-54%*	(Declining)	33% 15	Decline from earlier levels, stable since 2020
Net Church Openings per Year	N/A	N/A	~+300 (c. 2019 data 23)	Slow growth

The Assemblies of God is the largest Pentecostal denomination in the world.

Membership Statistics

Region	Number of Adherents
Worldwide	Over 85 million
United States	Approximately 3 million
Brazil (largest member denomination)	Approximately 25 million

The Assemblies of God has a significant presence in over 190 countries, reflecting its global reach and influence.

The Assemblies of God in the United States has approximately **1.84 million attendees participating in services each week.**



Words change meaning, but words still matter.

The word “cool” went from climate to consent.

Early Use (Temperature/Calmness)

- **Old English (8th–10th c.):** *cōl* simply meant moderately cold.
- By the **1300s**, “cool” was also used metaphorically for **calm, composed** (e.g., “keep a cool head”).

1900s Jazz Era – Cool = Stylish / Impressive

- **1918–1920s:** African American jazz culture begins using *cool* to describe **something excellent, fashionable, or emotionally controlled.**
- Example: Musicians like **Louis Armstrong** and **Count Basie** used “cool” to describe a smooth, laid-back style of playing.

1940s–50s – “Cool Jazz” and Beat Culture

- **1947:** Miles Davis's album *Birth of the Cool* popularized the term.
 - "Cool" came to mean **effortlessly stylish, relaxed, admirable**.
 - Beat writers like **Jack Kerouac** and the youth counterculture picked it up.
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1960s–70s – Mainstream Slang

- By the 1960s, *cool* had gone mainstream, used by teenagers everywhere to mean **good, hip, desirable**.
 - Example: TV shows Henry Winkler (The Fonz) and *Happy Days*, spread it as a universal "that's cool."
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Today

- *Cool* is now global slang for **approval or acceptance** ("Okay, cool," "That's cool").
 - It's one of the few pieces of slang that has stayed fresh for nearly 100 years.
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Summary:

- **Cool = cold (Old English).**
 - **Cool = calm, composed (Middle Ages).**
 - **Cool = stylish, excellent (Jazz culture, 1920s).**
 - **Mainstream youth slang (1940s–50s onward).**
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"Going to Church."

1. New Testament Era (1st century)

- The Greek word *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία) meant "**assembly**" or "**gathering of people**", not a building.
 - Early Christians met in **homes** (e.g., Romans 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Philemon 2) or in borrowed public spaces like the temple courts (Acts 2:46) or synagogues.
 - Saying "*church*" referred to the **people**, not a location.
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2. 2nd–3rd Centuries

- As Christianity grew, groups still mostly met in **house churches**.
 - Sometimes wealthy believers set aside entire homes for worship.
 - Even then, Christians thought of "church" as the *community*, not the structure.
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3. 4th Century – Constantine's Era

- After Constantine legalized Christianity (Edict of Milan, 313 A.D.), Christians were able to build large, public **basilicas** (adapted from Roman civic architecture).
 - Now, "church" increasingly came to mean the **place of worship** as well as the people.
 - By the late 4th century, the idea of "going to church" as **going to a building** was well established in culture.
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4. Middle Ages (5th–15th Century)

- The identity of church and building became almost inseparable.

- Cathedrals and parish churches became central to community life.
- Language shifted: **people didn't just "gather as the church," they went to church (the building).**

5. Protestant Reformation (16th Century)

- Reformers like Luther and Calvin tried to reclaim the biblical idea that the **people are the church.**
- Still, cultural habit kept "church" tied strongly to a **meeting place.**

6. Modern Usage

- In most languages, the word for "church" (*kirche, iglesia, église, etc.*) has a dual meaning: **the people of God** and **the building they meet in.**
- Everyday speech tends to favor the building definition, though theology still affirms that "church" means the *people*.

Summary:

"Going to church = going to a building" really **began in the 4th century**, when Christians first had the freedom and resources to build dedicated worship spaces. Before that, "church" always meant *the people gathered together*, wherever that happened.



A Simple Shift from "ekklesia" to "kuriakon" to "cirice"

Greek Roots

- The NT word for church = *ekklesia* = "assembly, gathering."
- But another Greek word existed: *kuriakon* (*κυριακόν*) = "belonging to the Lord" (from *kyrios*, "Lord").
 - Example: "the Lord's Supper" (*kuriakon deipnon*, 1 Cor. 11:20).
- **By the 3rd–4th centuries, Christians started using *kuriakon* in the sense of "the Lord's house" → meaning a place of worship.**

Into Germanic Languages

- When Christianity spread north, *kuriakon* got picked up into Gothic and later Germanic tongues:
 - Old High German: *kirihha* or *kirika*
 - Old Norse/Scots: *kirkja* (still "kirk" in Scots today)
- These forms always carried the sense of a holy house/building.

Old English

- **Old English borrowed it as *cirice* or *cyrice* (pronounced "church").**
- **By the 8th–9th centuries, English speakers used *cirice* almost exclusively for the building, not the people.**
- Meanwhile, the word *congregatio* in Latin (from *congregare*, "to gather") was the term church leaders used for the people.

Middle English (1100s–1400s)

- “Church” (*chirche, cherche*) = primarily the building.
- To describe the people, writers leaned on “congregation” or “assembly.”

Reformation & Beyond

- **Reformers tried to recover the biblical idea: “the church is the people.”**
- English Bibles reflect the tension:
 - **Tyndale’s 1526 NT avoided “church” and used “congregation” for *ekklesia*.**
 - **The King James Version (1611) reverted to “church,” reinforcing both meanings.**
- Culturally, though, “going to church” = “going to the church building” stuck in English usage.

Summary: Words matter

The shift from “church = people” to “church = building” wasn’t just cultural—it was also linguistic.

- *Ekklesia* = assembly → always “people.”
 - *Kuriakon* = “the Lord’s [house]” → came through Germanic → “kirk/church” → always “building.”
 - English inherited both ideas, but the *building* sense won out in common speech, even while theology insisted “the church is the people.”
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[The *ekklesia* and the *kuriakon*](#)

The Greek term *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) is normally translated by the English word “church” in the New Testament. What most people do not know is that the English word “church” did not originate from the word *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) nor from the concept of the *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) as expressed in the New Testament. Instead, the English word “church” originated with the Greek word *κυριακός*, (*kuriakos*), which means “belonging to the Lord”.

In both of these verses, the adjective *κυριακός* (***kuriakos***) **is used to specify the owner of the “supper” or “day”, that is, the supper and day belonged to the Lord.** This word belongs to a completely different semantic domain (range of meanings) than the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*).

Eventually, the place where believers met together came to be called “the Lord’s house” using the term *κυριακόν* (*kuriakon*), which is the neuter version (literally, “the Lord’s thing”). This word made its way into both German (“Kirche”), Anglo Saxon (“circe”), and Middle English (“chirche”). It is interesting that when Luther translated the New Testament into vernacular German, he did not use the word “Kirche” to translate *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*), he used the German word “Gemeinde”, which means something similar to the English word “community”. However, many Germans still refer to the “church” as the “Kirche”.

When Tyndale translated the New Testament into English in 1536, he also did not use the word “church” to translate the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*). Instead,

he used the word “congregation”. However, within the next 100 years, all English translations normally used the word “church”.



Tyndale, one of the reformers.

Background

- Tyndale (c. 1494–1536) was an English scholar and reformer, who at 32 years old, translated the Bible into English directly from Hebrew and Greek.
- His translation work was considered dangerous and illegal by church and state authorities in England.
- He lived much of his adult life in exile in continental Europe, often in hiding, producing smuggled New Testaments that were brought into England.

Arrest

- In 1535, Tyndale was betrayed by a man named Henry Phillips, who pretended to be his friend.
- He was arrested near Brussels (in present-day Belgium) and imprisoned in the castle of Vilvoorde.

Trial and Condemnation

- He was tried for **heresy** by the Holy Roman Empire's authorities.
- His “crime” was translating Scripture into the common tongue and promoting Reformation ideas.

Execution (1536)

- On **October 6, 1536**, Tyndale was **strangled to death** while tied to a stake.
- After he was strangled, his body was **burned**.
- His last words, according to tradition, were:
“Lord, open the King of England's eyes.”

Aftermath

- Just a few years later, his prayer was answered.
- King Henry VIII authorized the **Great Bible** in 1539, much of it based directly on Tyndale's translation.
- In time, Tyndale's wording shaped the **King James Version (1611)**—by some estimates, about 80–90% of the New Testament in the KJV comes straight from Tyndale.

Summary:

Tyndale was **betrayed, imprisoned, strangled, and burned at the stake in 1536**, condemned as a heretic. Ironically, the very work he gave his life for became the foundation of the English Bible for centuries.



Dr. B. Brandon Scott

In the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the Greek *ekklēsia* translates the Hebrew קהל (*qahal*), which means ‘assembly’ or ‘gathering.’ Judges 20:2 illustrates this meaning:

And the chiefs of all the people, of all the tribes of Israel, presented themselves in the assembly of the people of God, four hundred thousand men on foot that drew the sword.

New Testament usage follows the Septuagint.

The basic meaning of the Greek *ekklēsia* is assembly or gathering. In ordinary Greek it most often refers to the citizens of a city gathering to decide political issues and less frequently to an assembly of the devotees of a god.



History of Church Attendance

- Early Christian Practices
 - The earliest followers of Christ did not attend church in the way we understand today. They met in the Jewish temple and later in private homes or public places.
 - These gatherings were frequent, often occurring daily, where believers devoted themselves to teaching and fellowship.
- Development of Church Buildings
 - The concept of a designated church building emerged over time, particularly after the establishment of Christianity as a state religion in the Roman Empire.
 - By the 4th century, formal church buildings began to be constructed, reflecting a shift from home-based worship to communal gatherings in dedicated spaces.
- Modern Understanding
 - **In contemporary times, "going to church" typically refers to attending services in a physical building.** This contrasts with the early practices where the community itself was considered the church, not the structure.
 - The idea of church as a building became more ingrained in Christian culture, especially during the Middle Ages, when **cathedrals and large churches became central to community life.**

Summary of Key Points

Period	Church Attendance Context
Early Christianity	Gathered in homes and public spaces
4th Century	Emergence of dedicated church buildings
Middle Ages	Cathedrals became central to community life

Period**Church Attendance Context**

Modern Era

"Going to church" typically means attending a building

This evolution highlights how the understanding of church has shifted from a community of believers to a physical location over centuries.