

CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”

Make Sunday Mornings Uncomfortable: Three Rules of Engagement at Church

by Rebecca McLaughlin

“Sorry to cut you off!” I’d just started connecting with a close friend at church. I was eager to catch up. But as she talked, I noticed a woman sitting alone, thumbing through her service sheet.

Honestly, I wished I hadn’t seen her. *Interrupting my friend would be rude. It’s good for me to invest in friends! Someone else will likely spot that woman.* These were some of the excuses that ran through my head. But the woman was clearly new, and for all I knew, not a believer. So, reluctantly, I interrupted my friend. As soon as I sat down with the newcomer, I thanked God I had. Raised Catholic, she hadn’t been to church in over a decade. Her fiancé had just broken up with her right before their wedding, and she needed something else in life. I took a risk and asked if she’d like to come to our community group. She said yes. She’s been coming to church and Bible study ever since.

This was one of many opportunities my husband Bryan and I have had to connect with not-yet-Christians inside our church building. We have very little else in common. I’m an extrovert; he’s an introvert. I’m from England; he’s from Oklahoma. I’m into literature; he’s an engineer. But God drew us together around a shared sense of mission, and Bryan recently expressed that mission in three rules of engagement at church. These rules make our Sundays less comfortable, but more rewarding. If you’re tired of comfortable, you might want to give them a try!

1. An Alone Person in Our Gatherings Is an Emergency

In times of crisis, we do strange things. We interrupt conversations. We set aside social conventions. If someone collapsed in your church building, everyone would mobilize. But every week, people walk into our gatherings for the first time and get effectively ignored. They may not know Jesus, or they may have spent years wandering from him. Their spiritual health is on the line, and a simple conversation could be the IV fluid God uses to prepare them for life-saving surgery. Eternal lives are at stake.

What if it’s a regular church member who is alone? An isolated believer is an emergency too. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples,” said Jesus, “if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Of course, we all enjoy solitude at times, but loneliness in church is as much an indictment on our gatherings as prayerlessness or lack of generosity. How can we claim to be “one body” (1 Corinthians 12:12) when we can’t even sit together and engage one another in church? I come to church with a family of five. But the primary family unit in the New Testament is *not* the nuclear family: it’s the church. In fact, Jesus promised that anyone who *left* family to follow him would receive far *more* family among his people (Mark 10:29-30). There are tangible ways we can express this in church. Those of us who come with nuclear families can invite others to sit with us, or even separate to sit with others.

Last Sunday, for instance, I chose to sit between two sisters in Christ – one from Nigeria, one from Ghana – and to enjoy worshipping Jesus with them. Being one body with our spiritual siblings means more than sitting with others in church, but it certainly doesn’t mean less.

This call is not just for married people. If you come to church by yourself, don't underestimate what God could do *through* you to bless others. A while ago, a single friend shared her sadness about sitting by herself at church. She is a delightful, socially agile extrovert, and I told her she had no right to sit alone when she could be blessing others with her company! My guess is that we have all, at one time or another, walked into a gathering and wondered, "Who will love me?" What if we asked ourselves instead, "Whom can I love?"

2. Friends Can Wait

Did I miss out on intimacy with the friend I interrupted to greet the woman sitting alone? Yes and no. The Bible calls us fellow soldiers ([Philippians 2:25](#); [Philemon 2](#)), and few bonds are stronger than those forged in battle. Soldiers seldom turn to face each other. Rather, they look outward, standing shoulder to shoulder, or in extreme situations, back to back. Combat increases their closeness.

"Do you recognize that woman?" I asked another friend a few Sundays ago, as we started to talk. "No. I should go and talk to her, shouldn't I?" she replied. As I saw my friend walk off to greet a newcomer, I felt a closeness I would not have known without our shared endeavor.

Friends can wait for our attention on a Sunday. Better still, they can mobilize in mission too. Spurring each other on to welcome strangers in Christ's name won't weaken our friendships; it will deepen them.

3. Introduce Newcomers to Someone Else

A few years ago, I met a woman in the checkout line at Target. She had recently arrived from China and was a visiting scholar at Harvard. We got talking and I took the risk to invite her to church. She said yes. Her English was far better than my nonexistent Mandarin, but we were nonetheless relating across a language barrier, so after the service I introduced her to a Chinese-speaking friend. Minutes later, my sister in Christ was exchanging numbers with this newcomer. I hadn't been able to explain the situation, but my friend immediately recognized the gospel opportunity before her.

Even without a language barrier, newcomers benefit from multiple connections. When possible, I seek someone with an overlap: same country of origin, home state, school, profession, or stage of life. But our gatherings should cut across all demographic lines, and we must commit to connecting with those unlike us.

In fact, if some of our Sunday conversations aren't difficult — pushing us beyond our usual conversational topics to reach across differences — we're likely not conducting fellowship right. Calling out the racial, cultural, and social divides of his time, Paul reminded the Colossians that in Christ, "there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" ([Colossians 3:11](#)).

Take the Risk

So, this Sunday, let's take a risk. Let's reach across the small divides to others as we imitate the one who spanned the great divide for us. And let's urge our friends to do the same, because the harvest in our gatherings is plentiful. We may never know what difference a small act of welcome made. But sometimes God lets us see how he has weaved our little acts into his much greater plan. Last month, I asked our Bible study group to share a time when God had brought blessing to them through hardship. The most moving response for me was from the woman for whom I had left my friend that Sunday: "I'm so grateful my fiancé broke up with me. If that hadn't happened, I would not have found God."