

IX 9Marks

What If I Don't Feel Like Going to Church?



**Gunner
Gundersen**

Church Questions

Endorsements for the Church Questions Series

“Christians are pressed by very real questions. How does Scripture structure a church, order worship, organize ministry, and define biblical leadership? Those are just examples of the questions that are answered clearly, carefully, and winsomely in this new series from 9Marks. I am so thankful for this ministry and for its incredibly healthy and hopeful influence in so many faithful churches. I eagerly commend this series.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sincere questions deserve thoughtful answers. If you’re not sure where to start in answering these questions, let this series serve as a diving board into the pool. These mini-books are winsomely to-the-point and great to read together with one friend or one hundred friends.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *The Pastor’s Wife*

“As a pastor, I get asked lots of questions. I’m approached by unbelievers seeking to understand the gospel, new believers unsure about next steps, and maturing believers wanting help answering questions from their Christian family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. It’s in these moments that I wish I had a book to give them that was brief, answered their questions, and pointed them in the right direction for further study. Church Questions is a series that provides just that. Each booklet tackles one question in a biblical, brief, and practical manner. The series may be called Church Questions, but it could be called ‘Church Answers.’ I intend to pick these up by the dozens and give them away regularly. You should too.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

What If I Don't
Feel Like Going
to Church?

Church Questions

How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?, Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli

What If I Don't Desire to Pray?, John Onwuchekwa

What If I Don't Feel Like Going to Church?, Gunner Gundersen

What If I'm Discouraged in My Evangelism?, Isaac Adams

What Should I Do Now That I'm a Christian?, Sam Emadi

Why Should I Join a Church?, Mark Dever

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And all who believed were together . . .

Acts 2:44



The most important time to be at church is when you don't feel like it.

I once talked with three Christians in a week—two struggling with depression, and a third going through a tough breakup—who'd stopped gathering with God's people. Whether for weeks or months, all three stopped showing up on Sundays.

One said it would be unsatisfying because there wasn't a sense of connection. Another said it would be awkward because he didn't want to see his ex. The other said it would be unhelpful because she had no desire to be there anymore.¹

I'm not here to minimize their burdens or condemn them for feeling the way they did. I'm

not writing to them or about them. I'm simply writing to every Christian who feels the way they felt, who feels (as I have felt before) like gathering with God's people will be unsatisfying, unhelpful, or just plain awkward.

I'm writing to say something I said to all three of my friends: the most important time to be at church is when you don't feel like it.

My goal is simple: I want to motivate Christians to meet together with consistency, joy, and purpose. I'm writing to Christians who love Jesus and want to follow him but who struggle to understand, appreciate, or make time for the church.

What's in a Feeling?

Feelings can be complicated. We all know we shouldn't blindly follow them. Yet our feelings can reveal what we really like, want, or think. Since this book is about how we *feel* about going to church, here are three things to remember about our feelings.

First, *our feelings shouldn't dictate our choices*. If we always followed our feelings, no marriage would survive, kids would only eat candy, and

marathons wouldn't be a thing. Preachers who didn't feel ready on Saturday night wouldn't show up on Sunday morning, Christians under persecution would just stay home, and every believer who's unhappy with someone else at church would hold a grudge instead of holding the door. Yet we know we shouldn't do whatever we feel or avoid whatever's uncomfortable. Scripture reminds us, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Prov. 14:12).

Instead, we recognize that *our core desires run deeper than our emotions*. A frustrated mom might feel like collapsing into a well-deserved nap, but instead she keeps watching her three young kids. Why? Because she wants them protected more than she wants her rest. In the same way, every true Christian has a new heart for God and his people that keeps perking up and pushing us forward even when we're weary (Heb. 8:10–11). Our desires are layered, and our deepest desires often contradict our passing emotions.

At the same time, *most feelings are symptoms of underlying causes*. When we don't feel like going to church, something deeper may be going on—not always but often. As Scripture

says, “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water” (Prov. 20:5). Therefore, laying ourselves on the operating table and letting God’s Spirit open us through his word is the safest treatment for our souls. “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

Diagnosing the Heart

There are many reasons Christians might not feel like going to church. But if you can discern the reason behind your reluctance, the path forward becomes clearer. An accurate diagnosis is half the cure—even when the remedy is hard to apply. So what are some reasons attending church might be a struggle?

Physical Reasons

Some Christians struggle to attend church for *physical* reasons like exhaustion, illness, disease, or chronic pain. It might be obvious or unno-

ticed, temporary or permanent, diagnosed or mysterious. Regardless, you're physically burdened. The world is broken, you're not a machine, and sometimes the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41).

Spiritual Reasons

Maybe the dominant reason is *spiritual*. You're in a dark place, Christianity has lost its luster, or you're living in hidden sin. Maybe feasting on the world has sapped your spiritual appetite, or you're going through your first dry season as a Christian. Perhaps you resonate with the psalmist: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" (Ps. 42:5).

Relational Reasons

Sometimes the challenge is *relational*—a marital problem, a broken friendship, an awkward personality. Maybe you're single or widowed, and you feel out of place around all the families. Maybe you've disagreed with a leader, and there's lasting tension. Maybe

you've been judged or rebuked by someone, and seeing them triggers anger and shame. Maybe you'll be disowned or lose credibility if you identify with the Christian faith. Regardless, Psalm 133:1 is far from your experience: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!"

Logistical Reasons

Maybe your issues are mainly *logistical*. You live far away, or your work hours change from week to week. Perhaps you're often traveling, or the weekends offer valuable time to catch up on homework or house projects. For many moms, hauling young children to church can be chaotic and exhausting, and arguing with older kids each week can leave you feeling like a hostage negotiator. Whatever the situation, getting to and from church is challenging.

Preferential Reasons

Some frustrations are about *preferences*. You don't like the music, the liturgy, the way people dress, or the leadership style. You wish the ser-

mon were shorter, the people friendlier, the coffee better. Your preferences might reflect biblical principles or might just be nitpicky. But whether you're right or wrong, constant frustration isn't a good sign.

Cultural Reasons

Some of our preferences are *cultural*. You might be a blue-collar guy at a white-collar church, or a racial minority in a church where few understand your experience. You might be an immigrant, an overseas worker, or a third-culture kid. Whether it's a language barrier or other elements that keep you feeling like an outsider, cultural differences can make it difficult to engage at church.

Recreational Reasons

Some people struggle with church for *recreational* reasons. The weekends are prime time for hobbies, adventures, tournaments, travel, or kids' sports programs. With a busy week behind you and fresh opportunities before you, it can be hard to prioritize church.

Missional Reasons

Sometimes Christians have a hard time with church because there's little *direction* coming from the leaders. We want to participate, contribute, and give ourselves to the mission Christ gave his disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). But a lack of leadership leaves you feeling like your church is on the sidelines instead of the frontlines.

Doctrinal Reasons

Sometimes Christians can't find a church that aligns with their *beliefs*. The church you attend might be your default church but not your desired church, so you feel doctrinally homeless. You'd love for your church to line up with your convictions, but you don't want to be divisive. Your differences might be hindering you from connecting or serving, and you might find yourself on the margins or on the verge of leaving.

Intellectual Reasons

Other Christians find church difficult for *intellectual* reasons. The messages seem trite and

cliché, and you leave Sunday with none of your objections answered. Grad school, an intellectual occupation, diverse friendships, or a deep background in other religions makes you long for deeper thinking. Or maybe you're just a contrarian, and you're always playing devil's advocate. You're committed to Christ, but your church isn't a place you would bring a non-believing friend.

Transitional Reasons

There are also *transitional* challenges to navigate. Sometimes these transitions are personal—you're stepping away from a ministry or moving to a new city or searching for a new church. Other times the church itself is transitioning. A young new pastor takes the helm. Close friends leave. The church moves locations. Even a needed season of change can go on for too long and become a marathon without a finish line.

Personal Reasons

Finally, some have *personal* problems with the church. Maybe you've been abused by "spiritual authorities," witnessed a pastoral scandal, or endured

a church split. In some situations you might bear some responsibility, but even when you're completely innocent, there's still pain. Whether your wounds are caused by others or self-inflicted, personal history can make it hard to love a church, trust a church, or even attend a church.

We all have different personalities, situations, and challenges. But I hope the categories above kickstart your thinking as you assess your own situation. You can use the chart “Why I Don't Feel Like Going to Church” to rank and explain the reasons that resonate with you the most.

Why I Don't Feel Like Going to Church		
<i>Rank</i>	<i>Reason</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
	physical	
	spiritual	
	relational	

What If I Don't Feel Like Going to Church?

Why I Don't Feel Like Going to Church		
<i>Rank</i>	<i>Reason</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
	logistical	
	preferential	
	cultural	
	recreational	
	missional	
	doctrinal	
	intellectual	
	transitional	
	personal	
	other:	

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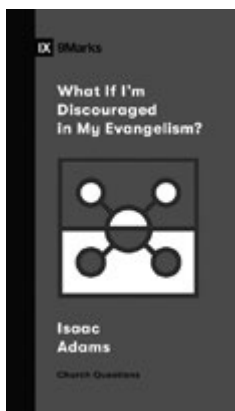
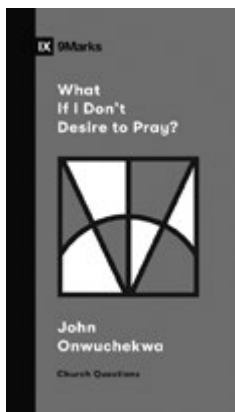
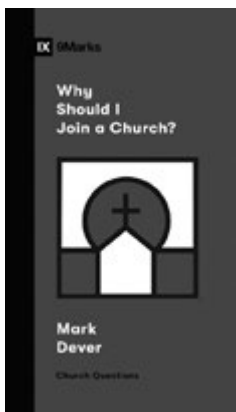
Building Healthy Churches

9Marks exists to equip church leaders with a biblical vision and practical resources for displaying God's glory to the nations through healthy churches.

To that end, we want to see churches characterized by these nine marks of health:

- 1 Expository Preaching**
- 2 Biblical Theology**
- 3 A Biblical Understanding of the Gospel**
- 4 A Biblical Understanding of Conversion**
- 5 A Biblical Understanding of Evangelism**
- 6 Biblical Church Membership**
- 7 Biblical Church Discipline**
- 8 Biblical Discipleship**
- 9 Biblical Church Leadership**

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The most important time to be at church is when you don't feel like it. Feelings are complicated and fickle, yet they often reveal what you really want or think. When you don't feel like going to church, something much deeper may be going on that must be addressed by God's Spirit, through his word. Gunner Gundersen diagnoses the human heart and offers biblical insight on the importance of being involved in the local church—even when you don't feel like it.

Church Questions is a series that seeks to provide ordinary Christians with sound and accessible biblical teaching by answering common questions they have about church life. Each volume offers biblical answers and practical applications with the goal of nurturing healthy church practice and commitment.

Gunner Gundersen (PhD, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) serves as lead pastor at BridgePoint Bible Church in Houston, Texas. He previously spent fifteen years teaching and training Christian college students as a resident director, associate dean, and professor.

CHURCH RESOURCES