

# WE CAN'T GO BACK

## Part 1



How many times have you heard over the last two years, “I just want things to go back to being normal?” I’ve heard it multiple times. On March 25, 2020, the team of five million New Zealanders entered into a lockdown phase to go ‘hard and fast’ in an effort to stop the transmission of Covid-19. We were hopeful the crisis would only last a matter of months. Instead, the pandemic and our response to it has plodded on for two years. Significant social, economic and political changes have happened during this time with multiple businesses and many in society experiencing extraordinary challenges.

The church has not been exempt from the loss of ‘normal’. We once thought that going to church on a Sunday morning, shaking hands, hugging friends, singing songs of praise, praying openly, sharing Communion and hearing God’s Word being taught was normal.

What has happened in the Christian church over the last two years has been far from normal:

- Church numbers have been limited by restrictions intended to prevent the spread of Covid.
- Mask wearing has limited the enjoyment of singing
- Communion has ceased in some churches.
- There is a reluctance to shake hands. Hugging is a no-no.
- People have been turned away from church meetings.
- Christians have met in smaller home groups to accommodate fellowship and learning.
- People have tuned into the internet for their Bible teaching.
- Disunity and strong opinions have divided some fellowships.
- Youth activities, Bible studies and face-to-face meetings have been constrained.
- A number are finding that YouTube, Zoom or Skype is now their go-to-choice for church.
- Others have skipped church altogether.

No wonder many would like to see a return to the normality they once knew. Going back to the good-old days seems to be a longing that many are yearning for.

## Keep Moving Forward

I don't mean to nit-pick, but I have a problem with going 'back' when we should be going 'forward'. This very issue is highlighted in the book of Exodus when Moses led the Israelites in their great freedom march out of Egypt. They had witnessed miracle after miracle before Pharaoh finally let them go. On the edge of the Red Sea, they became aware the Egyptian army was in pursuit to drag them back to Egypt.

Incredibly, on the brink of freedom but fearful of the future, they made it known to Moses that 'going back' would be better than trusting God (Ex. 14:11). The same attitude surfaced when the Israelites were hungry and thirsty and steps away from entering the Promised Land. They repeated the idea that 'going back' to Egypt was better than what lay before them (Num. 21:5). The people wanted to return to their 'normal' despite God clearly expressing that going back meant death. As He had been with them in the past, so He would be with them in the future. God was to be with them going forward, not going backwards.

In the early chapters of Acts a similar thing happened. The opening chapters convey the sense of awe, the thrill and the joy of being part of the newly formed church. There were miracles, people responded to the Gospel and under the love and pastoral guidance of the Apostles the church grew in numbers and was united.

Being part of a vibrant church community gave people a sense of purpose and Acts records their harmony and hope was infectious to the wider Jerusalem community. Everything was so good until Stephen was martyred. Suddenly Christians were public enemy number one. While many were beaten and imprisoned, thousands from the church fled the persecution. Acts 8:1 describes the situation, noting that – 'a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the Apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.'

Driven from their homes and heading into the unknown, how many of these early Christians would have muttered, "I just want to go back to what we had?" Clearly the Lord had other ideas – He wanted them to go forward as commanded in Acts 1:8, '...you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.'

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if they kept a forward focus.

The New Testament reveals that those scattered Christians took their faith and settled in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Asia, Cappadocia and even as far as Rome. The Lord allowed them to be moved from their comfortable community in order to get them witnessing beyond their church doors. The Gospel was only going to spread if they kept a forward focus.

## Negatives and positives

Church leaders spoken to all admit the last two years have presented them with diverse challenges. They grieve that people have left their churches. They've worked hard to accommodate the broad needs of their church. They have mediated with differing and non-essential opinions. Complications have developed between church members. It has not been an easy time. Mistakes were made. No given week has been normal. Some say that restarting church with full attendance and regaining trust may prove to be harder than they think.

On the other hand, some leaders have seen signs of encouragement. Unexpectedly, new people have ventured into the church family. Unknown people have tuned in to online services. New groups and vision have surfaced. There is a growing intent to reach into their respective communities. Obstacles have become opportunities. Some are praying about the best way forward and looking to adopt new initiatives to share the Gospel. On their knees they are intentional about seeking the Spirit's leading.

Obstacles have become opportunities.

As 2022 unfolds and restrictions ease, now is a good time to ask some searching questions:

- What is church all about?
- Was our past 'normal' actually what the Lord wanted for His church?
- Did our church life inadvertently get reduced to meeting at 10am on a Sunday?
- Can we meet and grow from a home fellowship?
- Are online meetings and ministry helpful?
- Is virtual church a possibility?
- Can I be a Christian and not meet with other Christians?
- How can we work together with other churches?
- How can we connect with our local community?
- Are we communicating the Gospel message to all age groups?
- What does our local community need in the weeks and months ahead?
- In an ongoing pandemic, how do we provide pastoral care?
- How can we equip our leaders to lead with wisdom and grace?

These questions will need to be addressed honestly and openly because after all, the church is not about a singular person. Church is about being part of the Body of Christ, learning, worshipping, edifying, maturing and growing (Eph. 4:12-13).

A personal question might be, 'What can church contribute to me?'

A Biblical examination would be – 'what do I contribute to my church family?'

German Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was martyred for his belief that 'The Christian church is the church only when it exists for others'. I value his deep insight that the church should never be about individual preferences, or what we get out of it. The Bible teaches that being a part of the church is about giving, serving and sacrificing so that others come to know our Saviour (1 Thess. 5:11-15).

'The Christian church is the  
church when it exists for others.'

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Being part of a Christian community is essential to the growth and development of an individual as they connect with like-minded people who trust God's Word to change them. Staying away from church (a body of people who remain connected to Christ) will be more harmful than good for individuals. Your presence is what helps make the church viable, tangible and renewable. Embodiment can only happen by being together. Together *is* better, that's why the author of Hebrews writes 'Let *us* not give up meeting together' (10:25). Church togetherness is where you will find your greatest mutual encouragement. GC3 Ambassador Murray Stevenson insightfully addresses how significant relationships happen when we meet as the Christian church. It is a worthy read - <https://www.gc3.org.nz/blog/post/80298/the-church-beyond-covid/>

For the last two years church life has not been normal. Many have felt detached. Some remain fearful that gathering with a large group puts their health at risk. Politics has had an unusually strong presence in the church narrative. Various people have become assertive, stubborn, angry and dogmatic with their views. Some pastors haven't coped, are stressed and are contemplating leaving the ministry. Various church leaders tried to manage their way through the pandemic regulations and failed to pastorally care for their flock. The forms of corporate worship had to adapt. Technology has been complicated for some while others embraced and used it effectively. Some small groups felt isolated and alone as they struggled week after week. The last two years sure have been an unusual period that has brought many challenges and opportunities. One can hope that through this extraordinary time we can learn many things as we move forward.

As I listen to and read about the stories that are happening among our network of churches in the country, I realise that not all have transitioned well. The painful adjustments made were accommodating for the time. Some have been good, others not so pleasing. Some changes have been helpful, others have made mistakes. The last two years have shaken the church and its formalities. Some want the church to retreat; others want to refresh the church. We can either lament or learn from this time.

## Refocus, Refresh and Renew

The irregularities of the last two years give us an excellent opportunity to reassess past activities as we rebuild a brighter mission for the future. If we are to reengage the family of God, we dare not go back to traditions that may have hindered the true purpose of the church. Comfortable Christianity was never supposed to be the norm. Apathy, laziness, fringe members, entertainment, comfortable seats and shallow teachings were never meant to be normal. Revelation 3:16-22 reminds us that Christians who are neither hot nor cold will not be overcomers in their world.

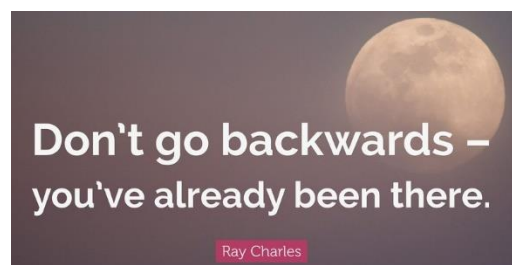
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never supposed to be the norm.

Now two years on, it's time to revisit some of the issues that were faced in the hope that we can make a clear path for the way ahead. We can choose to hide, or we can choose to make headway. Let's recognise our past dysfunctions so together we can intentionally press on towards a dynamic future.

The evangelical churches of New Zealand are at a crossroads. Like the Israelites of old we can look back to what was familiar, or we can look forward to what the Lord will do in the days ahead. Like the first Christians, we can long for the 'good-ol-days' or we can step into the unknown, believing the Lord is with us as we witness beyond our homes, our towns, our cities, our country.

2022 gives us the opportunity to cut up the rocking chairs that we've accepted as normal and turn them into the crosses that we should be carrying. Now is the time to look forward because we desire to involve the whole church to be active with their faith. Vision, obedience and courage will be needed as we infuse excitement and godly determination to reach our communities with the Gospel of Christ. We must strive to motivate the entire Body of Christ to move beyond the precious normal to the real mission of Jesus – to go and make disciples. If we have been in a rut, we need to confess our sins and from this time forward emerge as people who are willing and available to be His witnesses.

Dear friends, one thing is certain, we can't go back.



Graham Ashby, April 2022