

## Some Stores Doing Away With Self-Checkout Stations

*The Wired Word for the Week of November 19, 2023*

### In the News

Some large stores in both the United States and Britain are removing self-checkout stations from some of their stores. Spokespersons for the stores typically explain that the change is to improve the customer experience when checking out, but at some big-box stores, people behind the scenes say the change may be prompted by other reasons.

Self-scan machines were first introduced in the 1980s to lower labor costs but their use has expanded throughout many retail stores since the early 2000s.

Some shoppers generally like the self-service lanes because they enable them to check out faster -- especially as the use of barcodes has become ubiquitous and the scanning technology has improved.

Some shoppers generally dislike them because they miss the interaction with checkout staff, or because they don't like having to personally scan their purchases. Some dislike them because of mistakes the machines or the individual shopper make -- and error messages like "unexpected item in the bagging area" frustrate some users. And some refuse to use the machines because they don't want to support the store in eliminating checkout jobs.

Some people who don't normally like using self-checkout liked it during the pandemic as the machines minimized contact with other people.

At the Booths supermarket chain in northern England, which is removing self-checkout lanes from all but two of their 28 stores, the chain's managing director Nigel Murray told the BBC that customers complain that the machines are slow, unreliable and impersonal. And with the market selling many loose items, such as fruits and bakery products, customers often struggle with how to identify them for the machines to properly charge them.

"We are a business that prides ourselves on the high standards and high levels of warm, personal care," Murray said. "We like to talk to people and we're really proud that we're moving largely to a place where our customers are served by people, by human beings."

In the United States, Walmart, ShopRite, Wegmans and Costco are also making adjustments to their self-checkout strategies. Walmart recently removed the self-service lines at two of its stores in New Mexico and may do so elsewhere.

"We continually look at ways to provide our customers with the best shopping experience and that includes adjusting the checkout area in stores," said Walmart spokesperson Josh Havens.

Walmart and some other large stores don't speak publicly about their losses through shoplifting and other theft, but workers at such places have stated that the move is to curtail the rise in theft by shoppers that has occurred with the expanded use of self-service machines.

One study of retailers in several countries found that companies with self-checkout lanes and apps had a loss rate of about 4%, which is double the industry average.

Some inventory "shrinkage" occurs quite by accident as customers type in the wrong code, misidentify which variety of apple they have selected, or fail to notice that a product did not scan. Or they simply overlook an item as they move stuff around in their cart.

But some theft is intentional, where some items are deliberately not scanned, or cheaper items are scanned in place of more expensive ones or where everything is scanned properly, but then the shopper walks out without paying.

More cashiers, it seems, may be good for both shoppers and stores, to say nothing of the jobs the need for cashiers provide. Whether the reduction in theft will offset the increase in payroll will probably vary from place to place, so the effect on prices remains unseen.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Walmart, Costco and Other Companies Rethink Self-Checkout. CNN](#)

[A Grocery Chain Is Removing Self-Checkout After Realizing Executives Hate It as Much as Customers Do: 'We Like to Talk to People.' Yahoo Finance](#)

[Walmart Is Stripping Some Stores of Self-Checkout Lanes and Bringing Back Cashiers. Insider](#)

### **Applying the News Story**

One complaint sometimes heard about self-checkout is that it shifts the work of paid employees to unpaid customers. One critic quipped that soon we'll be meeting cargo trucks at the back of stores to unload so we can wait on ourselves in the store. (Of course, warehouse stores, such as Costco and Sam's Club, are already somewhat in between.)

The news story got us thinking about how unlike self-checkout the usual practice of the Christian faith is. During the pandemic lockdown and limits, some churches experimented with self-administered communion, taking up the offering without passing the plate, having worship services without group singing and "passing the peace" without touching or close interaction with others, but we never could figure out how believers could baptize themselves.

No, Christian faith and practice is meant to be a group trip. The sick are not left to call on themselves or to be without communal prayer on their behalf. The gospel message is not left to spread itself. Congregational prayers of confession still speak of "our" sins and shortcomings, and not simply "my" sins and shortcomings. Missions and ministries are not offered on a do-it-yourself basis. And discipling is not a solitary endeavor.

There is room, of course, for private prayer, one's own devotions, solitary good deeds, personal confession and individualized giving, but none of these things are intended to replace life together in the community of faith.

### **The Big Questions**

1. To what degree is living a Christian life an individual endeavor? To what degree is it a congregational endeavor?
2. What is your church's understanding of what happens when the Lord's Supper is *shared*? How would this understanding be affected if you were directed to acquire the elements (bread and juice or wine) from the local grocery and then take Communion at home, on your own?
3. What aspects of our spiritual growth, including satisfying the hunger for righteousness, are related to regular church attendance? Can there be a negative impact to regular church attendance? For example, instead of a hunger for righteousness, do we risk developing self-righteousness because we regularly attend? If so, how can we avoid that?
4. How can you as an individual Christian help strengthen the bonds of love within your community of faith?
5. How does your church teach its children that Christianity isn't a lone endeavor but more a team activity? How could it do better at that task?

### **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

#### **John 5:6-8**

*When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The ill man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up,*

*and while I am making my way someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." (For context, read [John 5:1-18](#).)*

This is the from the account of Jesus healing a paralyzed man who for 38 years had lain each day by the pool of Bethzatha (sometimes rendered as Bethesda or Bethsaida), where, supposedly an angel would occasionally stir the waters and the first one to get in the water when they were stirred would be healed of whatever maladies they had.

This man had lain there day after day, year after year, but when the waters were stirred someone always beat him into the pool. (That's the problem with the "take care of yourself" approach: Those who are best equipped to deal with the circumstances are going to succeed, while everyone else drops back to ground zero.)

But Jesus healed this man. No more waiting to self-checkout of the pool deck.

**Questions:** Who do you think brought the man to the pool each morning? What benefits might the man have found at the pool while not being healed? Why do you think Jesus asked the man if he wanted to be healed?

### **Hebrews 10:24-25**

*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (For context, read [Hebrews 10:19-25](#).)*

These two verses are the closest biblical reference we have to a command to attend Christian worship. Notice that the writer of Hebrews says that one reason for doing so is to encourage one another. And that is an important factor that is lost when we try to go it alone in the Christian faith.

What's more, church isn't like school where you attend for a while until you complete minimum course work and then graduate. The church has no alumni association. We need to continue to be part of a faith community both for what we receive and what we contribute.

**Questions:** Besides upping the attendance statistics, what does your regular attendance in church contribute to the faith of others who also attend those worship services? How does corporate worship help us draw near to God?

### **Matthew 18:19-20**

*Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. (For context, read [Matthew 18:15-20](#).)*

Jesus' statement about his being present where two or three are gathered in his name reminds us of the spiritual help of a group of believers. No self-checkout here.

We may hear these words as a statement that wherever any random two or three Christians happen to be in proximity to one another that some sort of religious reality is occurring, but that's not the same as being *gathered in his name*. Consider it this way: Suppose that you have an appointment on the 23rd floor of a high-rise building. You walk into the lobby, push the elevator button, and when the car arrives, you enter. As you do, another person who has just entered the lobby, someone you don't know, calls out to hold the elevator. You comply, and the person comes into the car as well. You push the button for the 23rd floor, he pushes the one for the 27th floor and the car starts to rise. Then, the elevator stops at the 4th floor, and a third person enters, who pushes the button for floor 17. Now, with the three of you on board, the car starts to rise again.

Now further suppose that all three of you, strangers to each other, all happen to be committed Christians. So there you are, three of you together. Is Christ there among you?

In one sense, since we can pray to Jesus anywhere and from anyplace, we might say yes. But in the more common idea of Christ among us, meaning that there is an active experience of spiritual connection going on, we'd have to say no. In fact, given the usual behavior of strangers in an elevator, there's probably very little

connection of any kind happening. Most people in that situation of forced close proximity with people totally unknown to them studiously avoid eye contact. Most don't even say anything. They just quietly ride to their destination and then exit quickly. There has been no religious experience, no sensing of the presence of Jesus among them.

But now, suppose that while the elevator is ascending, the building experiences a power failure, and the three of you find yourselves stuck between the 14th and 15th floors. After a couple of seconds of uncomfortable silence, one of you says something -- maybe "Uh-oh." One of the others responds and soon the three of you are talking about what you should do. When nothing happens after several minutes, one of you pushes the alarm button, but eventually, it appears you have no choice but to wait for either the power to come back on or rescuers to appear.

Of course, the three of you don't know what has caused the problem. The time in the elevator begins to stretch into hours, and although you have pushed the alarm button repeatedly, no help has arrived.

As the three of you talk, one mentions praying, and the other two immediately respond, and in further conversation, it comes out that all three of you are Christians. As you begin to pray together and continue to talk, you become aware of a feeling of camaraderie with these other two, and you are also aware of something else, some connection on a spiritual level. Now could we say that Christ is present in your midst? Absolutely! For now you are no longer strangers in an elevator, but people who have gathered in his name.

**Questions:** In what ways might a group acknowledgement of faith and the shared testimony of the group members help to make the presence of Jesus more obvious to those gathered together? What do you gather from this text about being solo practitioners of our faith? How might this statement from Jesus fit with [Daniel 3:19-30](#) (especially verses 24-25) and the fourth man who appeared in the fiery furnace?

### **James 5:13-16**

*Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.* (For context, read [James 5:13-18](#).)

These words are from James, who was the brother of Jesus and an elder in the Jerusalem church. He wrote this letter as a communication to the whole church, with instructions about practical aspects of everyday life as followers of Jesus. In the final section of his epistle, he turned his attention toward the matter of illness and difficulties. And clearly, James believed the church had a role to play in healing.

He begins this section by posing three situations, and in each case, supplying an instruction:

- Are any among you suffering? They should pray.
- Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.
- Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick ...

Notice that the treatment James urges is prayer and that he says nothing about a special person with a gift for healing. He does not tell the sick to send for somebody with a reputation for miracle working. Rather, he tells them to seek out the ordinary human beings who help to lead the congregation, and let them pray. And he tells them to pray for one another because "[t]he prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective."

We should not miss that what James is talking about is the prayers that arise from a community of faith. He is clear that the power of prayer does not reside in some specially gifted super-saint, but in the congregation as a praying fellowship.

The late Leslie Weatherhead, a well-known British pastor and author from a few years back adds some food for thought about this. While pastoring a church in Leeds, England, Weatherhead began including in his evening



services a time for intercessory prayer for individual sufferers, asking the congregation to pray for those persons. After 25 years of doing that, he reached two conclusions about intercessory prayer. One was that prayers for people known and loved by the congregation seemed more effective than those for people who were strangers to the congregation. That was not to say that the prayers for strangers were less sincere, but that somehow, the connectedness of the people who gather week after week for worship seemed to have a positive effect.

The other thing Weatherhead concluded was that the prayers are more effective when those making the intercession concentrate and believe they are cooperating with God in a person's recovery.

That is not to say we should not pray for others. Certainly we should, but we can appreciate what the prayers of fellow believers we know mean to us.

**Questions:** What is the connection between our personal lives and those of others in the faith community? How does your congregation participate in the healing and helping ministry of your church?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Consider this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "We don't do self-checkout as people of faith. We are received, personally, into the body of Christ with the body of Christ.

"I recall that during the height of the pandemic a young couple asked me to baptize them a month before they were married. Since they were raised Amish, that meant their families would come to the service in full force, and none of them would be masked. My wife and I decided there was nothing for it but to go forward with our traditional means of baptism. Down into the water and dunking them forward three times, with everyone in the sanctuary breathing full force. I just couldn't see any way they could self-baptize in a safe setting.

"In Colonial America, Conrad Beissel, the founder of the Ephrata Cloisters, decided no one on earth was worthy to baptize him, so he first went into the river and 'unbaptized' himself, to get rid of the taint of his Brethren baptism, and then baptized himself through immersion. I'm not sure how he did it, but I've had a laugh trying to figure it out."

2. React to this from TWW team member Stan Purdum: "I've gotten used to scanning my purchases in the local Walmart, but I really don't like having to do it when my wife and I go out to eat. One local restaurant presents us with only a minimal printed menu, but they have many more selections available. But the only way we can view those is by using our cell phones to scan a QR code and then having the menu pop up on the phone. We're probably showing our age, but we find this annoying. We asked if they had a full menu on paper we could see, but they didn't, and they don't seem receptive to the idea of having a few available for luddites like us. We choose not to eat at that restaurant anymore."

3. A few years ago, one church floated the idea of offering Communion over the internet. We assume the online respondent named "Robert" was being sarcastic when he made the following comment about the proposal, but see what you think: "Awesome idea! I don't like people anyway. How great that I can be a Christian and get my preaching from the TV, communion from the internet, worship from an iTunes download and serve the less fortunate by making a financial donation online. Who needs other people to be accountable to, or to learn from, or to serve alongside with. I sure hope heaven is this way, 'cause being in community with people is too troublesome and demanding. Who wants that?"

4. Respond to this, from Ernest Campbell, former pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. "From the very beginning of the human enterprise, religious longings have required institutional form. We need each other: the uplifting of a shared liturgy, a shared fellowship, a shared service. However personal our faith may be, it cannot possibly be private and survive. Let it be remembered that Jesus was not a spiritual Lone Ranger going off on his own. He was a product of the Old Testament church and one who heralded the dawn of the New Testament church. The local church, faults and all, is the central entity of the Christian enterprise."

5. If your church's worship practices were changed by the pandemic -- i.e., social distancing, wearing face covers, not passing the offering plates, no corporate singing, limited greeting options, distributing communion, etc. -- which practices were most challenging to do without? Which ones were easiest to accept or forego?

## **Responding to the News**

Next time you attend a worship service in your congregation, look for people you don't know, especially newcomers, and make a point of greeting them and welcoming them into this community. You may be greeting angels unaware.

## **Prayer**

Thank you, Lord, for making us to need one another. Help us to both contribute to and receive from our connections with our fellow Christians and the larger church. In Jesus' name. Amen