

“STOP DATING THE CHURCH!”

- A Bible Study adapted from the book by **Joshua Harris**,
“*Stop Dating The Church! Fall In Love With The Family Of God.*”

INTRODUCTION:

In a day where the local Church is looked at with such disdain, as an inconvenience to **MY** schedule, the message of this book is so essential and so needed. People look into coming to a local church as they would look into the movie page of the paper to see what movie they would attend. What will best suit **MY** needs, what will entertain **ME**, and what am **I** in the mood for. Very few “*Christians*” (or probably better said “*churchgoers*”), seem to be interested in what they can give to a local church body or how they can serve (and be a servant), but rather they look for what they can get out of it for themselves. The church deserves far more than that and Christ Jesus demands far more than this half-hearted, uncommitted, apathetic and sometimes plainly unfaithful attention the church receives. We **are not** into **commitment** today—we only want to **DATE** the church. This isn’t what God wants for His people. True believers are the “*Bride of Christ*”, and it is about time that professing Christians took the church seriously, and displayed the passion that shows they have fallen in love with the family of God.

1. WHERE IS THE PASSION?

Ephesians 1:1-14

This “idea” of “The Church” is not man’s idea. It is God’s plan and program. He has purposed to “call out” (ekklesia- the name used in the New Testament for the church which means “a calling out”) a people for Himself. He has purposed to set His love on us, to grant us the gift of faith to believe, to make possible peace with Him and to forgive us of all our sins, all through the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ in our place on the cross. It is “IN Him” (vs7) we have redemption. It is not by ANY merit or good works of our own (**Ephesians 2:8-9, Titus 3:5**). A true understanding of this truth on the part of one who has truly experienced God’s saving grace will manifest itself in the life of that individual. There will be a passion for God, and a desire to please Him in those who are truly His children. This is not to say that we as His children will always be perfect and that we can’t have our passion negatively affected through yielding to sin, disobedience, and the pursuit of our own selfish, sinful desires. But every true child of God will be chastened by the Lord (**Hebrews 12:5-11**) because we are all imperfect and need training and discipline. God has saved us to ultimately glorify Him (**Ephesians 1:6,12,14**) and all true born again people are now new creations in Christ Jesus (**2 Corinthians 5:17**), and we will desire to bring God that glory that is due Him. This passion for God will be seen in our lives in various ways, but it will be evident.

2. WHERE IS THE LOVE OF WHAT HE LOVES?

Ephesians 5:22-32

This thought is continued throughout the **book of Ephesians** and the picture of a passion and love for the church is illustrated in **chapter 5** where we find the church called the “*Bride of Christ*”. We are given a look at how Jesus Christ feels about the church, HIS church. In this passage we find The Apostle Paul even refers back and quotes **Genesis 2**. He then says in **verse 32** that this is a great mystery and it is about Christ and His church. God did not get His inspiration for loving the church from marriage, rather one reason He created marriage was to illustrate His love for the church. In the lives of a man and woman in love, pursuing romance, commitment, and faithfulness in the bond of marriage, we catch a faint glimmer of the undying love Christ has for those He died to save—His Church.

We can obviously see that this passage is referring to the church with a capital “C”. This is the universal Church, all of those who are truly born again by faith in Jesus Christ and His work on the cross alone for their justification before God. We understand that Christ loves His church with a love that is not fickle and flighty. As He hung on the cross His love for His Bride was evident. His passion and love for His Bride has not dimmed through the years. He still calls us His Bride. What about you? Do you love what He loves? God does not call you to love what He, Himself doesn’t love. He loved sinful people, lost in sin (**Romans 5:8**). So, you have no excuse for not loving the church, even though it “isn’t quite as perfect as you think it should be.” We must admit that we are not the most beautiful of “Brides”, yet while we were sinners, Christ died for us. In **Ephesians 3:9-11** we read that the angels look down upon God’s work through the church with amazement. As the power of the gospel is worked out in the lives of real people, it transforms them and they are reconciled to God. They are then reconciled to each other in the church, and this is a mystery that was hidden for ages past but is now being displayed, manifesting the wisdom of God, which brings Him glory. The **book of Ephesians** also gives us another amazing picture of Christ’s perspective of His Church. We read in **1:22-23** that the church is called the “Body” of Christ. This is how close the church is to the heart of God. We are called His Body. The true church is the physical manifestation of Jesus Christ on the earth. The church is also seen as a magnificent temple, unlike any other structure throughout history. It is not made with hands, or with bricks and stones but is comprised of “living stone”. **Ephesians 2:21-22.** As believers, we are joined with all the saints of God into this awesome spiritual structure.

God call us to be imitators of Him (**Ephesians 5:1**). As believers, we are being conformed into the image of His Son (**Romans 8:29**). We know that this process will one day be perfect and complete by God’s sovereign power and plan (**Philippians 1:6**). So, if Jesus loves the church, you and I as professing believers should too. Christ continues to love us despite the fact we are not yet perfect. If anyone ever had any right to give up on His bride, or to be disillusioned and give up on His marriage it would be Christ. But He never has, and He never will. As a matter of fact, according to **Ephesians 5:26-27**, Christ is at work every day making us as His bride more and more beautiful in anticipation of that final day when we will be presented to Him. –**“John Stott writes: On earth she is often in rags and tatters, stained and ugly, despised and persecuted. But one day she will be seen for what she is, nothing less than the bride of Christ, “free from spots, wrinkles or any other disfigurement,” holy and without blemish, beautiful and glorious. It is to this constructive end that Christ has been working and is continuing to work. The bride does not make herself presentable; it is the bridegroom who labours to beautify her in order to present her to himself.** (Joshua Harris, “*Stop Dating The Church!*” -Chapter 2 -*He Still Calls Her His Bride*, page 40-41.)

Does your life look like a bride that is being made ready? Are you passionate for the things that God is passionate for? Do you love what Jesus loves? Namely—The Church?

CAN YOU SPOT A “CHURCH DATER?” –THE PROFILE OF ONE WHO DATES THE CHURCH.

1. A “**me-centered**” attitude. They go to church for what they can get—social interaction, programs, activities. The common question of the “church dater” is, “What can church do for me?”
2. A “church dater” is **Independent**. They go to church because that is what Christians are supposed to do. They are careful to avoid getting involved too much, especially with people. They don’t pay much attention to God’s larger purpose for them as a vital part of a specific church family. They go through the motions without really investing themselves.
3. A “church dater” tends to be **Critical**. They are short on allegiance and quick to find fault in their church. They treat the church with the consumer mentality—looking for the best product for the price of ***Their*** Sunday morning. They are fickle and not invested for the long-term, like a lover with a wondering eye; they are always on the hunt for something better.

(These three points taken from, Joshua Harris- “*Stop Dating The Church!*” –Chapter 1- page 16-17)

3. WHY A TRUE BELIEVER NEEDS THE LOCAL CHURCH.

The New Testament itself is a testimony to the importance God places on the local church. Besides the gospels, we find that the other books of the N.T. were either written to leaders of local churches, local churches themselves, or contained instructions for or historical narrative about the “local church”. (**Romans-Revelation**)

When a person resists commitment in a relationship with the church, everyone gets cheated. No one wins when a person is just a “church dater”. God calls us to commit to a local church that obeys and follows His Word. We are to belong to a local church that follows His commands in its practices. We show our love for Christ’s church by being a part of a Biblical local church.

FORMALITY?

Many people feel they don’t need a local church family; they don’t need to belong because they think it is an unnecessary “formality”. We often hear the copout of “**I belong to the Universal Church**”. Many people when asked what church they belong to come back with that answer feeling it is somehow a sign of “spirituality” when in fact; if they don’t belong to a local Biblical church body there may be more “**carnality**” than “spirituality” going on. Yes, true believers **ARE** part of the “UNIVERSAL” or “catholic” church in a technical sense but is disconnection to a local church wise or even right? Josh Harris says it this way, “**Wouldn’t that be like telling your new bride that while your love is true, you have other priorities? Your heart of course is all hers, but as for the rest of you...well, you’ll be in and out.**” (*Joshua Harris-“Stop Dating The Church!” chapter3 page 45*) The Bible allows for no such disconnection. If you love the “**church**” you will identify and love an *actual, local* church. The universal “Body of Christ” takes a visible, tangible shape and reality through the local church. And there will be commitment evidenced in the life of one who is truly “**in love**” with the church.

THE MARRIAGE ANALOGY

Below is a sample of the basic traditional wedding vows: Many “Christians” do not even show this type of loyalty and love to the savior of their souls or to His church; either corporately or locally.

I, (Bride/Groom), take you (Groom/Bride), to be my (wife/husband), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part.

"[Name], do you take [Name] to be your wedded [husband/wife] to live together in marriage. Do you promise to love, comfort, honor and keep [him/her] for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health? And forsaking all others, be faithful only to [him/her], and keep yourself only unto [him/her], so long as you both shall live?"

These traditional vows are all about true, genuine love & commitment. We should strive to live these out with our God given mates but we should also reflect these qualities of faithfulness and steadfastness to our Lord Jesus Christ and His Church. Remember Christ’s example and commitment. (**Ephesians 5:25-28, 32, 1 John 3:16**) May we reflect this love for Christ and also for our true brethren, His church.

A. THE LOCAL CHURCHES TESTIMONY

One thing the local church does is make a visible display to the surrounding neighbors that there is something to this “**NEW LIFE**” in Jesus Christ. The local church is to display the transforming power of the gospel as it lives out the gospel. One way we live out the gospel is by being obedient to the practices given to the local church from God’s Word. These three things are given to the local church by Christ and enable the church to shine forth a distinct and different message.

BAPTISM

Baptism is a public testimony that a person makes to declare they have been saved and therefore identified with the death and resurrection of Christ. (**Matthew 28:19, Romans 6:4**)

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Taking "communion" is also a step of obedience and a time for introspection and examination to keep our lives clean before God and to focus on and remember the death of Christ which makes our forgiveness and cleansing possible. (**Matthew 26:26-29, 1 Corinthians 11:23-32**)

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The process that keeps the testimony pure and bright before the lost, and helps not to confuse the issue of what it means to be a Christian and who is one, is the matter of church discipline. A person in unrepentant sin is to be admonished and rebuked in love according to the Biblical principles and if they refuse to turn from their sin to Godliness in their living, they are to be removed from the local fellowship that hopefully they will be brought to a point where their heart is changed and they can be restored. (**Matthew 18, 1 Corinthians 5:9-13**)

Charles Spurgeon: *"An unholy church! It is useless to the world, and of no esteem among men. It is an abomination, hell's laughter, heaven's abhorrence. The worst evils which have ever come upon the world have been brought upon her by an unholy church. In proportion as a church is holy, in that proportion will its testimony for Christ be powerful."*

It should not be hard to see right away that the local church is to be different from the "neighborhood Bible study". Groups of Christians getting together can express many aspects of Christian community, but they are not church. NEITHER is just a bunch of Christians coming together in the same building for encouragement "being the church". All of those contexts could give you your teaching or fellowship "fix", but they cannot substitute the local church. God has distinctly set up the local church with its God ordained leadership and structure as well as its unique guidelines to follow as the place to display His ordinances and qualities. He is the one who chose to establish the local church. (**Ephesians 4:11-16**)

B. THE LOCAL CHURCHES FAITHFULNESS

The more mature a believer grows in Christ the more they realize they cannot "make it on their own". It is not just to be "YOU and CHRIST". I once had a man who disagreed with me on this point and who left the church, yet this idea of "personal" relationship that excludes all the other "brothers and sisters" you have in Christ is foreign to the scripture. God uses others to dispense much of His grace. He created a "body" not a freakish disconnected "living thing". **Hebrews 10:19-25** is one place in Scripture that lays out for us the importance of the corporate nature of the local body and being faithful to it. We see that we truly do need others and we are not to neglect gathering together so we can receive from God what he has to give us through the local church. WE CAN BECOME INCREDIBLY BLIND TO THE SIN IN OUR OWN LIVES. So we need others and God has designed the local body to fulfill that need. We also see the vital nature of corporate worship throughout scripture. **1 Corinthians 6:19** says that we as individuals are "temples" of the Holy Spirit, and then in the same letter we also read that we are all together a part of "God's building". (**1 Corinthians 3:9**) **1 Peter 2:5** says we are "living stones being built up together into a spiritual house." Gathering together as a local church body is irreplaceable. It CAN'T be substituted for with "personal devotions", Bible study with friends, a hike in the woods to reflect on God, or a TV service. Corporate worship edifies and strengthens in its own particular way that God has ordained. **Remember back to the "church daters". Do you see how they are actually cheating themselves?**

Another part of this “**FAITHFULNESS**” to the local church is membership. This is a subject which causes much consternation in today’s “church”.

Charles Spurgeon: *“I believe that every Christian ought to be joined to some visible church; that is his plain duty, according to the Scriptures. God’s people are not dogs, else they might go about one by one; but they are sheep, and therefore they should be in flocks. Now, I know there are some who say, “Well, I hope I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to any church, because—” Now, why not? “Because I can be a Christian without it.” Now, are you quite clear upon that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord’s commands as by being obedient? Well, suppose everybody else did the same, suppose all Christians in the world said, “I shall not join the Church.” Why there would be no visible Church, there would be no ordinances. That would be a very bad thing, and yet, one doing it—what is right for one is right for all— why should not all of us do it? Then you believe that if you were to do an act which has a tendency to destroy the visible Church of God, you would be as good a Christian as if you did your best to build up that church? I do not believe it, sir! Nor do you either.”*

Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC often begins his speaking engagements about the local church with this provocative sentence: *“If you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, you may well be going to hell. I don’t mean for a second that you literally have to have your name on a membership card in a church somewhere to go to heaven. I believe in justification by faith alone in Christ alone by God’s grace alone. At the same time, in the New Testament it seems that the local church is there to verify or falsify our claims to be Christians. The man in 1 Corinthians 5 who was sleeping with his father’s wife thought of himself as a Christian.”* (Taken from: Joshua Harris-“*Stop Dating The Church!*” –Chapter 3- page 55)

Marks point is that there are a ton of people who claim to be Christians, who have no idea of what the gospel does in a life and whose own lives have not been changed by the gospel. (**2 Corinthians 5:17**) They have not been born again and therefore do not have a changed life which for one thing will manifest a love and faithfulness to the church. They come with anticipation to be fed the Word of God and even though it may step on their toes they still avail themselves to it for they desire to please God and be like Him. Like we saw recently in our Lord’s Day messages in **1 Peter**, assurance of salvation must include an obedient life that has been changed by God’s grace. Josh Harris also says in his book, *“Confidence that we’ve truly been saved shouldn’t rest on an emotional experience or a prayer we prayed during an altar call years ago.”* He then quotes Mark Dever again, *“I don’t care how much you cry during singing or preaching. If you do not live a life marked by love toward others, the Bible has no encouragement for you to think that you’re a Christian. None.”* Mark Dever continues, *“Do you want to know that your new life is real? Commit yourself to a local group of saved sinners. Try to love them. Don’t just do it for three weeks. Don’t just do it for six months. Do it for years. And I think you’ll find out, and others will, too, whether or not you love God. The truth will show itself.”*

The place for this all to take place is the local church. Joining a church won’t save you. Christ alone saves you, but once truly saved the new life of obedience to Him and His Words will make evident who is His. (**Matthew 7:24-27, John 8:31**) Does your life give forth the evidence of a faithful, obedient follower of Christ? Many people are more committed to everything else in their lives that the One who they profess has saved them and given them “New Life”.

Charles Spurgeon: *“Persons go out on Monday to business who cannot go out on Sunday. It is raining on Sunday, and it is very curious how rain on Sunday will keep some people in; their health is so weak, though the same rain on Monday does not affect them at all in that particular way. Have you never observed how some persons appear to be periodically ill on Sundays? That seems to be a favourite day for being ill; and then they will say that they cannot walk so far, and they would object to ride, the objection being, probably, to going at all, at the bottom. Any hypocrite comes on a Sunday, but they do not, to my knowledge, all of them come on Monday to the prayer-meeting, nor all to the week-night service on a Thursday. I am pretty certain of this, though some of them may. Week-night meetings and services are a powerful test.”*

One more quote by Spurgeon drives home the point of how the local church is a place where “community sanctification” takes place. That is to say that within a body of believers there is a constant process of each one edifying the other and building them up to be more like Christ. Spurgeon warns those who would come to his local fellowship to not come in to just “join” the church and drag in all your unconfessed sin and unholy life which actually weakens the church rather than build it up.

Charles Spurgeon: *“Do not come in to weaken us, we are weak enough already. Do not come in to adulterate our purity, we have enough impurity even now. Pray that God may make you a real increase to our prayerfulness, to our holiness, to our earnestness, to our higher life, and then come and welcome, and the Lord be with you!”*

Finally in this section let’s ask “What holds us back from joining the church?” Yes it is true that many churches are not representing Christ Jesus through their lives and teaching. Everyone has a horror story to tell about a stale, lazy, or unfriendly church. But is this the real reason (or excuse) people don’t commit to the local church? I believe the biggest problems are not in the church but in people. We have been so influenced by the world around us that many of the world’s attitudes show up in those who are critical of the church. Let’s look at some examples:

1. People are self-centered and have bought the lie that we’ll be happier the less we give of ourselves and sacrifice our time. But the opposite is true. The more we hold on to “our” time, money, and comforts and refuse to give them to the church, the less we receive back and the emptier we really become.

2. People take great pride in their “independence”. People tend to think they don’t need others in their life or they are afraid that people will see them for who they really are. Both attitudes cut us off from blessings the local church provides.

3. Lastly, people have developed a critical eye toward the church. They think they are accomplishing something by logging the churches faults and complaining about it. God says to repent of a critical spirit and have an attitude of genuine concern. That is what people who love the Lord do. They see a problem and truly desire that it be fixed according to God’s Word and way. That kind of concern leads to positive change for both us and the church.

Only when a person rejects being self-centered, independent, and critical can they truly see the beauty of the local church come into focus. And even the true faults of the church become an opportunity for us to love and serve.

4. WHAT PASSIONATE INVOLVEMENT IN THE LOCAL CHURCH LOOKS LIKE.

This following “profile of commitment” should be seen in the life of every believer regarding the local church.

1. You join.

The Bible teaches accountability to church and church leaders in order for them to know who it is they are shepherding. In the book of Acts we read they were added to the church and it gives us a number to indicate they knew who was in the church and how many. **Hebrews 13:17** tells Christians to obey their leaders and therefore obtain the benefit of having elders who **“watch over your souls”**. And don’t just join but put down some roots. Let God and others know you are committed. The missionary martyr Jim Elliot once said, *“Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God”*.

2. You make the local church a priority.

Our lives are built around our priorities. Harris says in his book, “Building your life around the church means making it the kind of priority that secondary concerns flow around, not over.” This means such things as sleeping in; hunting season, football, picnicking, or many more should not run OVER the church but AROUND it.

It is easy to say the church should come before some things like football and fishing but what about the things like your job? Is God asking you to put the job He has given you before the worship and service of Him through the local church? All of the things in our lives should come after God first. **Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Matthew 22:34-39.**

3. You try to make your pastors job a joy.

Christians often pray for good leaders but we need to pray that God would help us to follow them. God actually says it is in keeping with your interests to be a kind of follower that is a joy to lead. (**Hebrews 13:17**) Shepherds will give account for how they fed, led, and cared for God's sheep but God also say's there is a responsibility on the part of those being led to make the leaders job a joy. When others engage in ungodly gossip, and slander call on them to repent of their sin and refuse to participate. This duty of making your leaders work joyful is of spiritual benefit for you.

4. You find ways to serve.

Spend yourself in serving the church. Use your God given spiritual gift to its fullest. (**1 Peter 4:10**) Also remember the example of Epaphroditus in (**Philippians 2:25-30**). Always be asking yourself, "What can I do to serve"? We all belong to each other as true members of the Body of Christ. (**Romans 12:4-6**). Don't withhold your gift, use it.

5. You give.

God also calls us to give and to bring to Him through the local church. **Malachi 3:10, 2 Corinthians 8&9**. There are many worthwhile ministries worldwide where we can send our money but God has called us to give it first and foremost to the local church.

6. You connect with people.

When we are active participants in the church we "do life" together. This is the entire meaning of the word used in the Bible for fellowship. The Greek word koinonia means shared life, participation. We have studied in the past all the "one another's" in Scripture and these are the very things we are to do in our relationships with each other. Here are just a few examples for us:

- Love one another (**John 13:34**)
- Be devoted to one another (**Romans 12:5**)
- Honor one another (**Romans 12:10**)
- Serve one another (**Galatians 5:13**)
- Admonish one another (**Romans 15:14**)
- Carry one another's burdens (**Galatians 6:2**)
- Pray for one another (**James 5:16**)
- Encourage one another (**1 Thessalonians 5:11**)

We know the list could go on and on. These are a few of the things we need to do for and with each other.

7. You share your passion.

People who get excited about something in life whether it be a new product or idea, always seem to try to get others excited about it as well. The same is true for the local church. Those who have been truly transformed by the Gospel are passionate about it love the local church and want others to share in their joy as well. You can not keep inside a true passion for Jesus Christ and His church. We should be passionate for the local church for that is the primary means that God uses to be a light to reach out into the world. A local church that honors Christ is desirous to evangelize the lost.

All of these things we looked at are not just one time things we do to show commitment. These very same things must be routine and practiced habitually if you are going to develop and thrive as a Christian through the local church. People that practice these things as normal life are married to the church; they aren't just "church daters". *(The previous list of 7 things that make up "the profile of commitment" are taken from Josh Harris "Stop Dating the Church" Chapter 4-Join the Club. pages 63-80)*

5. TEN IMPORTANT QUESTIONS IN CHOOSING A CHURCH

In looking for a spouse to marry, it is not wrong to look for a certain man or woman who meets a particular checklist of preferences. One may want to find a spouse with black hair that enjoys camping and a certain type of food etc.... But it would be foolish to put those preferences over the Godly criteria of whether the person is truly converted and loving the Lord and growing in Him. In a similar way it is not wrong for folk to look for some particular things in a local church such as a lot of people a certain age, or a certain style of music. But we must understand these things are **SECONDARY** concerns. The Word of God not our wishes is what lays out the "**MUST HAVE**" list for every church. There are certain qualities that would be nice but there is a Biblical list of musts that are a priority in looking for a local church. The following are 10 important "must's" to look for. *(The following list is taken from Josh Harris "Stop Dating the Church" Chapter 5 Pages 83-96)*

1. Is this a church where God's Word is faithfully taught?

Nothing nourishes us like the Word of God—**NOTHING**. It is God who created the individual and He through His Word has given out the necessary instruction and food for life. A local church that pleases God is one that is submissive to Scripture. It is governed by the Word of God which is what is profitable. **(2 Timothy 3:16)** There is a difference between "sprinkling" a little or a lot for that matter, of Scripture around a church and a church that is saturated with a mindset to conform to Biblical truth and make it the standard that will be followed. Make sure the church you choose to attend is one that is under the authority of Scripture.

2. Is this a church where sound doctrine matters?

Just the word "doctrine" causes some folk problems but this is precisely what the local church is commanded to follow. **(Acts 2:42)** We understand that sound doctrine is constantly attacked both outside and inside the church. **(2 Timothy 4:3-4)** Doctrine is not divisive but rather necessary and unifying as it informs us to the way God has designed for us to live and act. **Josh Harris** speaks in his book about a youth conference where the host started the event by walking onstage and declaring, "*It's not about doctrine! It's about Jesus!*" I would agree with **Harris** as he comments that the statement is both sad and misleading. As he states, "*We don't have to choose between caring about doctrine and loving Jesus. The two pursuits are not opposed to each other. In fact, they are inseparable! We can only grow in our love for our Savior as we learn more of who He is and what He has accomplished for us. A concern for truth doesn't take us away from a deeper relationship with Him. It leads us closer to Him, in greater worship, adoration, and obedience.*" So to wrap up this point we should be looking for a church that knows and defines what they believe according to the Scripture.

3. Is this a church in which the gospel is cherished and clearly proclaimed?

It goes without saying that the Gospel or “The Good News” is the primary message that ought to be upheld by Christ’s church. In the Gospel we find the perfect, sinless life of Christ, His substitutionary, sacrificial death for sinners, and His glorious resurrection from the grave and ascension on high. It is the story of how God has by His grace and mercy alone made the way for sinful man to be reconciled to Himself through faith. It all comes back to this glorious message of the gospel. As Paul the apostle said his desire was “*to know Christ and Him crucified*”. The church is to be the place where this message of Christ is clearly embraced and forth told. Commenting on choosing a church it was **Charles Spurgeon** who said, “*Do not go where it is all fine music and grand talk and beautiful architecture; those things will neither fill anybody’s stomach nor feed his soul. Go where the gospel is preached, the gospel that really feeds your soul, and go often.*”

4. Is this a church committed to reaching non-Christians with the gospel?

We all have heard Christ’s command to every believer. (**Matthew 28:18-20**) We must make this a priority in both our personal lives and it should be a priority in the life of our church. It is not enough to just celebrate the Gospel; we must share it with the lost as well. Yes, it is God who quickens a person to salvation and not our man made manipulation, but God uses us as the vehicle He has ordained to get the saving message of the Word to those who are lost. Churches have a very real danger of becoming selfish and introverted when they don’t spread the message of Christ to others. We do not go and take a message that has been adapted to better fit the culture or one that will draw a larger crowd at church on Sunday. We take a message that will clash with the thought process of fallen men but we bring it to folks in love and with authority.

5. Is this a church whose leaders are characterized by humility and integrity?

No Pastor is perfect, but you want to find church leaders that you can trust and whose example you can follow. We are given the list of Biblical qualifications for men who would be overseers in the local church in **1 Timothy 3** and **Titus 1**. The things listed in these passages are all about a man’s character. Leadership is first and foremost about character not charisma. We don’t see a list that requires men to be perfect but to be men of perfection. True leaders see themselves as the sinful men they are, understand they are not immune to sin, and try to be servants while maintaining the understanding of their accountability to Christ. These qualities are something that can be seen even by those who would oppose God’s leaders—for God has made it evident. (**1 Timothy 5:25**)

6. Is this a church where people strive to live by God’s Word?

Again, just like no pastor is perfect—no people are perfect either. In looking for a church it is important however to look for one that not only wants to believe rightly but also to live rightly. It is in the application of God’s truth that true growth and sanctification take place. This is what should be happening in the local church. Nothing is more detrimental than a church of people who say they love Christ but do not apply what He has taught. The church that pleases God is busy about the work of sanctification and becoming more like Christ—not just talking about it. (**James 1:22**)

7. Is this a church where I can find and cultivate Godly relationships?

We have said over and over that we need one another in the local church. The very word for fellowship speaks of “*shared participation*”. The church is to be the place where people enjoy the benefits of Godly relationships. It should be the environment for **Biblical fellowship, encouragement, and APPLICATION** of the Scripture. Every person needs to look at how much meaningful time **they put forth** to make this happen. Running for the exits at the last “Amen” doesn’t show a desire for cultivating meaningful relationships based on God’s Word, which is very important in church life.

8. Is this a church where members are challenged to serve?

According to the Scripture pastors are not to be the “*paid professionals*” who do the ministry, rather the people themselves (more specifically the saints) are to be “*equipped*” to do the work of the ministry. (**Ephesians 4:12**) This is for the purpose of the building up of the body of Christ. When it comes to our serving in the church we need to be careful that we do not become selfish and look only to serve where we feel it accommodates us. True service is meeting someone else’s genuine need. All church members should look for opportunities to meet needs rather than be upset if they aren’t “*servicing*” because they are not doing what **THEY** feel like.

9. Is this a church that is willing to kick me out?

This is one of the most ignored and ridiculed aspects of church life, but is so very important. When a person claims to be a Christian and lives in a way that contradicts that claim, a faithful church is responsible to begin the process of church discipline; this starts with calling them to repent, treating them like an unbeliever, and finally removing them from membership if they do not have an attitude of repentance. Many scriptures speak to this action of church discipline. Jesus addressed this Himself in **Matthew 18:15-20**. We also see it in (**1 Corinthians 5:4-5, 9-13, Titus 3:9-11**). Rather than being upset or “*offended*” over such treatment, true believers should be thankful that a church would care enough to discipline them if they are living in a way that does not honor Christ. This process is not to be done with a vindictive attitude but with a strong love for the erring brother or sister in hopes that they would repent and be restored to the body. Again we must remember this is also a part of the example to the world that the church gives out. Permitting sinful behavior and tolerating it for the sake of “*unity*” is not at all what God has commanded and it actually shows a lack of love and concern for someone. A church that will love you enough to put you out is a great blessing from God and will encourage not agitate a true believer who is desirous of living a Christ like life.

10. Is this a church I’m willing to join “as is” with enthusiasm and faith in God?

Just as you shouldn’t marry someone and plan to “change them into the person you want them to be”, you shouldn’t join a church with the same mindset. God doesn’t need any more “self-appointed” leaders. We all have our own sin to deal with and daily mortify, and you don’t need to appoint yourself to circumvent God’s leadership in the local church. Even God’s appointed leaders are sinful men (i.e. Peter), but they are the ones God has entrusted His Church to as shepherds. This is not to say we shouldn’t desire our church to grow and improve, but it starts with you assuming the role of obedience to God and His Word in your own life. As **Harris** say’s, “*Leave your gripes and complaints at the door. Those attitudes will only detract from your experience, limit your involvement, and weaken the church’s unity.*”

Church “*hopping*” or “*shopping*” is a big thing in today’s culture. Don’t be a “hopper or shopper”, but rather get involved with the right attitude to help edify and build up the local church God has led you to. We should ask the right questions of the local church, but ask them with the right attitude, an attitude of humility. Find a church that **TEACHES, VALUES, and LIVES** God’s Word. Remember that you will never find the **PERFECT** church until we are all glorified with our groom Christ Jesus.

6. HOW TO GET MORE FROM THE BEST DAY OF THE WEEK—THE LORD’S DAY

“On Sundays, Christians go to church. Everybody knows that. Church attendance may be slipping around the world, but for a good number of us it’s still something we do. It’s a habit—like sleeping, breathing...and all the other things we do without thinking. And I suppose that’s the problem. We could do it in our sleep. Some of us do.” (Josh Harris “**Stop Dating The Church, Chapter 6 –Rescuing Sunday- page 101**)

All of us have at some point had one of the following problems on Sunday morning: Woke up late, came to church sleepy and lazy, worshipped half hearted with distraction, occasionally listened, left early, remembered very little, and applied nothing.

For the Child of God “*The Lord’s Day*” is the best day of the week. Those few hours in a week of **168** have an irreplaceable, strategic, and lasting value. Why would you cheat yourself of such divine instruction and food necessary for living life to the full? Way back in the Old Testament God had set apart a day for spiritual reflection and renewal. (**Exodus 31:16-17**) This we understand was a law for the Jewish people, but we find then in the New Testament that God also ordained the “*First day of the week*” as a special day for His people. This was set down first and foremost by the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ on the first day of the week. This is why we like the early church call Sunday, “**The Lord’s Day**”.

The following are a few quotes from **Charles Spurgeon** in relation to The Lord’s Day:

“The Change which our Lord has made in the Sabbath is indicative of the change which He has made in our life. The Law say’s, ‘Work six days and then observe the seventh as the Sabbath.’ But under the gospel the arrangement is, ‘Rest on the first day before you have done a stroke of work. Just as the week begins, take your rest, and after that, in the strength derived from it, and from the grateful motives which arise out of that one blessed day of rest, give to the Lord the six days of the week.’ There is a change from law to gospel indicated in that very change. So let it be with you.”

“Sunday is our best day for business,” says somebody. Well then, so much more opportunity is there for you to make a greater sacrifice to prove your love for Jesus.”

“I believe that Sunday should be spent in recreation. You are dreadfully shocked, and well you may be. But what do I mean by ‘recreation’? It means creating us new. Oh, that everybody who talks about spending Sunday in recreation would come to be recreated, regenerated, renewed, refreshed, revived, and made to rejoice in God.”

Every day belongs to God. But Sunday is the Lord’s Day in a special way. From the very moment of that first “*Easter*” morning, the first day of the week was unique. We must learn to build our week around Sunday and not the other way around. (*The following are taken from Stop Dating The Church, Chapter 6 –Rescuing Sunday*)

1. Before the Meeting

Do we really need to prepare for Sunday? Don’t expect to get out of the Sunday service the best God has for you if you don’t come prepared. No one takes an important exam without studying and no believer should come to the corporate worship service of The Almighty God without spiritual preparation. Practically speaking, don’t go to bed in the middle of the night on Saturday and expect to come to church not rested. Lay things out the night before so you are not rushed in your physical preparation for The Lord’s Day service. Watching TV is NOT the way to prepare yourself for the worship of God and to hear the preaching of His Word. The following quote is from **John Piper** in regards to turning off the TV to prepare your heart to receive God’s Word:

*“It astonishes me how many Christians watch the same banal, empty, silly, trivial, titillating, suggestive, immodest TV shows that most unbelievers watch—and then wonder why their spiritual lives are weak and their worship experience is shallow with no intensity. If you really want to hear the Word of God the way He means to be heard in truth and joy and power, turn off the television on Saturday night and read something true and great and beautiful and pure and honorable and excellent and worthy of praise (**see Philippians 4:8**). Then watch your heart un-shrivel and begin to hunger for the Word of God. God means for His Word to be heard in “truth and joy and power,” but that requires a purposeful pursuit of personal holiness. **James 1:21** says, ‘Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the Word planted in you, which can save you.’”*

We must prepare our hearts before we come to worship God. (**Psalm 24:3-5**) We understand that it is Christ alone through His work on the cross that makes being clean before God more than a possibility but an attainable reality. Read the Word and Pray before you come to church and get your heart right and clean before God so that you may gain the fullest benefit from Him and His Word.

2. During the Meeting

When you walk into church think about what you are doing. You are not coming in to catch up on all the latest news—oops I meant gossip that you have not yet heard. You are not coming in to be “*entertained*” by the choir. You are not coming in to be part of an audience. You are part of a congregation that is standing before the **AUDIENCE OF ONE**. It doesn’t matter if you don’t have a good singing voice or if you like the style of the music for the day and it certainly doesn’t matter “*how you feel*”. Come clean and lift up your voice in praise of our great God. Then when the sermon begins, pay attention for this is the **MOST IMPORTANT** part of the service. This isn’t true because a “pastor” says so. It has nothing to do with a person or personality but it has everything to do with that the sermon from God’s appointed shepherd is the proclamation of **GOD’S** very **WORD**. You are not hearing information from a man but God is speaking to you through His Word. So Listen! Don’t be a passive observer catching a few words in between your glances around the room checking out the new folks in the other pew. Listen to this quote from **Donald Whitney** as he explains how listening to the preaching of the Word is in fact, worship:

“We normally think of worship as something we do, and since preaching is done by the preacher [and not us], many fail to think of preaching as worship. But listening to preaching is something you do, and it is an act of worship when you listen with an eager mind and responsive heart. The reason it is an act of worship is that you are listening to God speak [through His Word].”

God is speaking and we need to listen. And when we hear the truth we are according to Jesus obligated to respond to it. (**Luke 8:18**) Listen to this quote from **Harris**: “*As my pastor C.J. Mahaney has taught me, I will be held accountable for what I have heard regardless of whether it moved me emotionally. (If you’re brave, I encourage you to read that sentence again.) God’s truth is God’s truth. It doesn’t matter if it was delivered with pizzazz or introduced with a tearjerker illustration. If I have heard God’s truth, then I am called to obey it. Period.*”

Bring your Bible to church as well and take notes. You don’t need to write a book but write down things you can look at later and get pressed firmly into your mind. **Adrian Rogers** used to say that one should never study or read or listen to the Word of God without an ink pen in hand, and I agree.

3. After the Meeting

As the service closes now the time is right to apply the truths you have heard. Don’t let the Word be the proverbial “*water off the ducks back*”, but instead meditate and pray over the things you were taught and the things you have heard and then be diligent to put them into practice. (**James 1:22-25**) Just listening is not enough, even listening respectfully and attentively. According to the Word of God unless we put it into practice we are “**deceiving ourselves.**”

If you are truly Born-Again, you are part of “**The Church**”. What is your commitment to the “**local church**” look like? We are all as Paul says, “*earthen vessels*” or clay pots which contain this greatest and grandest of treasures. As we have recently studied in **1 Peter** we understand that we are God’s special people.

1 Peter 1:2-5 -“**...elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.**”

I pray you truly are His and that your desire is to love and serve Him through the local church. I close our study with one last quote from **Harris**: “*Charles Spurgeon once referred to the local church as ‘the dearest place on earth.’ You know, when I was a church dater I just wouldn’t have understood that sentiment. But now I do.*”