

The Importance of a Local Church

New Attitude 2002 conference

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This message by Mark Dever is made available to you through PDI Communications. It was recorded during the fourth main session at PDI's New Attitude 2002 conference. Mark serves as pastor of Capitol Hills Baptist Church in Washington, DC.

Well, I do appreciate this conference. I appreciate the opportunity to be here with you. We have gotten to hear great messages so far. The two yesterday from Josh on worldliness in very specific ways in the morning and in the evening devotion to God. And then the first one from C J on worldliness in 1 John two has concentrated a lot on God's calling us to be his special people, to be separated out. We want to think about that more carefully this morning and more thoroughly and specifically as we think about the importance of the local church. Let's pray together. All right? Let's pray.

Lord God, as we come into your presence we are aware that we in and of ourselves have no right to be in your presence. God, as we have sung this morning, our righteousness is only you. You provide it for us in Christ. We pray that you would give us tender hearts. We pray that your Spirit would speak clearly to us. Lord, you know where we are in our lives. You know each one of the decisions that is laying in front of us as we gather here. We pray that you would use this time this morning to help us consider seriously the way you mean us to live as your followers. Teach us, Lord, and bless our lives through this time of instruction we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Well, when I was asked to speak on the local church I was pleased to talk on that topic, though I am always surprised and impressed at the way this conference has commitment to this topic. I have to say as somebody who does speak at conferences from time to time, it is not a typical commitment that you find in a lot of Christian conferences. But here, knowing Josh as I do and his commitment to the local church that we have heard about some in C J, you find that commitment running deep and strong and throughout all the pastors. I am sure you have seen it in your family groups reflected.

But there is a commitment to the fact that God doesn't call us to follow Christ alone. We are called to follow Christ together and with some particular people.

Now I wonder what you think of when you think of the church. That probably has a lot to do with where you come from. It has a lot to do with what your situation is back home.

A lot of people may think it is just an unnecessary, even unfortunate outgrowth of the ministry of Jesus. You know, is the church kind of some attempt at a local Jesus franchise? You know, Jesus was great, but then why do they go and try to market him and keep the thing going? You know, is it kind of like a religious McDonald's, a bunch of religious people trying to hold on after the great man is gone now degenerated into just a marketing and in bracelets and t-shirts and bumper stickers and other trinkets. That is what some people think about the church.

Honestly that is what some of you think about the church. I don't know which ones you are, but I am sure in a group this large that is the case.

Certainly the age that we live in and the country that we live in is known for its individualism. That is, we are about ourselves. We are about what we see benefits us right now and immediately. So for us when we come to Christ and begin following him, the church can be a bit of a strange topic for us.

So I want to lovingly argue with you for a little while this morning about why you should build your life around a good local church. All right?

We will do this by considering four particular questions. Now were you to come to my church you would find I don't speak quite like this. I usually take a passage of Scripture and expound it, but here I have been asked to address a topic. We will turn to Scripture, but we will go to various passages of Scripture. You can note those down if you are taking notes. But let me tell you the four questions that I want us to think about, all right?

Number one: What is a church? Let's try to think about that first biblically. What is a church?

Second: Why is church involvement so important?

Third: Why should I join a church?

And, fourth: What does church membership involve?

So we are kind of looking at the same thing, but a little bit more intensely each time and meditating on it, trying to see if the Lord would not put it into our lives.

We have to begin more with the sort of homework part of it in the first question. What is a church?

Now, again, it is interesting how you might answer that. One popular Christian writer has written that church is a collective noun. We know about collective nouns. One sheep is a

sheep, but a whole gang of sheep is called a flock. One cow is a cow, but a whole bunch of cows is a herd. One goose is a goose, but a whole band of marauding geese is called a gaggle. So it is with church. One Christian is a Christian, but a number of Christians gathered together is called a church.

Well, what do you think? Well, kind of. You know, you have got have more than one person, I guess, to have a church. That is true. But when you meet three friends in some local store and they are all Christians, are you all of the sudden in church? Is that what a church is? Or is there something more to it when we look at it biblically.

When we think of church some people think of a Sunday morning meeting. Other people think of a building. Some people think of a denomination. Sometimes people mean all Christians everywhere.

Now, when we get to that, we have gotten to a meaning we find in Scripture, at least a couple of times. Maybe once in Matthew 16, maybe once in Ephesians. It does seem the word “church” means all Christians everywhere. But do you know almost every time the word “church” occurs in the New Testament it means a particular local gathering of Christians. The word in the original language is even very interesting. It is the word εκκλησια (ek-klay-see'-ah). So in Spanish, you know, [?]. I mean we get this word εκκλησια (ek-klay-see'-ah). It is from words meaning καλεω (kal-eh'-o) to call and εκ (ek), out, to call out, to be an assembly of those people who have been called out. That is what a church is. The church is an assembly of those people who have been, as we have been thinking about from 1 John two, from Galatians. It is called out. That is fundamentally what a church is.

So the church is the body of those people who have been called out from the world by God's grace and called together to serve him by glorifying him in a local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in faith and fellowship of the gospel.

Now we Christians collectively are called together for a purpose. It is not just there for some random reason, but we are there very deliberately. God calls us to be together in order to do what. Why do you think he calls us together? He calls us together to reflect his glory. He calls us together to reflect his character. That is why he doesn't just leave us alone. This church is what the God has set up to be the theater, if you will, of displaying his character.

You know, it is very easy for somebody to say, “Oh, I love everybody,” but when you start talking about a particular person, ok, but do you love, you know, Tom, you know? Do you love her? Do you love that group over there? Well, then it gets much more difficult when you start getting specific.

Well, friends it is the same way. If you get sort of high on Jesus at a conference, that is a wonderful thing kind of, maybe, probably, hope so. But then when you go back home how do you feel about loving the particular group of people that call themselves Christians that meet in that place? That is where the rubber really hits the road. That is

where you find out really maybe more about yourself than you do about them. That is what a church is.

Theologians have historically referred to marks of the church or what distinguishes the church. They have mentioned three things and I think it is biblical: the right preaching of the Word, the right administration of baptism and the Lord's supper and the right practice of discipline. If you have ever wondered, "Well, does the college fellowship that I am in or does my Bible study at church?"

Well, I would encourage you to look to those things. Christians down the ages have found those very helpful markers. The church in the New Testament provides the teaching of the Word by people who are gifted by God's Spirit to teach the Word, the right preaching of the Word.

The church also delineates, distinguishes Christians from non Christians by baptism and then the Lord's supper. It shows very clearly. These are people who are following Jesus. These are people who at least haven't told us that they are. They haven't given evidence of it, those outside, but those in are those who claim to be following Christ.

And then right discipline is... and some of these people who claim that they are start acting and living like they are not. Then we take it upon ourselves to separate them out so as not to confuse the gospel to make the gospel clear.

Now that is what the church seems to be in the New Testament.

These are hard things for us to hear, but we need to hear all of them. That right preaching is crucial. It is the center. It is the fount of the church. The right teaching of the Word of God. The most important thing you can look for in a good local church is the right preaching of the Word of God.

Paul says in Romans 10 that faith comes by hearing the message of Christ, by hearing the Word of God. If you become a Christian, it is because you hear God's Word. God's Spirit takes it and gives you live through it. That is the center and fount.

Baptism and the Lord's supper are more symbolic boundaries. Baptism, a kind of one time boundary. These are people who have identified with Christ. The Lord's supper, these are people who are continuing. It is like an every 10 minutes for a photograph. You know, every time you have the Lord's supper at your church it is a picture. These are the people who claim and give evidence that they are following Christ. This is a picture of Christ's body.

And then the discipline is the patrolling, if you will, the working in our own hearts and lives and those of our brothers and sisters that we have agreed to work with to make sure that we are repenting for our sins and trusting in Christ actively.

The one thing I think you might need help in distinguishing the church from is a kind of campus fellowship that some of you who are college students here might be involved with, because I get asked this question a lot.

Let me just make the distinction simple and I will deal with this briefly. You are an audience. You are not a congregation. Right? You paid to get here. You drove to get here. You can't be here every Sunday. I can't meet with you every week. We can't sort of live our lives together as Christians. It is a great thing. It is a wonderful thing, but this is a conference. This is not a congregation. This is not a church in that sense.

Well, it is the same way with your campus ministry. Your campus ministry, your campus fellowship you might be involved with doesn't really claim to do all those things. It doesn't claim to be able to give all the teaching from God's Word to all of the people there. It has a much more limited mission. You know, it is there to reach students for Christ. Basically that is usually the genesis of campus fellowships like Campus Crusade or InterVarsity. It is there to reach students for Christ. It is not there to reach the person who lives across the street. I mean, they are not opposed to you doing it. But that is not what they are trying to do. Their meetings are structured for students. It is a subset of the church. It is a particular missionary arm of the church associated together for a particular end. It is the same way with denominations, with publishing houses, with seminaries. Great things, none of them are churches. All of them are really useful things that some of us may work on with our time in order to encourage Christians and serve churches to be able to do what they need to do. But none of those things bears the unique responsibility that a church bears.

So just to compare a church and, say, your campus fellowship. One is biblically mandated, the church. The campus fellowship isn't. The Lord may want you to be involved in one. Don't misunderstand me. But Jesus nowhere promised the gates of hell shall not prevail against my campus fellowship. That is just not there. But there is his promise about the church. You can know his church will succeed because he is behind it.

One is biblically mandated, the other is not. One is, therefore, normal for the Christian life. The other may be sometimes when you are in a setting, maybe in college, maybe in a workplace where you start a Bible study together to reach other people who are in your profession who are accountants, who are nurses, who are doctors. One is geographically and even culturally specific. We are just involve din this campus. We are just trying to reach these people. The other, hey, we are trying to reach everybody who lives in this neighborhood, everybody who lives in this town, everybody who lives in this city or who we want to reach with the gospel. One is useful if it fulfills its purpose. The other will fulfill its purpose. Praise God. One is useful if it fulfills its purpose. The campus ministry, if it does a good job, it can be really used well. The church, praise God, the church will fulfill its purpose because God has determined it will be. So at its best a college Christian fellowship is the missionary force of the Christian church or a number of local churches in that college.

That is all I am going to say about that. That is the definition of a church. Feel free to talk to me afterwards more specifically if you have questions or find me around the conference. I will be here, Lord willing, the rest of the time so we can talk about it.

But now I want to move on. That is from the instructional point. Now I want to push you a bit more with these other three questions and more give you some godly biblical advice that sadly you don't hear that much these days.

The second question: Why is the church and church involvement so important? Why does it matter so much?

And the basic answer is because the church is God's idea. This is God's plan. When you start reading the Bible and becoming familiar with God's Word, you find that God has always worked corporately. It is amazing. You know, sometimes we joke around and we say, "Well, you know, he made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, you know."

Well, that is true. Yes. Fine cultural analysis there. But perhaps even more significant is the fact that he didn't just make Adam. From the very beginning God intended to show his character by people interacting with each other. So he made Adam and Eve and he made them to have children so there would be families. And when he called, he called Abraham and he called Abraham's family and his line. And so in the Old Testament we read about the nation of Israel and in the New Testament we see Jesus establishes the church. God in the Scriptures has never been simply about me and Jesus, about my own personal intense devotion to Jesus. That is good. That is important. That is fundamental, but that is in no way sufficient. God has always been about your devotion to Christ being part of a corporate devotion to Christ that creates a society, a community that reflects his own character and his own nature.

You find that not just in the Old Testament with this idea of Israel, but Jesus very clearly envisioned his followers being in a church. If you look at Matthew 18... you can't turn there, you don't need to, but if you look at Matthew 18 you will find he tells you what to do if someone sins against you. And you will see the final step is if there is no repentance, what are you supposed to do? You are supposed to take it to the... and then he uses that word *ἐκκλησία* (ek-klay-see'-ah). Take it to the church. Now he can't mean the universal church. What on earth would that mean? You know, take it to every Christian in the whole world everywhere. No, of course, he doesn't mean that. What does he mean? It means Jesus when he was on earth teaching his disciples intended that part of following him is that you would be in a local church and a kind of church where you could take that kind of thing, too, to be dealt with. You need to think about that.

If you want to follow Jesus, which I hope you do, this is part of what it means. This is part of what our Lord himself understood us to do, to be his followers.

In fact, this is the very way, it seems, that Christ intends to have a lasting witness to himself. In some ways I came to know the Lord because of a church, because of a

collection of people in a specific place who were loving Christ, serving him and sharing the gospel.

In John 13:35 Jesus himself said this is how the world will know that you are my disciples. Do you remember? By the love that you have for them. No, he didn't say that. By the cups of cold water you give out in his name? No, he doesn't say that. Well, how does he say the world will know that you are my disciples? By the love that you have for one another. Isn't that amazing? Our corporate testimony is supposed to be that.

Now in one sense that can just be with every Christian all the time. So I hope that you have been moved if you are here not as a Christian or if you are here as a young Christian, I hope you have moved by the love that you see among Christians here and this conference for one another. I think that is important. But I can tell you particularly as a pastor of a local church, that love really gets worked out with a specific group of people that you see more often than just once a year and sometimes under less than optimal circumstances. That is when you really begin to see the kind of love that Christ has shown to us, shown to one another and people begin to notice that and see that when they see a church, a community that is characterized by that.

When you go through the rest of the New Testament you see that it envisions Christians being in churches. One of the clearest places in this is Acts chapter nine, which, the first time I thought of it this way just really struck me.

Do you know what famous story is in Acts nine? Somebody yell it out. Paul's conversion.

Remember Saul, as he was called then, was going to Damascus to persecute Christians there. He was not yet a Christian. This guy who was going to end up writing half the New Testament was not a Christian yet. So he was going there to persecute, literally, these Christians. Well, while he is on the way there, the resurrected Jesus appears to him and he knocks him to the ground. Just it seems we don't really know how, just, I guess, by the very appearance of Jesus he knocks him to the ground. And if you have read this story you probably remember. What does Jesus say?

He says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute..." And then he doesn't say "this bunch of Christians up in Damascus." And he doesn't even say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute the church?" He says, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

He so identifies himself with his people, with the church, with that local church there in Damascus that Jesus speaking to Saul could say, "Me," and mean these Christians.

Friends, the local church is Jesus' idea. Paul gets his strong theology throughout his letters of the body of Christ as the Church not from some abstract reflection or lovely image he thought of, from his first encounter with Christ. Christ called the Church, "Me." That is why Paul calls the Church the body of Christ. He understands how closely Jesus identifies with his Church.

If you are here thinking that you are a Christian, sporting a kind of Christianity that doesn't know an allegiance to a church, I do just want to warn you to think. Consider carefully what you mean when you say that you are a Christian, that you love Christ when you don't give yourself for the very church that he bought with his own blood as it says in Acts 20:28.

If you look through the New Testament, again and again, it presumes that we are part of churches. The letter to James is a good example. There are some particular questions being worked out. He says in James two that you shouldn't show favoritism among yourselves. As believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, you should not show favoritism in James chapter two. And he talks about their meetings together and what they are like. He assumes the character of Christ is going to be lived out in their meetings, that even the way they treat one another will, in itself, display something of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ.

Friends, the New Testament assumes that you will be a member of a local church if you are following Jesus.

Now that is why church involvement is so important. That is why it matters so much.

Let me get a little bit more specific still. Let me talk to you about why you should join a good local church if you have not done that. I want to give you five reasons why you should join a good local church if you have not done so.

First, join a church for non Christians. Join a church for non Christians. I don't mean a church composed of non Christians, though sadly there are many of those. No, I mean a church that will show what the gospel is, that will show and teach and live out what it means to be a Christian and communicate that and communicate what it doesn't mean. I mean, we have to be honest. Churches don't have very good reputations today. A lot of you who might be being resistant to this message have some really good reasons why you are resistant.

I remember, you know, Josh mentioned I used to live in England. When I came back to the States after living over there for almost seven years my mother wanted me to meet a relative and we ... that I hadn't seen in a long time. So we met up in this one place and the conversation was going along swimmingly until my mother mentioned that I was ... had come back to America to be a pastor of a local church at which point the conversation just kind of evaporated. You know and this... the relative she looked very nervous and kind of uncomfortable all of the sudden and starts... her coffee became a lot more interesting at that point, you know, she looks down and starts staring at it.

She said, "Oh, the local church, huh?" She said, "Well, I don't really have much time for organized religion."

I said, "Really?"

She said, “Yeah.” She said, “I just... I think it is a pit of vipers.”

I said, “Really?”

She said, “Yeah.”

I said, “And do you think the world outside is really so much better?”

She said, “Well, no, I guess not.” She said, “I guess they are vipers, too.” She said, “But, you know, at least they know they are vipers.”

And I said, “Well, you know, you might be surprised how much I agree with you.” I said, “I am a Christian, you know, so I know a bit of what it is like to not be a Christian and to be a Christian and I know that the world outside is a pit of vipers. I have no doubt about that. But I also know that the church is a pit of vipers, too. I know that. I would never be involved with a church which didn't know that. I think the only difference is where we disagree is I don't think those outside know it. And I think the ones in the church do know it and that is why we are there.” I said, “And you know what? If you ever want to, you are welcome to slither on in any time. You know? We have got room, you know?”

People tell you there are hypocrites in the church. Well, I hope so. Where else should we have them? Let's bring them in. All the sinners are welcome here, you know, as long as we repent, as long as we throw ourselves on the grace of God in Christ, see his Holy Spirit working in us. We have to know that our churches are representing the gospel for good or for ill.

My friend, if you call yourself a Christian, you are to be part of the solution. You are to be part of the solution, you are to be part of that local church being a good representative of the gospel to the people who know that church in your community. Join a church in order to clarify what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

You can, if you are taking notes on this, you can put down 1 Corinthians five. That is one place where Paul writes to the Corinthian church saying, “Throw this guy who is sleeping with his dad's probably second wife and a member of your church, throw him out.”

People need to know Christians don't live like that. They don't do that or if they did that they repent. And this guy is doing it openly and you, Paul says, you seem to be proud. That confuses the world about what the good news of Jesus is. We join churches to clarify, to make the picture crisp, to make the image sharp of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Join a church for non Christian's sake, for the sake of the clarity of the gospel.

That is number one of these five reasons. Number two, join a church of weaker Christians. What I mean by that is set a good example. Don't be a kind of lone ranger

Christian. You will not make it. You should do all the stuff Josh was talking about last night of sowing to the spiritual, ok? You should do that. You should do all of the stuff he was talking about yesterday about not renting the kind of PG-13 movies that some people rent. You know, you should... don't do that, you know? You should definitely do all of the things that C J was talking about on the first night, two nights ago about not being worldly, not loving the things of this world. All of those things. But, friends, I am just telling you. According to the New Testament, I think you are going to have a very hard time doing that if you try to do that alone. You need to do that with others and particularly if you have a vision for just the obedience that we have seen taught and the new life that we have seen evidenced here in the teaching and in this conference so far, you need to share that with other Christians. You need to be an example of that for them and for you. You need to care for those Christians that may seem to be weaker, who need your help. And for your own sake you need to do that.

You know, you could be one of those weak Christians.

Sometimes I have begun talks on college campuses with this sentence.

“If you are not a member of the church you regularly attend, you may well be going to hell.”

That generally gets the attention.

Now, I don't mean of a second that you literally have to have a name on a card in a church somewhere to go to heaven. No, 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 like the local churches there to verify or falsify our claims.

That guy in 1 Corinthians five who was sleeping with his father's wife, he thought of himself as a Christian. He came along regularly. He may have been chairman of some committee. He may have helped to serve communion. He may have been a worship leader.

I had one friend ask me a couple of years ago what I thought about this case. He is a pastor of a church and he had this guy in his church who was leading worship, but, you know, he also owned a pornographic book store and he was wondering what I thought about that.

Well, I thought it was a bad idea. How tragic is that? That kind of confusion. You don't even think of how these things work together.

Friends, we clarify the gospel. That guy my friend was talking about needed to have the gospel clarified in his own life, what it meant to follow Christ. The man in 1 Corinthians five did and do you know what? Here is the real kicker. You may need to have it clarified. I don't care how much you cry during the singing or the preaching. If you do

not live a life marked by love toward others, this book of God has no encouragement for you to think you are a Christian, none.

How do you do that? How do you obey Peter's instruction 1 Peter two to make your calling and election sure? Well, you do it by getting involved with, committed to joining a local church. That is practically how you do it. Seeing the character of Christ worked out in your life. Join a church for weaker Christians and realize that you may be one of those weaker Christians.

Third reason to join a church. I could give you a lot more. I am just going to give you a third reason. Join a church for stronger Christians. Let's be honest. You have come, some of you, all the way across the country, some of you even further to come to this conference. Therefore, we might conclude privately in our own hearts that we are those stronger Christians, right? All the other people are just sort of laying about back home doing whatever they do with their vacation. But we have sacrificed our time, our vacation time and our money in order to come to Louisville, Kentucky, you know, not known as a Mecca of tourism in January. No why is this going on?

Well, obviously it... I don't want to say it publicly, but, of course, it does reflect positively on my own spiritual state. I must be something of a rather considerable Christian if I have done this. I won't say that to people, but it is... God knows the truth.

Now, friend, if that portrayal is anywhere similar to your heart let me just encourage you to join a local church. That will take care of any perception you have of spiritual strength really quickly.

I had a good friend when I was living in England who was a wonderful Christian brother. I mean, I could only hope to be as holy, as evangelistic, as knowledgeable, as servant hearted as this brother is. He is a wonderful brother in Christ. He was brought up the child of para church missionaries. By para church I just mean not a local church, but a kind of evangelistic organization. And he had come to Cambridge in part to do a degree, but in part to evangelize students. Praise God, wonderful thing.

And he wanted to kind of get to know me and sort of work together with me and I... we became good friends. And I noticed that he would come to the same church that I was a member of, but he would turn up like after all the singing, just in time of the sermon. And I asked him one day.

I said, "Well, why have you always just come right at the sermon? Why don't you come earlier for the singing and all?"

He said, "Well, I don't really like the singing."

I said, "Ok."

He said, "I like the sermons."

I said, “Ok.” I said, “Well, have you ever thought of joining the church to be a member?”

And he looked at me like I was from Mars. He said, “Why would I join the church? You know, why would I want to be a member of the church? I don’t really have a lot in common with those people in some ways. I think honestly it would just take up my time and it would probably just kind of slow me down, you know, from what I want to do.”

Now, you understand. What he wanted to do was not pub crawl. He was not wanting to do bad things. He was wanting to evangelize, memorize Scripture, study. But I thought that was so interesting and so typical and so tragic that such a godly man in many ways as this would say that.

And I was deeply moved when he said it and I had to kind of control myself. We were walking along. I said, “Well, you know, you may want to join a church and link arms with these other people, not because they will help to... because they will speed you up, but maybe it is God’s plan that even if it slows you down a little bit, you will help to speed them up.”

Did you ever think maybe that is what God is about? He is not just about you. He is not just about you like your spiritual life is some kind of body building, you know, like the [?] of your quiet times or the biceps of your Scripture memory just displaying your spiritual virtue for the world. No, he wants you to work. He has saved you in order to be a member of a family to give your time and effort and life and love on these people who may well slow you down, but you may well speed them up. And that may really be the kind of speed that he is interested in finally anyway, that kind of life in the church where your life is being poured out in love for other people. That may be what it really means to be a stronger Christian, having that ability to love that Jesus himself said in John 13:35 would be how the world knows that we are his disciples, by the love that we have for one another.

Also in 1 John three, if you are writing down Scripture references, 1 John three verses 14 to 16.

“We know that we have passed from death to life...”¹

You remember C J two nights ago told us that 1 John was written to tell us how to have assurance of our salvation and how to falsify, that is show that it is not true, an assurance we have that is not true, to expose a false assurance.

1 John three verse 14.

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life

¹ 1 John 3:14.

in him. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.²

And then if you keep reading you get down in chapter four verse 20. John even says it very clearly like this.

“If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”³

That is 1 John 4:20. It is a good thing for you to meditate on. This is how you can know. Do you want to know that this new life you feel you have is real? I have got a great idea. I get it from the Bible. 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 will find out—I think others will, too—whether or not you love God. The truth will show itself.

That won’t save you. It is only the death of Christ that saves you. He alone is our righteousness, but if he really is our righteousness, if we really do love him whom we have not seen, it will show itself by us loving those that we do see and that we are committed to regularly.

Let me give you a fourth reason to join a church. Join a church for the sake of church leaders. This is brief, practical. Friends, we have to know who is committed to us. If I am supposed to be an under shepherd of the flock of Christ, I need to know who I am caring for. You know, we will have hundreds of people turn up at our church on Sunday morning and, you know, I don’t know who one or 200 of them are. I shake their hands. Maybe I recognize that face, but how involved can I be in being a blessing to them that God calls me to be as a pastor if they haven’t committed themselves to say, “Mark, look. I am here. I am praying regularly. I am giving regularly. I am attending regularly. I am with you in ministry here.”

If they haven’t done that, they can hear my sermons. That is about it. There is not much I can do. Join a church for church leaders. Try to think of the church differently. Realize that if you are a Christian you are not called to be merely a consumer, but you are called to be a provider.

When you turn up at your church 15 minutes late, do you know what that says? I am here and I am here about you all serving me. Did you ever think about that? It is because there are some brothers and sisters who turn up there an hour and a half before and turn the heat on, you know, and some others who maybe set the chairs out, some others who get this ready and that ready and the teaching has been prepared through the week, all kinds of people doing things to provide for you. Well, I am telling you, that is not just for the really hyper spiritual few. That is supposed to be typical of every Christian.

² 1 John 3:14-16.

³ 1 John 4:20.

Now I am not telling you. Don't get worried. If you have just become a Christian this weekend, I am not telling you you need to go back and start preaching next week. I am not saying that. But I am saying even you, very young Christian brother or sister, you are to immediately become a consumer. I mean, not a consumer, sorry. You are supposed to immediately... don't have an outtake of that and put that on [?] thing. That wouldn't be good.

You want to be a consumer.

You are to be a provider, not just a consumer. You are to be a provider. If you are a member of that congregation it is your responsibility to hold out the Word of life to others. It is not just the responsibility of the pastors that serve you or of the other people around the congregation that serve you in so many ways. It is your responsibility. You, my friend, if the Holy Spirit of God has given you new life it is your glorious privilege and responsibility to be one of the providers of ministry at that place. I hope you understand that.

I had one brother who I feel is quite mature in some ways ask me recently what he could do to grow as a Christian. And I said... I just gave him a couple of particular ways to be more involved at our local church. You know, he is a godly guy. I don't know of any outstanding sin he has rolling around in his life, but he will have to involve other people in his life more deliberately and regularly if there is going to be the kind of growth in grace that is going to show Christ's likeness, that is going to mature him as a Christian. Of the way to maturity is by you becoming one of those providers. Even if it is in the simplest, most humble ways that you can find, Christ loves humble ways to serve. It is so like him.

Friends, in your local church, become a servant. Just turn up to the elders, to the church leaders and say, "What can I do to serve? I don't know much. I don't have much ability, but with whatever I can do that you name, I just want to do it."

The fifth reason to join a church: Join a church for God. It is his idea. Remember the thing we talked about from Acts nine. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

You must realize the church is not simply the idea of a union of pastors that need jobs. So come on. Let's come up with the church. That is a good idea and then they will stand around and pass for talking to them.

Oh, friend, if you have tried to grow at all as a Christian you realize you are not called to live this Christian life alone. You are not. God has made a most wonderful provision for you in the church. There is a richness of knowing God and intimacy with God that you find in these committed relationships with one another and every one of you that are in them and have them know what I mean, that is a foretaste of heaven. It is a reflection of God's own love and character and grace. And it is exactly that that he means us to have as we minister to him, as we minister to his people.

Finally, the most practical thing. What does church membership involve? It is one thing to say you have joined a church officially and however you do that in your local church, ok, let's say you do that. Ok, but what should that really look like?

Well, it should help to make credible your claim to be a Christian by doing all the things that you should then be doing, regularly attending, you know, certainly be baptized. You have got to be baptized. Joining it, listening to the preaching regularly, worshiping there, witnessing, serving as I have just exhorted you to do even giving, you know, taking communion regularly, fellowshiping with people. Praying with them, learning from them even teaching in the church. I mean, all of these things should be aspects of our Christian life.

You need to think of your commitment to your local church as one of the most basic and important aspects of your Christian life because, you know, if you find a good one, it will help to put right everything else that is wrong with your Christian life.

You know, Christian books are great and I hope you buy them and read them. They have got wonderful books here. I will tell you two good books on the church, the one that I wrote called *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, useful. I have a chapter on membership even if you want to think about this some more and go, oh, did Mark really get this from the Bible? Get a copy of that book and read it. Membership. You will find copies in the bookstore. Another one that I don't think is in the bookstore, but some other books by this guy are is Don Whitney's book *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church*. It is a great book on how your Christian life is meant by God to be art of the life of a local church. So *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, *Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* both of those would be good books for you to get and read to think of more about this. But, you know, even if you have got good books what God will use to address those areas that you are kind of struggling with or falling down on or not quite getting right, he will use the church. If you are in a good local church, brother or sister, they will address those things. They will lovingly encourage you when you are down. They will instruct you throughout. They will challenge you when you are beginning to go wrong and they will rebuke you if you are in sin. That is what all of us need if we are here as Christians.

Let me just give you four simple direct points that you might want to consider about building your life around the local church, all right, four, simple, direct, practical things, particularly for people in your age group.

Number one, think about how you pursue your education. You realize—and I know I am standing here with this guy with all these degrees—but you realize that education in our culture has become an idol. We give unthinking allegiance to the idea that it must always be good to get further education.

All right, well let me ask you a question. What if that further education takes you away from a good church? Ooh, that is hard. Ok, well, but, you know, this education is just a few years. You know, ok, how dumb are you? I mean, how long does it take you to sin?

Do you usually premeditate for three or four years before you go and have a really good sin? No. Sin usually just sneaks over us and grabs us. I mean that is the nature of sin, right? It is scheming, prowling about as a lion, waiting for those whom it may devour, not like tantalizing tease and maybe ingest over four years. All right. We sin quickly.

Friends, you can't decide to be without good fellowship for years and expect it to have no impact on your relationship with Christ. You just can't do that. You should know yourself better than that> you know, you sin and you repent from sin not over year and five year increments. So if you are thinking about going someplace for college or for some graduate degree, well, think about how you can be immersed in a good local church.

I have got a daughter right now who will be thinking about college in a couple of years. One of the things we have talked about as part of her decision for college needs to be where we know there is a good church and she is on board with that. She thinks that is a good idea, too. She sees why it is important.

That might rule out some schools. It might encourage us to look at some that we hadn't otherwise, because we know about a good church. But I just have to say that in light of eternity, I think that is a more important consideration. And I would encourage you to think about that with some of the decisions that you have.

I have got another friend in our church right now who is considering law schools. He did very well on the LSAT. He could go to a lot of different places. He is deliberately choosing to go to a law school in our city so that he can be a member of our church and serve there because he is growing as a Christian there. He is prospering. And he knows that that relationship with God is more important for him, for his family, for everything that he cares most about in life than which law school he gets his degree from.

Friend, these are the kinds of things that you need to consider.

If you want to know more examples of this, ask in your family group. When you get into your family groups, raise this issue. You know, is my church more important than my education? All right. Is there some way that my obedience to God challenges what I have thought about my education? I am not telling all of you don't go to college or only go to the local community college. I am trying to put a category in your mind that may tell you going to a local college is better if you have got a good local church. Or it may tell you, yeah, I am going to go out there to college, but I know there is a good church. And I am warning you that if you go to a college where you do not know there is a good local church and, in fact, there isn't, you are doing something far more perilous and important and significant than you may realize right now. I am just pleading with you. You look at so many other things when you consider where you might go for a college degree or a graduate degree. Consider that. Look carefully at that. Talk to your pastors about that. Help them to pray with you and think with you about that.

Second thing parallel to that, what if you are not in college, what if you are in a job? All right. Second thing: consider about your job. It might be an important consideration for you to know what kind of job you should pursue by thinking about, well, where would that job take me? What would that job require of me? Will that job require me to be functionally unable to be part of a good local church?

Well, friend, think about that good, long and hard.

Am I being offered a promotion if I will only move over there? All right, well, now does your corporation always do that? Are they going to do that every two years? Will that have an implication in your Christian life? Just going to assume that there is going to be a good church wherever your corporation calls you to live?

Well, I can help to plant a good church. Ok, maybe. Maybe. You have a good opinion of yourself. Could be true. We need to do that. We need good churches planted. That is true. I am just saying consult with your pastors. Talk with your godly Christian friends that know you well, but know the foibles of your own heart and think carefully and pray before you just uncritically think, oh, more money, cool sports near there. I am going. There might be some more to think about if you are a Christian. It might be near the mountains. It might be near the beach, but is it near a good church? What matters most in your life?

We have heard these wonderful searching messages on worldliness. I am just trying to get practical here and look down at the very crevices of our life.

Ok, here is a big decision you have got coming up. Now what does it mean that you are a follower of Jesus for this decision?

Are there any practical implications for this? Think them through. Pray about them. Acknowledge that they are serious things. Talk to people about them.

One of the jobs that I was thinking about taking a few years ago before I came to this church in Washington was very attractive to me and my family. We loved where it was. We loved the kind of work. We like everything about it except we did not know of a good local church in that area.

Now I knew that there could be some exist that I didn't know of. I have not been granted omniscience. You know, it is true. You know, I don't know. There could be lots of good churches there. Yeah, but I wasn't playing with probabilities. I was playing with the one life that my family really would live.

Now do I want to take them to a place where from what I know I don't know of a good church when I need to keep growing as a Christian myself if I am to be a good husband and father where I want them to grow as Christians and therefore a church would be helpful for that, where a church would be so helpful for evangelism if I want to see people come to Christ. What do I integrate them into? I mean, in so many ways. And that

was one of the chief reasons that we decided not to go to that place, because though I liked the place in other ways and liked the job, I didn't know a good church and I knew for my own discipleship, my own evangelism, I wanted to go where there would be a good local church that I could live my Christian life with.

Third thing. So I talked about your education, your job, third thing. How do you think about where you live? Oh, man, we have a very transient park in our church. Younger people in their 20s. They graduate from... in their younger 20s, I mean early 20s, they graduate from college. They come to Washington to work on the hill of a year or two and then they move on. So it is kind of like a college town only even shorter duration of time. And I don't know how many times I give the advice, you know, before you move when you are going back to wherever, find a good church first and then decide where you are going to live. Don't go get an apartment and then hope you find a church. Why don't you... especially if it is a family buying a house. Please, especially going to a major metropolitan area. Find a good church.

Rent a place for a year if you need to first and then buy a house near enough where you can be involved in the life of that church very practically and easily because the more easy you make your involvement with a good local church, the more blessings you will be multiplied to yourself, your family, your friends, the more the Lord will be able to use you.

You know, let's say somebody is involved in the teaching team at Covenant Life Church and it is such a large church maybe there are people like this, but if they live in Annapolis it is going to be a lot harder for them to get over and do that than if they live in Gaithersburg, Maryland. It is just going to be a lot easier if you live near where that church is. So insofar as you have the opportunity yourself to decide where you will live at some point, I am just telling you. You might take into account how near you are to good schools for kids. You might take into account all kinds of other things. Take into account how near you are to a good local church. All right? Practical stuff here.

Number four, how you choose a spouse and care for your family.

Now when you want to begin to find a spouse, you need to ask yourself the question. Is this person a member of my church? If they are, good. Then there are other things you need to ask. If they are not, you do need to ask why. And the earlier you get the answer to that the less painful it will be for absolutely everybody. And this is pastor who is an old hand at this. I have gone through this a lot of times with young couples when they start to get to know each other and start to move toward marriage, you know, I always have ongoing situations like this where you have somebody who is clearly moving toward marriage with somebody else and when they are not members of the same church. You need to raise that issue. You need to raise it soon. You need to find out why. Because whatever issues are there are going to be important for that marriage.

If there are things that you like in you local church that you are attracted to, it is how you understand the Bible to teach you should follow Christ. If the person that you are asking

to be your other half, that you are asking to be one with for your whole life doesn't see some of those same things as important, doesn't care about some of those things, doesn't even agree with you on some of those things, then, friend, I am telling you. Stop being smitten. Those are significant. Those things are going to matter for your whole life. Care about whether this person is going to be your spouse is a member of the church and why. Are they involved there? Do you see them being fruitfully a provider of ministry, an exporter of love and concern and care for others? Do you see that typical of them?

A church will bring that out. And if it is not typical of them, you need to ask yourself some questions about what you are doing.

If you are already married and you have a family you need to realize that your local church affects hugely how you fulfill your responsibilities for your family. Are you involved with a church that is going to help you to be a better husband, a better father, a better wife, a better mother? Are you involved with a church that is going to teach you how to disciple your family, how to be a good and loving spouse? If you are not, that affects more than just you. And particularly if I can just speak to the men for a moment. It is your responsibility, my brothers who are married, it is your responsibility before God to make good decisions. Be wise. Lead well in this. Value a church where you are hearing God's Word preached, you are seeing it lived out and you are growing as a Christian. That will be a better gift to your family than an extra 20,000 dollars a year. That will be a better gift to your family than an extra bedroom on the house. That will be better gift to your family than being even closer to relatives. That is an internal blessing and God will work rewards in your life in that in ways that you can only begin to imagine through his goodness that you have already known.

Think about that. Think about all of these things. You need to build your life around a good local church, then. Life is wonderful and it is dangerous.

You know, Jesus talked about that in the parable of the sower. We were thinking about in 1 John two the worldliness that is there. In the parable of the sower in Mark four when Jesus is interpreting this parable to his disciples he says, “

Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.⁴

Oh, friend, do not think you are immune, that you would be the one Christian that would ever walk, who has no worries in this life, who is never deceived by wealth, who has no desire for other things. The Lord Jesus begs to differ. If you are human, he knows these are the things you face in life.

Now, then, how do you propose to face them? How do you propose to face them? He has a wonderful plan. His Spirit will incorporate you into a loving family of other Christians who have sins and weaknesses, too, but maybe by God's grace not exactly the

⁴ Mark 4:18-19.

same as yours. They can help you with these things and so you can endure in the Christian life.

Next weekend I am supposed to be speaking in Los Angeles at another conference, an interesting conference for Christian talk show hosts. Hmm. Yep. Some people still interview me, Josh.

I am just joking.

One of the things that... well, what they have asked me to speak about is what are the major challenges facing evangelical Christians today in America. And I am going to mention four, but the last one I am going to mention, what I think is the most important, is exactly what I am talking to you about this morning. Pastors have forgotten they have congregations. They think they have audiences. Christians have forgotten that their being a member of a local church is supposed to be fundamental to their discipleship to Jesus. They just entirely forgotten it and it has been lost. And I think this is the greatest challenge we as Christians face in America.

We can have all the think tanks we want on abortion coming out with all reasons we need to be concerned about it, but, friend, if you are a part of a church that will not take a stand over that and discipline someone over that, it is like having great big muscles and no skeleton. You just... you can't do anything. You know, we know these things are true, but you can't make something happen. You can't define something clearly and say a disciple of Jesus lives in faithfulness to his wife. A disciple of Jesus does not repeatedly, unrepentedly commit adultery. Friend, if you can't say that, you can't say the gospel. I don't care how many times you can recite a gospel plan that you have learned. Your church needs to do that. We, as Christians, need to be committed to getting the sheep out of the ravines and into the folds, to make it clear it is not safe to go wandering about by yourself out on the hills alone. You are meant to have an under shepherd. You are meant to be in a flock, in a fold. That is part of God's wonderful plan for your life. And we need to be clear on that. And we in our own hearts need to shepherd ourselves into those kinds of situations.

This is God's great cosmic plan.

One friend said, not too long ago, "We are one of God's chief pieces of evidence."

Paul's great concern in Ephesians four for the church is that the church manifests and displays the glory of God thus vindicating God's character against all the slander of demonic realms, the slander that God is not worth living for. God has entrusted to his church the glory of his own name. The circumstances of your life in that church are the God given occasion of your displaying and manifesting the attributes of God.

So, friend, the kind of worldliness that we have been warned about in Scripture should not typify our lives. God's glory is to be displayed in the church in some very practical ways. And they are wonderful.

I would just implore you. Any of you who haven't had a great experience in a local church, maybe because you have just become a Christian or maybe you have just never really found one that seems to be a place where you can grow spiritually. Please talk openly with some other people at this conference about it. I am sure that there you will find hundreds of people who have found churches that are not free of hypocrites. No, we are all sinners, but sinners who know they are saved by the grace of God. And it is finding people like that and committing yourself to meet regularly with them to fold your life into their lives that is the way Jesus intends you to follow him. And if you try to follow him without that, there is no promise that you will succeed. In fact, there is no promise that you have really even begun the journey.

Let's pray together.

Lord God, we pray that you would be moving by your Spirit in our hearts to teach us how we can be devoted to you, how we can bring you pleasure and glory and honor even by very practical ways of serving and loving those around us. Lord, give us a commitment to you that is in fleshed and incarnated and evident and visible to people around us in the way we love and serve them, in the way we covenant with them. Oh, God, we pray that your faithful love, that your graciousness, that your self givingness would be reflected in our lives. And we pray all this for your glory in Jesus' name. Amen.

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