

Stop Dating the Church by Joshua Harris, Multnomah Publishers, Sisters, OR, 2004 (30 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

Chapter 1 Can this relationship be saved?

1. Few Adults Attend Church Regularly

According to pollster George Barna, while the adult population in the United States increased by 15 percent during the nineties, the number of adults who either didn't attend church or only went on major holidays increased by 92 percent! [Page 16]

2. The Good News is Simple and Powerful

The Good News is simple and powerful Jesus Christ died to save us from our sins, and there is no other way of salvation (see John 14:6; Romans 5:8). To receive the free gift of salvation Jesus offers, we must turn from our sin in genuine repentance and trust in Him and His sacrificial death on our behalf (see 1 John 1:8-9; Romans 10:9; Ephesians 2:8-9). [Page 19]

3. Your Life Is Much Bigger

Paul David Tripp writes to Christians:

Your life is much bigger than a good job, an understanding spouse, and non-delinquent kids. It is bigger than beautiful gardens, nice vacations, and fashionable clothes. In reality, you are part of something immense, something that began before you were born and will continue after you die. God is rescuing fallen humanity, transporting them into his kingdom, and progressively shaping them into his likeness-and he wants you to be a part of it. [Page 20]

4. The Church Is God's Best Place

The church *community* is where we learn to love God and others; where we are strengthened and transformed by truth from the Word; where we're taught to pray, to worship, and to serve; where we can be most certain that we're investing our time and abilities for eternity; where we can grow in our roles as friends, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. The church is earth's single best place-God's specially *designed* place-to start over, to grow and to change for the glory of God. [Page 21]

Chapter 2 He still calls her His Bride

5. Imitators of God Loving the Church

As Christians we're called to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1). We're to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). Can there be any question that part of being like Jesus is to love what He loves? Christians often speak of wanting God's heart for the poor or the lost. And these are good desires. But shouldn't we also want

God's heart for the Church? If Jesus loves the Church, you and I should, too. It's that simple. [Page 31]

6. The Church Is What Heavenly Beings See

The heavenly beings look down at the Church, and they see an amazing *family*. The power of the gospel is not only changing individuals, but is also creating a whole new kind of humanity. In the midst of a strife-torn world—a world divided by gender, by race, by class, and by political ideology—the Church is a city set on a hill where people who once hated God and each other become God's children and members of *one* family.

This family expresses itself in practical, yet radical, ways.

Maureen, a white woman from my church, has a particular burden for racial reconciliation. She came of age in the tumultuous sixties, when her parents were heavily involved in the Civil Rights movement. She graduated from T. C. Williams High School—the school featured in the movie *Remember the Titans*. "The movie didn't come close to describing the horror of attending the school during that time in history," Maureen says. "I witnessed my share of incendiary racial conflict and bigotry. And because I made a point of befriending black students, people of both races senselessly persecuted me."

Maureen hoped in vain that relations would change. They didn't, and she encountered similar disappointments in college and at work. "'We shall overcome' was the popular chant," she says, "but it is unattainable without God."

Maureen became a Christian at age twenty-five. Not long after, she fell in love with her church. She's seen things happen there that can't take place anywhere else on earth. "I recognized that the Church was the only place where people of different races could find the forgiveness, acceptance, and trust necessary for deep friendship."

Today Maureen's best friend is Jamaican, and she sees her kids enjoying diverse friendships, too. "My son Michael's best friends from church come from three separate nations: Nigeria, Mexico, and the Philippines. None are Caucasian. They aren't even American! And amazingly, they all take this for granted. Race is of minor importance here. Our equal relationship to Christ makes us members of the same family."

Maureen has caught a glimpse of what heaven sees. [Pages 33-34]

7. In the Church One Sees the Whole Christian

Eric Lane describes what each of these pictures of the church says about our part in it: to belong to a living, functioning, serving, witnessing community.

"Put together," Lane continues, "you have the main functions of an individual Christian. Evidently we are meant to fulfill these not on our own but together in the church." [Pages 36-37]

8. True Unity in the Church

True unity is by the Spirit of God through faith in the gospel. Any form of unity that forsakes the central truths of the gospel-the substitutionary atonement of Christ, His resurrection, and justification by grace alone through faith alone-is no unity at all. All those who hold and cherish these core truths-the kind of truths that Paul described as of "first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3-5)-enjoy true unity. We're one in Christ, even if we exist on opposite sides of the world and worship in different traditions.

So you don't have to think of denominational differences as the enemy of unity, but as something that makes true unity more achievable. We agree to agree on things of first importance; we agree to respect disagreements on things of lesser importance.

"Denominations allow us to have organizational unity where we have full agreement," writes Richard Phillips, "and allow us to have spiritual unity with other denominations, since we are not forced to argue our way to perfect agreement but can accept our differences of opinion on secondary matters."

In the most important way, Jesus' prayer for unity has been answered. Because of the gospel, there is unity. Our job is to maintain it. How do we do this? By rejecting a denominational spirit in our attitude. By praying for God to work through other Christians even though they might worship differently than we do. By being humble about doctrinal differences of secondary importance. And by rejoicing when we hear of others being used to advance the gospel. [Pages 38-39]

9. The Bridegroom Makes His Bride Beautiful

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. [Pages 40-41]

Chapter 3 Why we really need the local church

10. Acting and Living Where We Are

Authors Brian Habig and Les Newsom, in *The Enduring Community*, make a helpful recommendation. Borrowing from the bumper sticker, they recommend that Christians should "Think globally, love locally." "All of us should concern ourselves with the challenges that face all people everywhere," they write. "But that concern cannot be

expressed everywhere. We demonstrate our concern by acting and living where we are." [Pages 46-47]

11. Living Differently than the World

If Christ did bring new life as He said, Christians should be living differently than non-Christians. Don't you agree? Of course, we don't always do this perfectly. But we should do everything possible to keep our light shining brightly in a dark world, on display for all to see. Part of the local church's job is to distinguish those who believe from those who don't-to show what it means to truly follow Christ. That's also why a local church must maintain certain uniquely Christian practices given us by Jesus.

Consider the distinctive ordinances a church is called to measure itself by:

Baptism shows those who have been saved and who have identified with the death and resurrection of Christ (see Matthew 28:19; Romans 6:4).

The Lord's Supper shows those who are continuing in fellowship with Christ and are remembering His death until His return (see Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25).

Discipline is the process that removes a person from the church who is acting and living in ways that contradict New Testament teaching for godly living. In order to most helpfully love the person in unrepentant sin, and so as not to confuse others as to what it means to be a Christian, church leadership lovingly puts them out of the church in the hope they'll be restored (see Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5:1-9).
[Page 48-49]

12. Stir One Another Up to Love and Good Works

My individual and direct relationship with God through Jesus is the greatest privilege and He is truly all I need-and yet God in His wisdom has created all of us to need others, too. Is this a contradiction? Not at all-for God has ordained that much of His grace flows to us through others. Says Pastor John Piper, "Sanctification is a community project."

In five verses in Hebrews 10, we see this two-fold path for the Christian clearly laid out. In verses 19-23, we're encouraged to draw close to God and relate to Him personally and intimately. We're invited to confidently "enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus"! It goes on to tell us to stand strong in our faith as believers, to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."

What more do we need?

Evidently we do need something more. And in verses 24-25, we're told what it is:

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. [Pages 50-51]

13. Christians Collectively Are God's Temple

God will manifest His presence in congregational worship in ways you can never know even in the most glorious secret worship. That's because you are not only a temple of God as an individual, but the Bible also says (and far more often) that Christians *collectively* are God's temple.... God manifests His presence in different ways to the "living stones" of His temple when they are gathered than He does to them when they are apart (see also Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5a). [Pages 53-54]

14. Love One Another

I don't care how much you cry during singing or preaching," Mark Dever states. "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." [Page 56]

15. Genuine Love for One Another

The book of 1 John was written to help people identify the evidence of true salvation in their lives. Do you know one of the primary signs we're told to look for? Genuine love for others (see 1 John 2:9-10).

"Do you want to know that your new life is real?" asks Mark Dever. "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 local church is the place where our new life in Christ is lived out and proven. "Joining a church won't save you," Dever states emphatically. "It's only the death of Christ that saves you. He alone is our righteousness. But if He really is our righteousness, if we really love He who we have not seen, it will show itself by us loving those that we do see." [Page 57]

Chapter 4 Join the club

16. God's Purpose Central to Our Lives

"If the church is central to God's purpose as seen in both history and the gospel, it must surely also be central to our lives. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously? How dare we push to the circumference what God has placed at the center? -John Stott [Pages 64-65]

17. Wherever you are, be all there.

Christian martyr Jim Elliott once said, "Wherever you are, be all there. Live to the hilt every situation you believe to be the will of God." [Page 68]

18. Belong to Each Other

Fellowship means belonging to each other. The New Testament is full of instruction on what it means for us to belong to each other. Have you ever noticed the "one another" commands in Scripture? Here's a sampling of what we're called to do in our relationships with other Christians. We're to:

- Love one another (John 13:34).
- Be devoted to one another (Romans 12:5).
- Honor one another (Romans 12:10).
- Rejoice with one another (Romans 12:15).
- Serve one another (Galatians 5:13).
- Carry one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2).
- Forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32).
- Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11).
- Offer hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9).
- Confess our sins to one another (James 5:16).
- Pray for one another (James 5:16). [Pages 75-76]

Chapter 5 Choosing your church

19. Doctrine and Loving Jesus Are Inseparable

These days, doctrine is often derided by people who view it as divisive and unnecessary to living the Christian life. Some people pride themselves on not being concerned with the specifics of what they believe about salvation, sin, the work of the Spirit, and other doctrinal issues. A friend who attended a large conference for youth workers told me that the host started the event by walking onstage and declaring, "It's not about doctrine! It's about Jesus!"

I consider this a sad and misleading statement. 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. [Page 86]

20. Meeting a Genuine Need

True service means giving cheerfully to meet someone else's genuine need- [Page 93]

21. Living Contrary to Those That Are Disciples

When a person who claims to be a Christian lives in a way that blatantly contradicts all that it means to be a disciple of Christ, a faithful church's responsibility is to begin the process of removing that person from membership and to treat him or her like an unbeliever in the hope that he or she will repent and ultimately be restored (see 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2). This is not harsh or abrupt. This practice is called church discipline and was instituted by Jesus (see Matthew 18). [Pages 93-94]

22. Restoration in Church Discipline

Remember that the purpose behind church discipline is first to restore. Four hundred years ago Menno Simons wrote: "We do not want to expel any, but rather to receive; not to amputate, but rather to heal; not to discard, but rather to win back; not to grieve, but rather to comfort; not to condemn, but rather to save." So church discipline is an expression of love. It's a way to try to restore a sinning brother as well as a way to protect the witness of the church. [Page 94]

Chapter 6 Rescuing Sunday

23. Sunday – a Privilege and a Benefit

Still, I think we're missing out on enormous personal and spiritual blessings when we treat Sunday like any other day. Because it isn't. The early church called it "the Lord's day." It's a day to "receive and embrace," as Matthew Henry said, "as a privilege and a benefit, not as a task and a drudgery." [Page 103]

24. Every Sunday – a Great Day

"We must never, therefore," writes J. I. Packer, "let our Sundays become mere routine engagements; in that attitude of mind, we shall trifle them away by a humdrum formality. Every Sunday is meant to be a great day, and we should approach it expectantly, in full awareness of this." [Page 104]

25. Turn Off the TV

Pastor John Piper believes that turning off the TV can be one of the best ways 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 the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you" (NIV). [Pages 106-107]

26. Gathering with the People of God

When you walk into church, remember the eternal significance of what you're joining. You are gathering with the people of God. You've come to worship God, and He will be present by His Holy Spirit.

As the meeting starts, remember that you're not here to be entertained. You're not part of an audience-you're part of a congregation. You stand before the Audience of One. What matters isn't whether you have a good voice, or whether you like the song or the style of music being played. What matters isn't even what you feel.

Worshipping with song is a chance to sing truth and express praise and gratefulness to God. So don't live by your feelings in this moment. Instead, focus your mind on the truth of what you sing and the Person to whom you're singing. God is observing and receiving your worship. In light of the wonderful, gracious God He is, give it your all. [Page 110]

27. Preaching Is God Addressing You

"When God's Word is being preached, you're not merely receiving information about God. God Himself is *addressing you* through His Word." –Jeff Purswell [Page 111]

28. Listening to preaching is a form of worship.

I wonder if you've ever considered this: *Listening to preaching is a form of worship.* Donald Whitney explains:

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]. [Pages 111-112]

29. Be on the Lookout for God

As the Sunday meeting comes to a close you'll be given a chance to express your worship to God through the way you love and encourage those around you. John Piper encourages his church to come "on the lookout for God and leave on the lookout for people."

Our faith and love for God is always expressed in our love for others. So try to find people who are new in your church or who don't appear to know others. A new Christian named Lynn dropped me a note: "I don't think people who have grown up going to church know how hard it is to walk into a new setting and feel comfortable," she said. She had visited several churches but left feeling lonely every time because no one took the time to greet her or get to know her.

My family loves to use Sundays whenever we can to invite people to our home. It's the perfect day for fellowship with others and a time when you can reflect together on what God spoke through the message. [Pages 113-114]

30. Sunday – the Market Day for the Soul

The Puritans called the Lord's Day the "market day for the soul." By that they meant that Sunday was a day for stocking up spiritually for the week ahead. Ask what you could do to "stock up" more successfully. Because no matter how you spend Sunday, Monday always shows up before you know it. [Page 115]