

LESSON 7

CHURCH

The Purpose of the Church in the Life of a Believer.

The purpose of this booklet is to challenge Christians to dedicate themselves to greater service to the Lord and to truly experience the joy of their salvation. The Lord promised this joy to all believers who live faithful and, subsequently, fruitful lives as a testimony to the grace of God. Many Christians outwardly appear to have little joy or satisfaction in their lives, and I believe one cause is a lack of understanding of Christ's program for believers, which is the local church. Often believers neglect the support that God provides through the fellowship, ministry and worship in a local, Bible believing church. My purpose is not to scold, but to show from God's word the importance of the local church in the life of the believer. If you are having trouble in this area, please read this material carefully to the end. It just might change your life.

Cooper P. Abrams, III
Romans 12:1 2, 1 Corinthians 16:13

What's So Important About Attending Church?

"What's so important about attending church?" is a valid question to ask Christians, because assembling believers together is a vital part of God's plan for them. However, the poor attendance at some church services shows that many do not understand this important teaching of the New Testament. Most Bible believing churches schedule at least three services a week; however, in most churches fewer than half the membership attends services regularly. Of the number who do attend services regularly, most of these only attend Sunday Morning services. Across America attendance on Sunday nights, and at midweek services, is poor. Because so few attend, many churches have abandoned all but their Sunday morning services.

Church attendance is the subject of a "tongue in cheek" joke: "Those that attend Sunday morning love the preacher. Those that attend

Sunday night love the church, and those that attend midweek services love the Lord!" I believe this statement correctly reflects the reason many people attend their church. Loving the preacher or the church will motivate some to attend the more popular services, but if one truly loves the Lord, he will actively take part in all that his church is doing.

Often, we hear reference to those in the churches today as "fair weather" Christians. These are the ones who will miss services when it rains, or if it will cause them some inconvenience. Sadly, if the full membership of most churches would show up on any given Sunday, in many churches, there would not be enough room in the building to seat them. This has become so commonplace that it has become acceptable behavior among the membership of many churches.

Is attending the regular scheduled service of one's church important? Is it necessary to attend each service? What's so important about attending church anyway?

God Commands Us to Not Forsake His Church

Is it important for you to attend the services of your church? The answer is obviously "yes" because God commands us to be faithful in attending the meetings of our church. Let's look at what the Bible says about assembling together, and how God views the church.

Note what God says in Hebrews 10:19-25. Carefully read the passage:

"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. "

In these verses the Lord is teaching us to do several things:

1. To "draw near with a true heart in the full assurance of faith (V22)."
2. "To hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering (V23)."
3. "To provoke unto love and to good works (V24)."
4. "To not forsake the assembling of ourselves together (V25)."
5. "To exhort one another (V25)."

The reason for doing these things is found in Verse 19. Because we have been saved by Christ's shed blood, we should boldly be seeking the closest possible relationship with Christ. Christ, by His death, has removed all barriers between Himself and the believer. Our High Priest is Jesus Christ our God and we have immediate and full access to God Himself!

Should not a believer want to have as close a fellowship with the Lord as possible? The Lord also wants this and gives us further instruction by telling us to draw near to Him with a full assurance of faith. God tells us to holdfast our profession of faith in Christ Jesus, without wavering. There is no reason for wavering or doubting because we are promised and assured total access to God.

These verses also tell us to encourage others to serve the Lord. The Lord uses a strong word in telling us to "provoke" others toward love and good works. "Provoke" is not a passive word, it means to actively "incite" others, which says we are to do this with great enthusiasm and zeal.

He then solemnly commands us, "do not forsake the assembling of ourselves together as some do, but to exhort one another." Note that a vital part of provoking others to be faithful to the Lord is found in attending church. "Exhort" means to urge someone to pursue some course of action. In other words, we are to be urging our fellow believers to be living faithful lives to the Lord.

In The New Testament, An Expanded Translation, Kenneth Wuest translates these verses:

". . .having had our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and having had our body washed with pure water. Let us constantly be holding fast our confession of the hope, doing so without wavering, for faithful is He who promised. And let us constantly be giving careful attention to one

another for the purpose of stimulating one another to divine and self sacrificial love and good works, not letting down on the assembling of ourselves together, even as the custom of certain is, but exhorting one another, and so much more as you are seeing the day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:22-25).

There can be no confusion on the matter: God is telling us to live godly and faithful lives and to urge or stimulate others to do the same. A vital part of living faithful lives is urging others also to live for the Lord. An essential part of doing this is not forsaking the meetings of the church. Christians who do not faithfully attend the services of their church will have a poor testimony among other believers and among the unsaved.

If you have tried to encourage someone to be faithful to the Lord and attend church services, but you are unfaithful in your attendance, your coaxing will have little effect. *"Do as I say, not as I do,"* carries little weight in persuading others. There is a rebuke in the words in verse 25, *"as the manner of some is."* The Lord is saying for us to be faithful, and not follow the example of the unfaithful.

So, a person who is not faithful to their church's services, according to the Bible, is disobeying the Lord. Those who choose not to attend are not only forsaking their fellow believers, but are forsaking the Lord. There will be little joy and satisfaction in the life of a believer who regularly lets other things interfere with their attendance. The way one attends church can be seen as a barometer of one's dedication and commitment to the Lord. It too, can show a lack of the inward peace and fellowship with the Lord. Truly, God is not going to bless the life of someone who is not faithfully being a testimony for Him.

Not attending regular church services shows a lack of concern for others. It is a selfish and inconsiderate act not to attend services. A church member is not showing love and concern for other believers when he avoids their company. A Christian cannot encourage his brothers and sisters in Christ without being in their presence. No one can lift up others by presenting them with a poor model to follow.

It should be clear that those who are not faithful to church services are setting an example, but it is a destructive one! They are not urging their brothers and sisters in Christ unto love and good works, but by their example are teaching others to be unfaithful. There is no neutral ground for the sinner saved by the Grace of God. When God saves a person,

they become a part of the family of God. There are no "benches" in God's plan for some believers to sit on and watch others "carrying the ball" for the Lord. Everyone who is saved is actively on God's team and their place of service is important to the work of the Lord.

Every child of God must be made to understand that to not do one's part in the church is, in truth, giving aid to our enemy Satan. If a Christian is not bringing honor to the Lord, who is the author of righteousness, he is honoring the Devil, who is the originator of disobedience and unrighteousness. The Christian who decides not to attend and support his church when they are meeting is helping Satan by being a stumbling block to the work of the Lord. Further, he is being a hindrance and a discouragement to others who are trying to be faithful.

What is the Effect of a Believer Being Unfaithful to Sunday School, Church Services and Prayer/Bible Study?

Those who choose to forsake assembling themselves together with their fellow Christians are, by example, teaching others that attending church is not important. Their actions say that attending the scheduled meetings of the church are not worth their time. If one thinks the activity worthwhile, they would be present. I once heard the story of a pastor who announced Sunday morning that in the evening service there would be a special vote on whether the church would continue holding that service in the future. Next Sunday morning in the church bulletin there was no mention of a Sunday evening service. When asked why, the pastor replied the church had voted to cancel the services. This greatly upset some people and a group of them got together and complained to the pastor that they had not voted to stop these services. The pastor then asked, "Were you here last Sunday night?" "No," they replied, each with a different excuse. "Oh, yes. You did vote," the pastor responded, "And you made your vote clear."

Think for a moment, what effect your unfaithfulness has on your family, other believers, new Christians, children and the youth of your church? Most of all, think about how this affects you spiritually.

Attending all of the services of your church takes personal sacrifice and commitment. It is not always the easiest thing to go to church. Scripture does not say that we are to serve and obey the Lord only if it is

convenient. We have conflicts at times, however Christ commands us to give him preeminence in our lives (Col. 2:18). Our first responsibility should be to Christ. The church is at the center of God's plan for a believer. You cannot be faithful to Christ and be unfaithful to your church. It has been said that the reason some people miss church is the reason we have church. (Think about this statement for a minute, and it will come to you!)

What Else Does the Bible Say About Attending Church?

Ephesians 5:25, states that Christ died for the church. To many, the word "church" is normally thought of as encompassing all believers, but it has a more narrow and specific meaning. The word translated church is the Greek word "ekklesia" (e la see' ah) meaning "a called out assembly, (concretely) a popular meeting, especially a religious congregation." The verse says that Christ gave Himself for the local assembly of believers. Christ did die for all believers of all ages, but that is not the emphasis here. This stresses that Christ is Head of the local church (Eph. 5:23) and He died for the local congregation! In most places in the New Testament the word "church" refers to a "local" body of believers. Thus, the Bible's emphasis, regarding the church, is that of a 'local' congregation. The local assembly of believers is important to Christ. Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, that He would ". . . establish His church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it." The word that Christ used is the same word in Ephesians 5:23, 25.

Christ set up the local church for believers. Acts 2:41 relates that, at Pentecost, three thousand people were saved and baptized. Verse 47 tells us that these saved people were added to the church daily. Again this is the same word, "ekklesia", meaning these were added "by God" to the local congregation there in Jerusalem.

You cannot separate a believer from the local church. God clearly and always presents a believer as a part of a local church. One example of this truth is found in giving gifts or talents to believers. The gifts or talents that God specially gives to believers are given for the local church. Nowhere does the Bible teach that believers are free agents, working outside the local church.

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul tells us that there is a diversity of gifts or talents given to believers to enable them to carry on the work of the Lord. He uses the word "body" in referring to the collective membership of believers. Many ignore the context of these verses and assume that Paul is speaking of a universal body of all living believers, but note that the context of this instruction is about gifts. In 1 Corinthians 11:18, Paul makes his introductory statement: "For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it." Paul is not addressing a "universal" church, but a local congregation of believers! His comments "when ye come together" means the local church. This highlights the importance of gifts or talents being used in one's local church. It shows that the local church is a body made up of many different believers who God has brought together and given special abilities to carry on the work the Lord has given to them collectively, as a church.

Further, note verse 22: *"What? have ye not houses to eat and to drink in? or despise ye the church of God, and shame them that have not? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I praise you not"* (1 Corinthians 11:22). In verse 33, he is again talking about when they come together. Clearly he is talking about the local gathering of believers, and he is calling them the "ekklesia", the church. Then in Chapter 12 Paul continues his instruction. There is no break in the thought or progress of his teaching. The chapter divisions, in the Bible, are not in the original Epistle. His thought continues without interruption.

Note that he summarizes his teaching by saying: *"And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues"* (1 Corinthians 12:28). Clearly Paul is talking about the local church and the local congregation of believers.

I belabor the point because it is vital for us to understand that Paul is saying that God's intention for believers, after they are saved, is to be part of a local church. Thus, the believer is not a free agent working within or without the local church at his discretion. The ability to serve the Lord and to carry out God's will for the individual is centered in the church. The plan or organized program of God for believers after they are saved is the local church. God gives specific talents to the members of the local church, so the members can carry out God's will (1 Cor. 12:18, 28). The focus is on the church as a collective body, working together to carry out God's plan. Every member of the local body has a

job to do, and when everyone uses his God given talent, God's work is accomplished.

Note Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 14:12. *"Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church."* Paul is saying that the believer is to seek to "excel" in the use of the talents God gives him. The word "excel" means to "superabound (in quantity or quality), to be in excess." The believer, then, is to actively be using his gift with great enthusiasm. If one's gift is given for service within the local church, it must be concluded that we are to be vigorously using it in the church. Being unfaithful or apathetic toward the ministry of the church would certainly show that one is not obeying God's clear teaching on this matter. Further, one's God given gift is valid only within its use in the local body of believers.

If this is God's plan, that all believers be a part of and faithful to a local congregation, then clearly, it is abnormal for a believer not to be faithful in attending and serving in a local church. If each member is not enthusiastically doing their share, then the work of the Lord suffers, and they suffer spiritually.

God's Plan is that Pastors and Teachers are Called From Within the Local Church.

It is also God's plan that pastors and teachers are appointed and work under the direction of a local congregation of believers. Paul and the other missionaries were called to their ministries by the Holy Spirit. "As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Act 13:2). God called them, but He directed the local congregation at Antioch to send them out.

Ephesians 4:11 12 states, "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." These offices were given in the context of the local church, to provide the leadership necessary to carry on the work of the Lord.

There is no example in the New Testament, after Pentecost, of believers working outside the local church. When one understands this,

it helps to see how important it is to attend and be a vibrant part of Christ's local church. Philip who was sent to witness to the eunuch, was sent by God out of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:26-40). Those that started the church at Antioch came from the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:19-20). Paul, Barnabas and those that accompanied them on their missionary journeys were sent out from the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1-2, 14:27). Timothy was the pastor of the church at Ephesus as was the Apostle John later. God's program on earth is carried out by God through the local church. To be unfaithful to one's local church is to place oneself outside God's plan for the propagation of the Gospel.

What Are Some Negative Effects of Being Unfaithful to the Local Church?

- 1. One is not being obedient to the Lord (Heb. 10:15).**
- 2. One is not obeying the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Tim. 2:2).**
- 3. One is not putting Christ first place in their life (Col. 1:18b).**
- 4. One is not living a sacrificial life but rather a worldly life (Rom. 12:1-2).**
- 5. One is being a stumbling block to others (Rom. 14:13, 1 Cor. 8:9).**
- 6. One cannot edify others when he is not faithful to the church. (Rom. 14:19; 1 Cor. 14:12; Eph 4:12, 16; 1 Thess. 5:11).**
- 7. One is causing others to fall (Mal. 2:8).**
- 8. One cannot be filled with the Holy Spirit of God and be unfaithful (Eph. 5:18).**
- 9. One cannot serve God and be a good steward, without being faithful to Him (1 Cor. 4:2).**
- 11. One cannot show he loves the brethren by refusing to gather with them (1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:14).**
- 12. One cannot show he loves the Lord if he does not obey Christ (Luke 6:46).**

Let's be honest. What goes through your mind when you notice someone is missing from the church's service? Of course you wonder where they are. If they normally attend services and are absent, you will wonder if they are sick, or some emergency has kept them away. Once, in a morning service my church had prayer for a member who failed to show up for a service. The members noticed that he was absent and knowing his past faithful

attendance suggested we have special prayer for him. After the service many called his home to check on him. Finally, late that evening, he answered the phone. He was quite embarrassed to have to explain he had gone fishing!

Another time, I had a dear woman get very upset with me and the church for not knowing she had been ill and had spent several days in the hospital. I apologized for not visiting her in the hospital and explained I was unaware of her illness. She replied I should have known when she was not in church the preceding Sunday. The truth was she had never regularly attended church. She had only attended one or two Sunday morning services in the past several months. Most of the time there was no legitimate reason for her absence, so no one was overly concerned about her missing that service. The church assumed it was normal for her to miss many services.

Another experience I had was with a couple, who were leaders in the church, and had been regularly attending church for many years. They were faithful and when the doors opened you could count on them being in their seats. They were an encouragement to me and set a good example before the whole assembly. One Sunday morning, about an hour before Sunday school, the phone rang. It was the wife of this couple, and she explained that they would not be in church that day. She said she just wanted me to know that some of their relatives were visiting, and since it was such a pretty day, they had decided to go to the lake and fish. She explained she did not want me to be worried about them. At first, I thought she was joking. But, it was not a joke. I was glad she called, but was greatly concerned at their actions. That Sunday started a trend, and it became a regular thing for them occasionally to miss services for various reasons. When people in the church began to ask about them, I was a little embarrassed to tell them where they were. In time, it affected their testimony, and I also noticed others began to miss services, following their example. They were not upset with anything in the church, but for some reason decided they had other things to do. Maybe they thought their past faithfulness entitled them to miss a Sunday or two. I seriously doubt they thought out what the effect of their actions would be to themselves and the church. They gave up a lot, when they decided to be unfaithful to the Lord. *"But seek ye first the*

kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). The whole church was affected by their staying out of church. They gave up eternal rewards for a few hours on the lake.

As a pastor, probably the most discouraging thing I have to deal with is poor attendance by some members of the church. Often, I have spent hours studying a passage and preparing a message or lesson for my congregation. As Sunday approaches, I am excited about application of this truth in the lives of the congregation. Often, I can think of several in the church who are struggling in their Christian lives, and I cannot wait to preach the Word of God and provide the answer to their need, from the Word. I am excited about being able to help them by showing, from the Word of God, principles that would help them.

Sad to say, the Devil also knows what is happening in the lives of my congregation. He sometimes has greater access to them and influence with them, than I do. On many Sundays, God gave me a message for them and they never got to hear it, because they let a hobby, beautiful day or even a rainy one keep them from the house of the Lord. I can tell you, it deeply hurts when this happens, and it happens much too often.

How often I've watched professing Christian families, in effect, teach their children to also be unfaithful to the Lord. Often I grieve for the wasted lives of children, whose parents regularly kept them from Sunday School and church to spend the day pursuing some hobby or recreational activity the parents wanted to enjoy. I often wonder how much grief rebellious children have caused their parents, that could have been avoided if they had just kept them in church and Sunday school? At times, the unfortunate outcome is that the children of these professing Christian parents have little or no interest in spiritual things. Often the result of unfaithful parents is unsaved children. In my years of pastoring, I have never personally known of children of unfaithful Christian parents growing up and being faithful themselves. So often I think of the children I have been privileged to teach who showed great promise of being used of the Lord, but as they grew older, they began to see the unfaithfulness in their parent's lives. They began to follow their disobedient parents, and soon they too, fell by the wayside.

I have even known parents who punished their children, for some disobedient act, by not letting them attend youth activities at their church. What a negative message this must be to the child. Church youth activities are important in the lives of our young people. There they receive Biblical instruction and personal support tailored to help them in their lives. Parents should never refuse attendance at church activities, as a means of punishment.

Once, about two hours before Wednesday night prayer meeting and Bible study, I received several phone calls. One member only said they were not coming, without explanation; another called and said they had company and the husband had just gotten home; another, who my wife went by to give a ride to church, had forgotten it was Wednesday night; our adult Sunday School teacher and his family did not even bother calling to let us know they were not coming. That night only one dear woman showed up. I thank God for her. She is always faithful, and if she is not at church, there is a good reason. I was embarrassed, and I hoped no one came by and saw the empty parking lot or that we had visitors that night. If someone did come by, what would they think of our church? Would they want to attend such a dead looking church that had only one person show up for Wednesday night? I hoped no one in town would notice, but I know the Lord did. He knew that most of the members of this church had abandoned Him that night. My wife, this dear woman and myself, were the only ones who met that night. We prayed for these missing members and the needs of our church. It is impossible to have a vibrant outgoing church when people do not attend.

The effect of Christians forsaking the assembling of themselves together has far-reaching consequences. How easy it is to think light of the matter and ignore its importance. Apathy toward the things of God always begins with little, seemingly small, unimportant inconsistencies in our commitment to the Lord. But in time, indifference grows and matures into open rebellion. It can be compared to a small cancer, if it is ignored and allowed to grow, it becomes fatal.

I wonder how many pastors who deeply loved the Lord became, in time, so discouraged by the unfaithfulness of some of the membership of their church that they quit the ministry. How many preachers have lost heart, lost their zeal and enthusiasm for the

ministry, because professing Christians failed to support their church? No pastor can accomplish even half of what he could, after he has lost heart and become discouraged.

Many pastors will prepare a series of messages or studies that take a number of weeks to teach. In order for the series to be fully understood and applied in a believer's life they need to present at every meeting. The pastor eagerly awaits the time of the meeting fully prepared with charts, notes and study materials that have taken weeks to prepare. What a disappointment when only a handful of people show up or, over the course of the study, miss several of the classes. I have had people ask questions, during a Bible study, that I need to study in order to give them an answer. I would promise to have the answer for them the following week. At the next meeting I would be ready with the answer, having spent many hours studying the matter, and find the person who asked the question did not attend.

How many churches, with full membership rolls, have been literally rendered ineffective by poor attendance? It is unfortunate that in many churches their members remained babies, having to be fed milk, as the Apostle Paul said, when they should have matured enough to eat meat (1 Cor. 3:2, Heb. 5:12) Churches, whose members are unfaithful to the Lord, remain weak, milk fed infants, too frail to be of any real service to the Lord. Paul said he wanted to feed them spiritual "*meat*," but he concluded, ". . . *ye were not able to bear it.*" The writer to the Hebrews, addressed the same problem: "*For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracle of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not strong meat*" (Heb. 5:12). A healthy church grows and wins the lost in direct proportion to how its members mature. A great man of God many years ago is reported to have said that he wondered what God could accomplish with one man who was totally dedicated to the Lord. I too wonder what God could do with a church that was totally committed to Him.

I am sure most pastors personally understand the Lord's statement to the lukewarm church at Laodicea. Jesus says to them, "*I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot: So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will slue thee out of my mouth*" (Rev. 3:15

16). Lukewarm professing Christians cannot be relied upon, and you never know from week to week whether they will be at church or not. You cannot give them jobs, because you will never know whether they will do them or not. Because of their poor attendance they can contribute little or nothing to the church. Oh, what they are missing by wasting the opportunities that God is giving them. What a blessing that could be to others and, in turn, to themselves.

My friend, the failure of so many to faithfully attend the services of their church, shows a serious spiritual problem between them and the Lord. Not attending church is only the symptom of a deeper spiritual failure. It is a positive indicator that their relationship with God is not right. God's children love each other and, like any normal family, want to be together. They want to worship God, they love the preaching and teaching of the Bible at church. Did not God say in 1 John 3:14, *"We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren."*

Sadly, many who are unfaithful have, possibly, never been saved and have been given a false hope of heaven when they die. Yet, these lost souls are comfortably able to fit into the church, because of the poor example of saved church members. Unhappily, a certain percentage of the church will always regularly fail to attend. A worse situation is when the church with poor attendance begins to accept it as normal. God's preacher should not be complacent about this matter, and he should never be satisfied with his flock giving anything but their best to the Lord. The church is important to Christ, important enough that Eph. 5:25 says, *"gave himself for it"*. To me, that proves the church's importance in God's plan.

Attending Church to Get or Give?

Many professing Christians wrongly base their attendance on what they receive from attending. That idea is foreign to the Bible. It is the established thinking today, among most Christians, that going to church is a matter of finding a church that meets their perceived needs, and then joining it. Thus, their attitude toward the church is that it should minister to them, and they go to get what it has to offer. Again, there is no such teaching in the Scriptures. First, a believer goes to church to worship God. The church service is a

sacred assembly to honor God and offer thanksgiving to Him for salvation and the blessings of life. He does not go to get, but to give worship, honor and praise to Almighty God. It is a time of being instructed in the paths of righteousness as the Word of God is taught.

Second, the Bible says that our goal in assembling ourselves together should be to strengthen our fellow believers: *"From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love"* (Eph 4:16). The word "edifying" means to build up, to promote Christian wisdom, affection, grace, virtue, holiness, and blessedness. The purpose of assembling together is that we be a blessing to each other. Many only go to church to get a blessing, rather than going to church to give a blessing to others. What a selfish and worldly motive that is.

Once I had a church member who I believed was under conviction because of their poor attendance. The member brought up the matter of church attendance and explained that they knew they should come to church to give, but they explained that they had needs too and often they were not met. I carefully tried to explain the "getting" came from the "giving." It was in ministering to others that they would be ministering to themselves. Sadly, many professing Christians do not want it this way. They prefer to get the blessing without any effort on their part. Many think that coming to church is like going to the store. You go in, pay your money, and get the blessings of God. Those with that attitude will always be disappointed in their pastor, the teachers, and their church.

What a transformation our churches would see if each member dedicated himself to the "edifying" of others in the church? God says, *"Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others"* (Phil. 2:4). Surely, there would be less grumbling, backbiting, gossip, blaming others, and complaining, if each believer sought to lift up and encourage others to live for Christ. As they became concerned for the spiritual well being of their brothers and sisters in the Lord, they would hardly be trying to criticize those that they, in love, were trying to help!

Paul warned the church at Ephesus, that "grievous wolves" would enter into the church. He proclaimed that he had not failed to declare unto them all the counsel of God. In his closing words of encouragement to them, he said, "*I have shewed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, It is more blessed to give than to receive*" (See Acts 20:17 35). The Christian grows in the Lord, when he gives sacrificially to others. God's preachers would need to spend little time trying to encourage people to come to church, if the membership came to church with the purpose of being a blessing to one another. In fact, they would eagerly wait in anticipation until the next appointed hour, so they could come and be of help to others.

Anyone who has ever led someone to the Lord knows the thrill and the utter joy in the Lord of seeing them receive Christ as their Savior! What a joy too, for a Sunday School teacher to teach the lesson they have worked on so hard and then, in time, see it bear fruit in the lives of their students. We all have our bad days. It is a part of life. There have been times I have come to church, maybe a little down hearted, and then have some saint of God say a few encouraging words. What a lift! Christians are in the world most of the week seeing the results of sin all around them. It is discouraging to see the Devil seemingly winning on every front. But what a soothing balm it is to be able to go to church and be with others who love the Lord. How refreshing to be with God's people. Sadly, because of the unfaithfulness of it membership and uncaring selfish attitudes of it members, many churches are not places of rest and relief from the cares and toils of the world. I'm sure it grieves the Lord to see the church He died for so far removed from being what He wanted it to be (Acts 20:28).

Many churches members have accepted the selfish idea that the church is to serve them. This is the reason that many churches have turned their pulpits into stages from which the congregation is to be entertained, instead of where the Word of God is preached. Preachers have become entertainers instead of men of God who preach the whole counsel of the Word of God. The worship service has taken on the atmosphere of a rock concert, and God honoring hymns have been replaced by "contemporary Christian music" that entertains the assembled crowd.

Our generation, of church members, has become a generation of "church hoppers" going from one church to the other, seeking a better program, more entertaining music, a more dynamic preacher and a host of other "supposed" reasons for attending church. This ungodly idea has stemmed the modern "Christian Rock Music" which is an abomination to God. Entertainment centers calling themselves churches, have wooed many into their shows in the name of God. They hawk their false gospel with appealing phrases such as, "Something good is going to happen to you today." Those that buy their appeal to the flesh are always, in time, left empty never finding the fulfillment of truly knowing God.

God says in the book of Hebrews: *"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)* And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." (Hebrews 10:22-25). God says come to my church to encourage, strengthen, console and comfort your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ! That is what it means to exhort, and that is God's plan for us. How can a church be what God intended, when members come to be exhorted rather than to exhort?

The truth is that dead churches are produced by dead church members. Churches where God is not working are churches where the people, because of their unfaithfulness, are quenching the Holy Spirit and not allowing God to work. It has been said that no church will rise above the spirituality of its pastor. May I add that no pastor will ever get far, spiritually, without a faithful congregation standing beside him, supporting him, encouraging him, praying for him and loving him in Christ. Too often God's preacher is blamed for the failure of the church he shepherds, when the real fault lies with the flock of rogue sheep he is trying to lead. The Bible teaches the nature that God puts in His sheep is the nature to follow and be led (John 10:4 5). Too many professing sheep, by their contrary natures, appear to be more like unruly and unmanageable goats.

Making the Commitment Once and For All.

May I share with you my personal testimony of how God gave me the victory over this matter? I know what it means to be tempted to stay out of church. In fact, the day I was saved, the very moment I was under deep conviction about the fact that I was a sinner and needed to ask God to forgive me, the Devil brought up church attendance to try and stop me. As I stood there, about to yield to the Spirit of God, the thought came into my mind, "If you do this, you will not be able to go bass fishing on Sunday anymore!" Friend, I dearly loved bass fishing, and Sunday was my fishing day. Do you see how cunning the Devil is? He tempted me with what I truly loved to do and tried to use it to keep me from being saved. Thank God, the Lord's convicting power was mightier than the flesh, and "I repented of my sin and God gave me the victory!"

At first I had little difficulty; I was at the church early for every service. But in time, as the newness began to wear off, I began to struggle each time it was time to attend church. Sunday and Wednesday nights were especially hard. Then even on Sunday morning, it became hard to convince myself go to church.

On one Sunday morning it was especially difficult to get my enthusiasm up enough to go to church. It was a beautiful day and I was tempted to take this Sunday off and go fishing. I lived on a lake and I walked outside and looked across the water. I could see the ripples and hear the slashes of bream hungrily feeding. I began to reason with myself. Had I not been working hard lately and been faithful to the Lord? I had not missed any services at my church and what would be the harm in staying home this one Sunday? Didn't I deserve a day of relaxation and rest? It would be only one Sunday and I rarely, if ever, missed any service. I almost let myself stay home that day (Ha-Ha). Somehow I fought off the temptation and managed to attend church that morning, and I am so happy I did.

Just before the service started that morning, I watched as a dear elderly woman named, Mrs. Davis, was being helped by her son and another man in the door and down the aisle to her seat. Her legs were swollen and afflicted with arthritis. I could see the pain in her face as she struggled along and I heard the sigh of relief as

she settled down in the pew. That morning we had testimony time. She raised her hand, and the pastor recognized her. God used her words coupled with what I had seen earlier that morning to touch my heart. She simply said, "I just want everyone to know how good it is to be able to be in God's house today. I thank Him for letting me come." I said, "Amen to that." That day I made a decision (with God's help) that I would, from that point on, be faithful to my church.

As I reflect on it now, I know the commitment I made that morning has kept me faithful over these many years. It is clear to me that before that day I had never made the decision to be faithful. When I was first saved, I wanted to go to church because it felt good to go and that's why I went. As it became a little inconvenient to attend, or other things came up I wanted to do, God began to test me. When I did not "feel" like going to services, it was hard to make myself go. However, that day as I watched Mrs. Davis struggle in pain to be in the Lord's house, I learned an important lesson. She loved the Lord, and despite the pain and physical suffering, she wanted to show God she loved him. Thank God, for her testimony that day. Her pain bore fruit in the life of a young man that God was calling to preach. I love the Lord for saving me, and I want to please and bring glory to Him. I learned that day, that one way I could show others how much I loved the Lord was to be faithful to His house. That happened over twenty years ago and since then, with God's help, I have always been able to be in church.

Since I made the decision, on that particular day, to faithfully to attend all the services of my church, I have not had to make that decision again. When my family went to bed on Saturday night, we set the clock to arise in time to get to Sunday school and church. If we took a drive or visited relatives, we never went too far or stayed too late on Sunday afternoon that we could not be back in time for our church's Sunday evening service. The same applied to Wednesday night. You see, the decision was already made, so we did what was necessary to keep our promise. We did not have to make the decision each time the church was to meet. Once in a while, friends would drop by, and I realized it was nearing time to go to church. I did not have to decide whether to stay home or not; that decision was already made. The question was how could I gracefully leave. The best way I found was to tell them it was

getting close to church time and would they like to go with us. If they were from out of town, or staying overnight, the same rule applied. We would ask them to go with us, and if they declined, we showed them the kitchen, bathrooms, etc. We told them we would see them when we got back. Not once have we ever heard anyone complain. Most seemed pleased they were not keeping us from our church.

The times when lost (unsaved) friends or relatives were visiting, and would not attend church; if we tried to witness to them about the Lord, some of them would take offense. If they were there on Sunday, we would explain that we would be attending our church. My family chose to show our lost relatives and friends that our relationship to the Lord was real and was a vital part of our lives. We politely let them know it was important to us to be in our church at the appointed time. I think some may not have understood our commitment and love of the Lord but I chose to risk offending them rather than lose our testimony. People knew we were Christians and I think they often watched to see what we would do. Our actions proved we truly did love the Lord. I have no regrets concerning our actions.

I know in many ways over the years I have failed the Lord, and I asked Him to forgive me. But, I know there will not be one person at the judgment who can say I placed a stumbling block in their path by my unfaithfulness to the church. Not one pastor can accuse me of being a discouragement to him and others in the church because of being unfaithful to the Lord's church. Had I failed that test, early in my Christian life, God may never have been called me to be a pastor, preacher and missionary, and I would have lost the privilege of serving Him in that way. Thank God, Mrs. Davis loved the Lord enough, to come to church that day and be a blessing to me. No one had a better excuse to stay home than she did, but her love of the Lord was stronger than any pain and inconvenience she experienced. Not long after that she went to be with her Lord. I know that God will reward her for her faithfulness. I am sure she never knew the influence she had on me, and I will always be grateful for her part in my life.

I am also thankful for the example my parents set for me. It was my mother who first took us to church. My father was not saved for a few years, in those days, and did not attend church. However, my

mother faithfully attended both Sunday School and church. When I was eight or nine years old my family moved to the small town of Pinetops in Eastern North Carolina. My mother began attending Pinetops Baptist Church shortly after we arrived. On Sunday morning, it was the order of the day to get up early and get ready for Sunday School. Although my mother does not drive a car, she made sure my father was ready to take us to church and get us there before starting time. She got up early each Sunday morning, fixed a hearty breakfast (always with homemade biscuits), and managed to get five children dressed in our very best for church. A couple of years later my father was saved and from that time on our whole family attended church. In all those years of our childhood, with five children to get fed and dressed, never do I remember our family being late or staying home, except for sickness. I do not remember once any question about whether we would attend church or not. You see, my parents loved the Lord and they loved us children and wanted to see us saved. I thank God for the example they set for me.

Seeing my mother's example, has made me unsympathetic to mothers who use the excuse of the time it takes to get their children ready as their reason for not attending church or for arriving late. One mother, who had three children, was always late for services. I suppose feeling somewhat guilty about her tardiness, one Sunday she began to explain to me how hard it was for her to get everyone ready and to church on time. She said, "I just do not know what to do!" As tactfully as I could I told her I had the solution to her problem. She then said she would surely like to know what it was. I then asked her with a smile on my face, "Have you ever thought about getting up an hour earlier?" Her response was amazing! She said, "I never thought of that."

Morbus Sabbaticus

An anonymous author described the condition of regularly missing church as "morbus Sabbaticus" or better, "Sunday sickness." He said that this is a disease peculiar to some church members. The symptoms vary, but are generally observed and never last more than twenty four hours. The symptoms never interfere with the appetite, nor affect the eyes. The Sunday paper can be read with no pain. TV seems to help the eyes. No doctor is ever called. The

patient begins to improve almost immediately after the services start. No symptoms are usually felt on Saturday. The patient sleeps well and wakes feeling well. He eats a hearty Sunday Breakfast, but then the attack comes and lasts until services are over for the morning. The patient then feels better and the problem seems to go away. The patient feels better and eats a solid dinner. After dinner, he takes a nap, and then watches one or two pro football games on TV. He may go fishing or work in his yard and feels well enough to do what he pleases. He may take a walk before supper and stop and chat with neighbors. If there are church services scheduled for Sunday evenings, he will likely have a relapse about an hour before service time. Invariably, he will wake up on Monday morning and rush off to work with no ill effects from the attack the day before. The symptoms will surely appear again the afternoon of the midweek service and probably the following Sunday as well. After a few of these "attacks" at weekly intervals, the disease seems to become chronic, it becomes worse and, for some, even terminal. Some are so affected that they quit going to church altogether.

The only cure for "morbus Sabbaticus" is to first repent of the sin of unfaithfulness and disobedience to Christ's commands. You see it is sin and disobedience for a child of God to shun the church and fail to be at their appointed place and time. Before a Christian can become faithful and get back in fellowship with God they must confess their sin, and then God will give them strength to overcome their failure (1 John 1:9). The second part of the cure is to make the decision once and for all time, to be faithful to the Lord. Once the decision is made, you will not have to make it again.

My friend, have you ever made such a decision for the Lord about your own faithfulness to Him? I'm sure you say you love the Lord, but do you, by your life, prove you love Him? Jesus said, *"If ye love me, keep my commandments. . . He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and will reveal myself to him "* (John 14:15,21).

"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that

we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:2 3).

It is my desire that through this study of what God's says in His Word, about church attendance and faithfulness to Christ, that if you have not made such a commitment to the Lord on this matter that you will do so now. I hope my experiences of how God has worked in my life will be an encouragement to you as well. My object is not to scold or condemn you, but to encourage you to live the happy, productive life the Lord has for you.

If you are not interested in Christ's church, it may be because you do not know Him as your Savior. It is possible you are not saved. God says,

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). Those that God saves He changes and makes them into a new person with a new nature who loves and seeks the things of God. Christians love one another and want to be together. *"We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death"* (1 John 3:14). It does not hurt you to ask yourself this question. If the answer is that you are not sure or you realize you are not saved, then you surely know what to do. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and He will save you! (See Acts 16:31, Rom. 10:9 10)

If you are born again, and you are not faithful to the Lord, then you must ask yourself why? How can you not be faithful to Him, who suffered and died for you? You are surely outside God's will and out of fellowship with Him.

Someone is watching your life! Christ surely is. I hope you can say you are faithfully serving the Lord. If you are not, God is love, and He is seeking to make you victorious, that you would be able to overcome the world. God wants you to have His peace and have satisfaction in your heart. But, my friend, He will not force Himself on you. He offers you His peace and joy, but you must accept it by living for Him. He cannot bless you, if you live in disobedience to Him.

If you have never made this commitment to be faithful, do it now and let God bless and use you.