

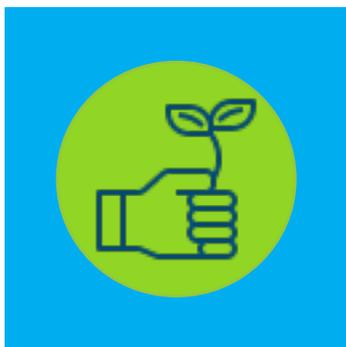
THE VALUE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

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“When anyone, including our teenagers, chooses not to participate in the life of a church, you are depriving the body of something it needs.”



As I’ve worked in youth ministry for almost a decade now, one of the many things I’ve learned about teenagers is that if you want them to do something they are likely to do the exact opposite. As children turn to teenagers, they are less likely to do things just because mom and dad tell them to or believe what mom and dad believe. They start to think for themselves and assert their desire for independence from their parents. For Christian families, this often results in teenagers not wanting to go to church, which can be a frightening thought for parents. One of the ways we can combat this is by helping our kids see the value of the local church.

According to authors Jim Davis and Michael Graham in their book *The Great Dechurching*, we are currently in the middle of the largest and fastest religious shift in the history of the United States. Approximately 40 million people have stopped going to church in the last 25 years. When kids graduate high school, they are at the highest risk for walking away from the church.¹ If we don’t want them to become part of the 40 million, we need to help them see the

value of being connected to a local church for life.

The first thing we need to help our teens see is that being part of a church is valuable because the Bible says it’s valuable. Now, I know for teenagers the “because the Bible says so” reason doesn’t usually fly so let’s try to reframe it in a way that’s helpful. If they are serious about being a Christian or even just exploring the Christian faith, being part of a local church is a necessity. If you would have said to Jesus, the apostle Paul, or any other early church leader that you were a Christian but not part of a local church, they would have looked at you like you had three heads because that was unheard of in the first century. The local church was so important to the life of early Christians that Paul uses four different images throughout his writings to describe the church: the body of Christ, an embassy, a temple of the Lord’s presence, and a family. The one I think may be most helpful for teenagers is the image of the body used in 1 Corinthians 12.



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In verse 12, Paul says, *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.”* Just like our individual body parts rely on each other in order to function properly, individual members of the church need other members in the church to “function properly” as a Christian. You cannot do life as a Christian by yourself. Other people have unique gifts that you don’t have. Other people have knowledge and wisdom you don’t have. Other people know the Bible better than you do. Other people can pray with and for you. Other people can see where you may be struggling and help hold you accountable. Saying you can be a mature Christian without a church is like saying you can win a football game without a team. Could you have minimal success in some areas of the game? Sure. But you would never win the game on your own. Can your teen grow in certain aspects of his or her faith on their own? Yes. And we want them to be spending time daily in prayer and in the Word. But they will never embrace the faith for themselves on their own. If your teen is wrestling with questions or doubt, there is no better place for them to be than church. It is full of people who likely did or still do have a lot of the same questions they do.

A second implication of these verses, and the one I think is critical for teenagers, is that just as a body needs all of its members to be healthy and function properly, a church needs its members to be healthy and function properly. During adolescence, teenagers are often struggling with finding a place to belong. They want to be given more independence and opportunities to prove themselves. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:21-22, *“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”* Here’s what our teenagers need to hear: the church needs them. They have unique gifts to bring to the table. They can serve in a variety of roles both in the youth ministry and the greater church. When anyone, including our teenagers, chooses not to participate in the life of a church, you are depriving

the body of something it needs. We need to help our kids see what their gifts are and how they fit within the needs of the church. Does your teen have a knack for working with kids? Find out how they can volunteer in the nursery or children’s ministry. Are they musically gifted? See if they can be involved with leading worship. Are they really tech savvy? Get them connected with the person who runs the audio/visual on a Sunday morning. These are just a few of the many things that churches need to flourish and places our teenagers can take some ownership. This will make them far more likely to show up.

I know many parents wrestle with the question of “should I make my teen go to church even when they don’t want to?” We know being a part of corporate worship is what’s best for them and something that is essential to our growth as believers. However, forcing attendance can make the teen dig their heels in harder and start to resent church (and you as parents). So what should you do? A great place to start is by asking the simple question of “why don’t you want to go to church?” Then shut your mouth and listen. While on the surface their answer may be “I want to sleep in” or “it’s boring,” the underlying reason is likely they just don’t see the point in going. It is our job as parents to help them see the value in being an active part of the local church, not only because it’s commanded in Scripture, but because our personal sanctification and the health of the church depend on it.

¹ Jim Davis & Michael Graham, *The Great Dechurching*, p. 3



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