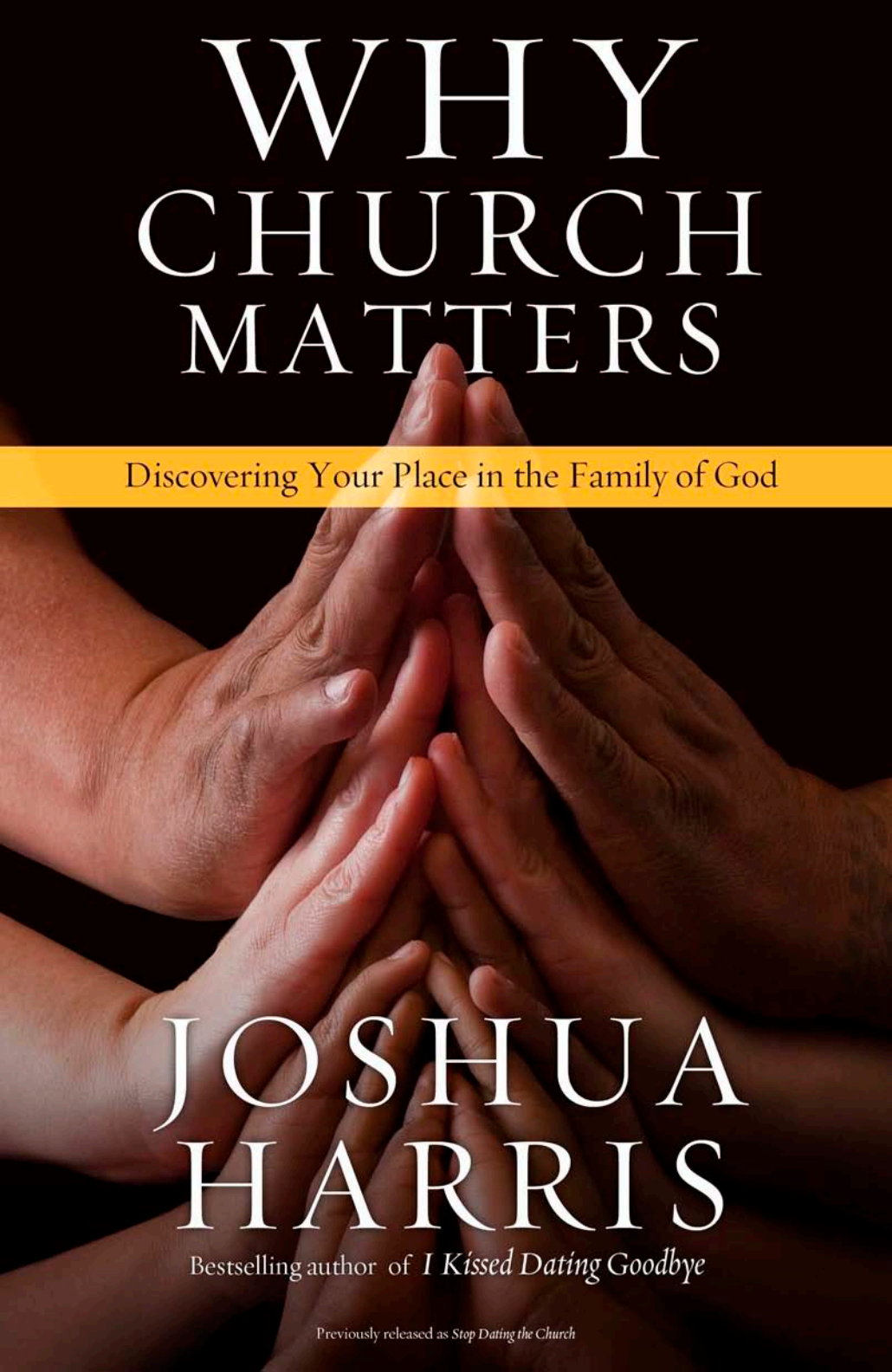


WHY CHURCH MATTERS



Discovering Your Place in the Family of God

JOSHUA
HARRIS

Bestselling author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*

Previously released as *Stop Dating the Church*

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To C. J.

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WHY
CHURCH
MATTERS

Chapter 1

CAN THIS
RELATIONSHIP
BE SAVED?

*What We Miss
When We Don't Commit*

Jack and Grace met through a mutual friend. From day one they seemed to be the perfect match. Grace was everything Jack had always wanted. She was beautiful, outgoing, and caring—always there when Jack needed her.

For the first five months they were inseparable. Jack could hardly think of anything but Grace. He didn't need to look further, he told friends. "She's the one."

Now almost three years have passed. Jack still enjoys

the comfort and familiarity of being with Grace, but the spark is gone. Grace's flaws seem more obvious. He's not sure he finds her as attractive as he once did. And he's beginning to resent all the time she wants to spend with him.

One night, when she asks if they can define the nature of their relationship, Jack blows up. "We're together, aren't we?" he asks angrily. "Why isn't that enough for you?"

Obviously, Jack isn't ready for commitment. And it's unclear if he ever will be. . . .

Have you ever been in a relationship like this? I'm writing this book because I believe God has something better for you. He wants you in a relationship defined by both passion *and* commitment. But before you can take hold of this wonderful plan, you need to know something about this couple. There are millions of Jacks walking around today. And Grace isn't a girl.

Grace is a church.

TRAVELING SOLO

This is my third book on relationships, but it's unlike any of my previous books. You won't find anything here about how you should relate to the opposite sex. Instead, this book is about how you should relate to the family of God.

The story behind this book is closely tied to my own

journey. I was raised in a Christian home, but even though the church played a big part in my life growing up, for many years it didn't have a big place in my heart.

My first home as a child was across the street from the little Baptist church my parents had gotten saved in during the Jesus Movement of the seventies. My dad was a pastor till I was seven and even planted a church in Texas. But after two disillusioning church splits, he left the pastorate and started speaking across the country on homeschooling. Over the years our family attended a wide spectrum of churches—mainline, evangelical, charismatic. One church gathered at a run-down commune complete with hippies and llamas. Another was a seeker-sensitive megachurch.

When I graduated from my church's high school youth group, I started visiting around. I loved God and had big dreams for how I wanted to serve Him, but I didn't see any reason to get too involved in one church. By then, I thought I knew all there was to know about church, and I wasn't impressed. Most churches struck me as out-of-date and out-of-touch. There had to be better, more efficient ways to accomplish great things for God.

For me, that meant becoming the next Billy Graham. But I was only nineteen, and invitations for me to lead a

worldwide media crusade weren't rolling in. So I threw my energies into opportunities that were closer at hand. I started a magazine for fellow homeschoolers. I began to speak at my own conferences for teenagers. Before long, I had written my first book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*.

The message of that book was that singles should avoid directionless relationships that were romantic and physical but had no intention of moving toward commitment. The irony of this was that even though I had stopped playing the dating game with girls, I was perfectly happy to keep playing it with the church. I liked attending on weekends, and I enjoyed the social benefits of church, but I didn't want the responsibility that came with real commitment. Like Jack in our story, I wasn't interested in settling down. So though I gave the appearance of commitment, I mostly just flirted with different churches and kept my options open.

Then something happened that I never expected.

A PASSIONATE ENCOUNTER

A friend sent me a set of sermons on tape called "Passion for the Church" by a pastor in Maryland. I'm still not sure why I listened to those tapes. For a confirmed church-dater like me, the title alone was baffling. "Passion

for the church”? The words *passion* and *church* absolutely did *not* connect in my mind! The series might as well have been called “Passion for the Laundry Mat.” But for some reason, as I drove around my hometown of Gresham, Oregon, I popped those tapes into the cassette player and began to listen.

The preacher taught from the book of Ephesians. He showed that the church was actually God’s idea—not some plan or program invented by humans. In fact, the church is the only institution God promised to sustain forever.

This is where passion came in. To be part of the universal church isn’t enough, the preacher said. Every Christian is called to be passionately committed to a specific local church. Why? Because the local church is the key to spiritual health and growth for a Christian. And because as the visible “body of Christ” in the world, the local church is central to God’s plan for every generation.

I have to tell you, the biblical truths in those messages picked me up, turned me over, and gave me a good shaking. Out of my pockets tumbled an avalanche of well-worn attitudes about the church. Most weren’t carefully thought-out, it’s true. But all of them were misguided, and some were unscriptural and dangerous. For the first time I realized that a wholehearted relationship with a local church is God’s loving plan for me and for every other follower of Christ.

It is not just what my parents want for me. It is not just what some pastor thinks.

And it is not optional.

CAN YOU SPOT A CHURCH-DATER?

Today we live in an increasingly fragmented world. That mind-set has influenced the way we approach our relationship with God. Faith is a solo pursuit. These days, experts describe America as a nation of “believers” but not “belongers”—and the numbers confirm it. 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!

Can you spot what I’m calling a church-dater? Here’s a quick profile. Do you see one or more of these characteristics in yourself?

First, our attitude toward church tends to be *me-centered*. We go for what we can get—social interaction, programs, or activities. The driving question is, “What can church do for me?”

A second sign of a church-dater is being *independent*.

We go to church because that's what Christians are supposed to do—but we're careful to avoid getting involved too much, especially with people. We don't pay much attention to God's larger purpose for us as a vital part in a specific church family. So we go through the motions without really investing ourselves.

Most essentially, a church-dater tends to be *critical*. We are short on allegiance and quick to find fault in our church. We treat church with a consumer mentality—looking for the best product for the price of our Sunday morning. As a result, we're fickle and not invested for the long-term, like a lover with a wandering eye, always on the hunt for something better.

Take my friend Nathan. He attended *two* churches on Sundays—one because he liked their music, the other because he liked the preaching. And his involvement in both went no deeper. At the first church he'd slip out just before the last song wound down and drive to the other church five minutes away. He even factored in time to stop by McDonald's for an Egg McMuffin. He timed it so that he'd be walking into the second church just as the pastor started to preach.

I guess you could say Nathan was two-timing.

If you see yourself in any of these descriptions, I want

you to hear this from a former church-dater: *God has something better for you and me than dating the church.* What practiced daters like Nathan and Jack don't realize is that what they assume is working for their personal gain is actually resulting in serious loss—for themselves and others.

I'm writing this book because I want to share with other sincere followers of Christ the profound blessings that come with living a life committed to the church. I want to show that the church matters to God and it should matter to us. I want you to catch a glimpse of the beauty of God's plan for the church in each believer's life and the unimaginable power that could be unleashed through even one generation embracing that plan.

And why shouldn't that generation be ours?

But before we look at the benefits of commitment, consider what is lost when church dating becomes a way of life. When we resist passion and commitment in our relationship with the church, *everyone* gets cheated out of God's best.

- You cheat *yourself*.
- You cheat a *church community*.
- You cheat your *world*.

I hope you have the courage to stay with me, because the biblical insights we're looking for in this book have

the potential to bring tremendous change for the better in your life.

Let's start with the last idea. Your world.

YOUR LIFE IS BIGGER

Step back for a minute. Remember how high the stakes really are for every human life. Each of us lives out our earthly days in a visible world that just barely conceals a larger invisible reality. What we see won't last forever. We're in a cosmic conflict against the spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:12). At some point in the future, every human being alive today will be dead, and there will be an accounting. Every one of the seven billion souls on earth will spend eternity in either heaven or hell. That's why every human being alive today needs to hear the Good News of the gospel!

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).

Have you heard this Good News before? Have you

responded to it and had your sins forgiven through faith in Christ? I pray that you have!

Now I want you to see how the church and the Good News connect: The church is the *vehicle* that Jesus chose to take the message of the gospel to every generation and people.

Are you seeing the bigger picture? The church matters because Jesus chose it to tell and show the world the message of His love. And this message, carried forward through history and lived out for all to see, is the world's *only* hope.

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.

Isn't this amazing? God has not only saved us; He has invited us to participate in His master plan of redeeming a

people for His glory. Through the local church we take part in His eternal plan to rescue men and women from their sin and totally transform their lives. This is the mission of the church. It's our duty, our calling, and our privilege.

But as you'll see in the pages ahead, another powerful dimension is at work when we decide to take our role in the family of God seriously. As we become genuinely involved in the church's work in the world, we put ourselves in the best possible place to allow God to do His work in us. That's because the church is the best context—God's greenhouse, if you will—for us to flourish spiritually. It's here that God grows us and conforms us to the image of His Son. (And when I say “the church is the best context,” I'm *not* only talking about what happens in the pew, or prayer room, or anywhere else inside the walls of a worship facility.)

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.

That's why I tell people that when they get serious about the church, they're not just adding another item to a long spiritual to-do list. Instead, they're finally getting started on experiencing *all the other blessings* that Jesus promised to His followers as the fruits of the truly abundant life.

WHY SHOULD YOU KEEP READING?

In the rest of this book, we'll look at how God views the church and how seeing the church from His perspective can transform our attitude. We'll narrow our view to look at "the church down the street"—what keeps us from really committing to it, and what we can do about that. We'll also examine the lifestyle changes that take place when we make the church a priority, as well as the tangible benefits this change brings. And we'll talk about what to look for in a local church when you're ready to commit.

For some, I know, just the idea of committing (or recommitting) to a church stirs up unpleasant feelings and memories. You may think you're doing just fine on your own. Or you may have had a bad experience at church in the past. Perhaps you've seen a church torn apart by greed, arrogance, or a lack of moral integrity. Any talk of commitment makes you balk or want to run. You don't want to give your heart and have it broken again.

If this is where my book finds you, I understand your feelings...and I hope you'll keep reading! My prayer is that in the pages ahead you'll dare to dream again of what your place in the community of faith was meant to be. And more than dream, that you'll believe that God's loving, unchanging purpose for you is stronger than anyone else's sin.

I'll admit, the prospect of falling head over heels in love can feel very risky. But God is calling us to just that kind of wholehearted and deeply involved experience with His church. He feels this kind of passion.

And I'm not exaggerating. Because, as you're going to see in the next chapter, Jesus still calls us His bride.



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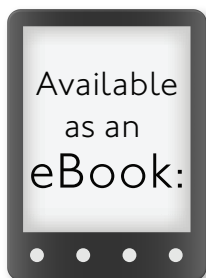
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