

- The BARNA Group conducted some research last year to determine what helped people grow in their faith the most. Prayer, family, friends, reading the Bible, and having children were among the top answers. Certainly all of these things can help us grow in our faith, but did you notice something that is missing from this list of answers?.... THE CHURCH is missing! Going to church did not even crack the top-10 in this list. Isn't that disappointing? I believe it is very disappointing, but honestly I'm not all that surprised.
- We live in time of this world where people are becoming more and more hostile towards local churches and organized religion. Many people have said things along the lines of, *"I just want to focus on God or Jesus instead of worrying about organized religion. Spirituality is what I'm really looking for and that can't be found in a building."* This type of mindset seems to be the increasing norm among American adults. According to the same research 49% of those surveyed said that attending or being a member of a church is "somewhat" or "very" important. The remaining 51% said that the same is "not too" or "not at all" important.
- For those who might want to chalk this up to a generational glitch, I have some disturbing news. As you go down the current generations, the picture does not become any more optimistic. Only 20% of Millennials believe being a part of a local church is important. The percentages only get as high as 40% as you go through the older generations.
- This news is certainly discouraging, but I believe that it is fixable. The cure to this type of thinking is for individuals to understand that there are blessings that are gained when we join ourselves to a local church. Saul certainly saw this as something that needed to be done because he joined with the disciples in Damascus immediately after his conversion. **(Acts 9:19)** Once Paul leaves Damascus, notice again that he seeks to join himself with the disciples of Jerusalem. **(Acts 9:26)** It seems that Paul recognized the importance of being a part of a local church. Paul wanted to do so because #1) it is God's will for Christians to join together and work for the Kingdom, and #2) there are blessings that come from being a part of a local church. Let's discuss 3 of those blessings that come from being a part of the local church.
*study cited: <https://www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/661-americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church#.VOemj0I15YY>

I. Shepherds who are the spiritual leaders of the local flock.

- A. Some refuse to join themselves to the local church because they don't want to be under the watch of the eldership. They don't want the leadership to "meddle" in their personal life.
- B. This is not a godly approach to local leadership. We should happily work with and support godly local leadership.
 1. We should be overjoyed that we have men who are willing to invest themselves in the spiritual well being of others.
 2. These men are taking on a great responsibility that they will have to answer for on the day of judgement. **(Heb. 13:17)**
 3. Because of this we should submit and honor such men who are giving of themselves for us. **(Heb. 13:17; I Thess. 5:12,13)**
- C. It is a blessing to have wise men who are shepherding God's people in a local church.
 1. They are men who have lived godly lives and are tremendous godly examples. **(I Peter 5:1-3)** Why wouldn't you want to worship and follow after those type of men?
 2. They are good men, they are wise men, they are loving men, and we need more of this kind of man to lead local churches.
 3. These men love the flock and they watch out for the souls of each and every member. **(Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17)**
 4. Not only that, they are also here to assist us in our struggles in this life, whatever type of struggles they may be. **(James 5:14-16)**
- D. What a blessing to know that we have men who are looking out for our spiritual best interest!

II. Fellow members who are there to support, encourage, and aid you.

- A. Supporting, encouraging, aiding, and working with our brethren takes effort on our part, and some people don't want to have that responsibility so they refuse to join themselves to a local church.

- B. It is easy to take love, support, encouragement, and aid from others, but it takes much more effort to give that back on our part. Some will take, take, and take, but when they are asked to give back they pull the “I’m not a member of this church, so I am not responsible to have to do those things.”
- C. It is absolutely backwards thinking for us to not want to put for the effort to show love and dedication to those we are in fellowship with through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- D. Members of a local church should be the first ones we go to when we are in need to something we are lacking, either spiritual or physical in nature. Paul, in **(I Thess. 5:11,14,15)**, in the context of being ready for the return of Jesus tells the Thessalonian Christians that they should treat their brethren a certain way:
 - 1. They were to encourage one another. **(v.11)**
 - 2. They were to build one another up. **(v.11)**
 - 3. They were to admonish those who were unruly. **(v.14)**
 - 4. They were to encourage the faint hearted, help the weak. **(v.14)**
 - 5. They were to be patient with everyone. **(v.14)**
 - 6. They were not to be vengeful. **(v.15)**
 - 7. They were to seek the good for one another always. **(v.15)**
- E. In doing these things, the local church thrived and prospered. Every persons spiritual and physical needs were met and none one lacked in any way just like the very first disciples of **Acts 2**. What a blessing to be part of a group of like minded individuals that are going to watch out and take care for one another!

III. A place to go and escape the troubles and sin of this broken world.

- A. Consider Paul’s letter to the Corinthians concerning the cleanliness of Christ’s church. **(I Cor. 5)**
 - 1. This might seem like a strange place to go but notice the reasoning for Paul’s strong actions against this man that was involved with sin and his rebuke of the church that was tolerant of it.
 - 2. Paul rebukes the church for allowing a man who was involved in blatant sexual immorality to continue to be in fellowship with them. **(vv.1,2)**
 - 3. Paul was not going to have any of it and he said that he would deliver the man to Satan in hopes that he would be saved in the end. **(vv.3-5)**
 - 4. The Apostle recognized that sin and its influence could ruin the purity of the church and make it no different from the world that is around it. **(vv.5-9,13)**
- B. Why look at this example? This example shows that the church should not be full of the wickedness that has already over taken the world. The church should be a safe haven, a sanctuary, a place of pure worship of our God that isn't tainted by the sin and troubles of this world.
 - 1. The church should be a safe haven, a sanctuary, a place of pure worship of our God that isn't tainted by the sin and troubles of this world.
 - 2. The church should be without any “spot or wrinkle or any such thing.” It should be “holy and blameless.” **(Eph. 5:27)**
 - 3. It should be the place where we go and experience pure worship, praise, and study that isn't affected by the drama, troubles, and wickedness of the world.
 - 4. No where else can we go and fully escape the corrupted nature of this world but the local church that we are a part of.
- C. What a blessing it is to be a part of this group of saved people who’s eyes are toward heaven and who’s hearts are striving to be more and more like our Savior!

Many people don’t put much stock in the local church because they don’t recognize that there are so many benefits and blessings in being a part of a local group of God’s people! Will there be problems at times? Yes, yes there will because imperfect people are involved. However, the blessings far outweigh the temporary challenges we face at times. If you have not committed to being a part of a local group of God’s people then I’d encourage you to consider this church here at Pleasant Plains. I believe the blessings we discussed are available here and you’d be better for being a part of it. May God help us to always seek our His will for us and may we be part of the blessings of the local church and not the challenges.