

What's Next? Commitment

Dan Hamel
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Great to be with you today. Before we jump in, can we take a moment to say thank you to Tom and Darnell who preached such great messages the last two week?! We are so blessed at this church to have such great preachers and teachers who faithfully open up God's Word for us.

A couple weeks ago my family and I were catching a flight. And I don't know if you've ever had to get a family of four, with a two-year-old and a two-month-old ready for an airplane ride, but let's just say it was more stressful that I anticipated it being. We got to the airport just in time, and after making it through security, we heard that our flight was in its final boarding stage. We are running with our stroller, they were literally saying "Daniel Hamel and Keren Hamel" over the intercom system. We got on the plane, everything was smooth...for the first 5 minutes. The flight time was during the exact window of Hudson's nap time. But he decide8d that instead of sleeping, he would cry for the entire ride. After an hour or so, Keren literally looked at me and said, "This isn't fair to the other people on the plane." I'm thinking, "What do you want me to do? We are 37,000 feet in the air!" After two hours of craziness, we began our descent. And as the pressure in the cabin changed, my son started pouting and saying, "Owy daddy, owy, my ears, my ears. Owy." I looked through my bag to see if I could find something for him to chew on to take away the pain. I found some M&M's and I gave him two of them and I said, "Here you go." He put them...in his ears.

Here's why I tell you that story: we are in a series called What's Next, where we are talking about the different steps that God might be calling us to take as we continue in our walk with him. We've talked about baptism, freedom from strongholds, forgiveness, serving, giving, and today, we're talking about commitment to a local church. These are all really important next steps, and here's what we have to make sure of: that when God gives us an invitation to take our next step, that we don't plug our ears, pretend we didn't hear it, and get on with our life. When God speaks, when he shows us our next step, we want to be the people who say: "Yes, God, if that is what you are calling me to, I'm all in." Just like we learned in the first week of this series, when Peter was in the boat with Jesus and Peter looked to Jesus and said, "Because you say so, I will." Whatever Jesus is calling us to do, that's the next step we want to take.

The specific next step that we get to talk about today is *commitment to a local church*. These days it's very easy to approach church as a consumer, where we ask, "What can the church do for me? Does it have the kind of worship I like, the kind of teaching I like, the kind of kids ministry I like?" People engage with a church like you chose a restaurant: they are looking for the service and product that fits their appetite.

Others approach the church as a critic. A critic is less interested in consumption and more interested in evaluation. Critics evaluate everything, looking for errors, pointing out flaws, highlighting weaknesses. The song was a little too loud, the sermon was a little too long, the temperature was a little too cold, the pastor was a little too attractive (kidding...that was a complaint we had under Gary, but no one has complained about that since I came aboard). You get the point. Sadly, that is how a lot of people approach the church. And here's what I want to set before you today: the next step that God is calling us to take is not to increase our

consumerism of the church, it's not to increase our critical evaluation of the church, it's to increase our *commitment* to the church.

Let me show you how important the church is to God. I want to take you to two specific passages. The first one is in Matthew 16. Turn there with me. Jesus has just asked his followers who people say he is. They told him, "Some people say you are Elijah, or John the Baptist, or one of the other prophets reincarnated." Then Jesus says...ok...but what about you, who do you say I am? Peter responded, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). He got it right. Jesus says, God is the one who opened your eyes to even allow you to see that. Then he says in 16:18: "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." Here's what I really want you to see. Jesus says, "I will build my church." Jesus is committed to the church. The church wasn't Peter's idea, it wasn't the idea of any other person, it was Jesus' idea. Jesus is *committed* to the church. Jesus wants to *build* the church.

One other passage - Acts 20. This is the Apostle Paul speaking to the leaders of the church in a town called Ephesus. He has been there with them for three years. This is his final goodbye. He will never see these people again. And he wants to give them a final charge. Listen to what he says: "Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." So again, whose church is this? This is the church of God. And what price did God establish this church? Look: "He bought (the church) with his own blood." Jesus didn't just die for us individually. He shed his blood for the church.

So here is my basic premise I want to set before you today. It's really simple: Jesus is committed to the church. There is no question or debate about that from Scripture. And since Jesus is committed to the church, his followers should be committed to the church, too.

Let me give you a simple example of this. Throughout the New Testament the church is called the "Bride of Christ." Jesus is the groom, the church is the bride and at the end of history there will be a wedding, where Jesus is united with his church forever. I have a bride, her name is Keren. We were married almost six years ago. She means more to me than anyone else in the world. I could not put into words my love for her, my devotion to her, my commitment to her well-being. And because of that, do you know one of the most practical ways you could show me that you care for me? It's by loving my bride, by serving her, supporting her, encouraging her, building her up. When I see people care for her, it warms my heart beyond words. The opposite is also true. The times when I've heard people say unkind things, or treat her poorly, or dismiss her, it pains me deeply. The same is true for Jesus. The church is his bride. When we neglect the church it's an offense against him, but when we honor the church, and build up the church, and serve the church, we are honoring and blessing him.

What does commitment to the church look like? If I show my commitment to Jesus in part by my commitment to the church, what does it mean to be committed to the church? I want to give you a very simple and clear explanation: *a loving and consistent partnership with a local church family*. I want to break this sentence down into smaller pieces.

What does commitment to the church look like? Everything begins with this word *loving*. In the Bible we not only read that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), we also hear Jesus tell us “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). As followers of Jesus, *love* is essential to everything we do. And when you think about church, don’t primarily think about a building you come to. Don’t primarily think about the teaching we offer or the songs we sing or the outreach we do, think about the *people* in this church. Think about the *relationships* that are here. We show commitment to the bride of Christ by loving one another.

Showing up to service every week is important. Do you know what is even more important? Loving one another. Serving in areas of need is important. Do you know what is even more important? Loving one another. Inviting your friends to church is important. Do you know what is even more important? Loving one another. In the church, everything comes down to love. In the book of 1 Corinthians the apostle Paul wrote an entire chapter about the importance of love, and he said in 13:2, “If I don’t have love, I am nothing,” and in 13:3, “If I don’t have love, I gain nothing.”

If you want to be committed to the church, it all begins with loving the people in the church the way Jesus has loved us. If I had all day, I wouldn’t be able to even scratch the surface of the ways I’ve seen this on display at The Creek. People are sharing their lives with one another, raising their families alongside one another, encouraging, challenging, and holding one another accountable, praying for each other when they are sick, sitting with one another in sorrow, rejoicing with one another in victory. It’s celebrating someone’s birthday, baby-sitting someone’s kid, paying for a funeral for a family in need. It’s all about love.

We show commitment to Jesus’ church when we love one another the way he has loved us. But it’s more than just love. Let’s look at our definition again: *a loving and consistent partnership with a local church family*. There is also the necessity of being *consistent*. This is about sticking with one another and having a bond that is not easily broken. Listen to Ephesians 4:2-3: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.” And listen to Colossians 3:13: “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.” I put these two passages side by side so you could see that they each showcase how we are called to bear with one another / bear with each other. To bear with someone means that you stick with them, even when it gets really hard. This word is used 15 times in the New Testament. About ½ the times it’s mentioned it means to be patient with someone. And the other half it means to put up with them. It means that even when things at your church aren’t perfect, even people at your church aren’t perfect, you stick together. It’s a commitment that, sadly, a lot of churches are lacking these days.

I remember reading a blogpost years ago by a well-known theologian. And he posed the question: what was the worst day in the history of the church? A very probing question. Was it the great schism in 1054 when the Eastern and Western church officially split and there was no longer one united, universal church? Was it during the Spanish inquisition or selling of indulgences or the Salem witch trials? He ventured the guess of the year 1908. Does anyone know what happened in 1908? Henry Ford invented the model T. Strange connection at first, right? But think about it: as soon as people had a car to drive, they could leave the church in their

neighborhood to go find a church miles away they liked a little bit more. Before the advent of the car, you were a part of the church in your community, with the car, you could pick and choose. And the tradition of being consistently committed to one church family began to wane.

Now of course there are legitimate reasons to transition away from a church family and join another. Sometimes you move cities, sometimes your adult children are a part of a different church and you want to worship together as a family, sometimes you stop to evaluate that your church hasn't baptized any new converts in the last 3 years and you want to be a part of a church that is carrying out the mission of evangelism and discipleship, sometimes a church shifts theologically and is no longer grounded in the Word. There are very valid reasons to potentially leave a church.

But if we want to be committed to the church the way Jesus is committed to the church, our default disposition is always consistency. And this is something we need to hear now as much as ever. I've talked to leaders of churches all over the country, and every single church that I know of has seen more people walk away this last year than ever before. They left in the spring because their church shut down for too long because of COVID, or because their church didn't shut down for long enough. They left in the summer because their church said too much about Black Lives Matter, or their church didn't say enough about Black Lives Matter. They left in the fall because their church didn't provide enough support for Donald Trump or because their church didn't provide enough condemnation for Donald Trump. People have been leaving their churches left and right, all across our country. Our spiritual enemy is having a field day, separating Christians from one another, sowing division and discontent. I believe our commitment to our spiritual family ought to supersede and override our convictions and perspective on lesser things.

We know that Jesus is committed to the church. As his followers, the next step he's asking many of us to take is to share in his commitment to the church. What does commitment to the church look like? *A loving and consistent partnership with a local church family.* The one last word I want to highlight here is *partnership*. And this is a bit of a paradigm shift for a lot of folks. Often when people ask the question: "What church do you attend?" People will say what? "I'm a _____ (member) of The Creek." Or "I'm a member at 1st Baptist or 2nd Presbyterian" or whatever the name.

And though, of course, there is nothing wrong with the word membership, it doesn't really convey anything about commitment. You might be a member at Sam's Club. You pay a fee, and you get access to their store and enjoy free samples, ridiculously cheap rotisserie chicken, and enormous packages of paper towels. You are a member of Amazon prime. You pay a fee of 10 dollars a month, and you get free two-day shipping. You are a member at a golf club. You pay a fee, and you get to play there whenever you want. Membership mentality is all about what you *get*. Partnership mentality is all about *mutuality*. If you are a partner in your firm, you have ownership in the company, you bring unique skills and assets to the table, you deploy your strengths and talents for the good of the entire organization. That's what commitment looks like to the church. Not, "What can I get," but rather, "How can I contribute, what can I give?" That's the mindset of partnership.

In the book of 1 Corinthians, the Bible describes being a part of a church as being a part of a body. Listen to what we read in chapter 12:13: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body.” The entire chapter carries out this analogy and then it builds to the conclusion, starting in 12:27: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. My foot and my hand are not the same, but they are connected to one another and have ownership stake in one another. My ears and my eyes are not the same, but they are connected to one another and have ownership stake in one another.” The same is true for a church body. We are all different, but we have been joined together to make up the body of Christ, and we have an ownership stake in our church together.

Again - the sermon series is all about *what's next*. And I believe that for a lot of people, the next step that God is calling them to take is to decide to be committed to a church. To lovingly and consistently partner with their local church family. And basically everything I've said so far is applicable and relevant to everyone no matter what church they may be a part of. But in the final few minutes I want to share something that is specific to The Creek.

Over the last year, the elders and staff at our church have spent a lot of time praying and seeking God's council about what partnership should look like at the Creek. And I want to share with you what we have come up with. Let me ask everyone to take out their phones (you usually aren't asked to do this in church, I know). Go to our website: thecreek.org, and I want you to see what we have there.

We share that we believe partnering with a local body of Christ is a sacred relationship that unites followers of Jesus together. We believe partnering in a local church should be characterized by deep relationships, sincere love, genuine accountability, and shared mission, and we welcome anyone into partnership at The Creek who has expressed faith in Jesus, who has been baptized, who aligns with our statement of faith, and who is committed to accomplishing our mission and vision and embodying our priorities. Our hope and prayer isn't for people to simply attend our church, but for people to be fully engaged at our church.

We then spell out expectations. And it begins with what partners in our faith family can expect of our church: we will preach the Gospel and teach sound doctrine from God's Word, we will carry out our vision and mission, and priorities, we will shepherd those in our church, equipping them for ministry, and praying for any needs as they arise. We also commit to stewarding the resources entrusted to this church with wisdom, integrity, and transparency, we commit to appointing leaders who strive to live a life that is above reproach, worthy of Christ and of emulation, and to communicate about the health and direction of the church honestly and transparently.

If you are a partner at The Creek, that's what you can expect from our faith family, and then the second element is what our faith family expects of everyone who wants to be a partner with us:

- Align with the doctrinal beliefs of our church, expressed in our statement of faith.
- Engage with and live out The Creek's mission, vision, and priorities.

- Maintain unity with the body and with one another, giving no place for pride, bitterness, gossip, slander, or division.
- Resolve conflict as quickly as possible, motivated by love and a desire for restoration, in accordance with biblical directions.
- Pursue personal holiness in all areas of life, in accordance with the Scriptures.
- Prioritize weekly worship gatherings and pursue deep, meaningful relationships characterized by encouragement and accountability with others at The Creek.
- Use their time, talents, and spiritual gifts for strengthening the body and serving the community.
- Give generously to support the ministry of the church.
- Submit to the spiritual authority of the elders at The Creek, making the work of leadership a joy.

That's a tall order. Let me give this caveat. We know that we are never going to live into this perfectly. We all stumble in many ways. The expectation is not perfection, it's not that we never make mistakes, it's simply that we want to be united in heart and aligned in mission. We want to all be on the same page. And can you imagine what kind of church we could be if every person who was a part of this place agreed, to the best of our ability, to living this out, to loving God, loving one another, making disciples, and connecting people to Jesus? The 317 would be a different place. That's our goal and hope!

We aren't trying to be consumers at church, we aren't trying to be critics of the church, we want to be *committed* to the church, which looks like having *a loving and consistent partnership with a local church*. And I would ask that everyone who wants to express that kind of commitment to The Creek to sign their name at the bottom of this page. Some of you have been a part this church for 10 years, 20 years, you know who we are, you know what we are about, you can sign your name right now. Others who are newer here or are praying to see if God is calling you to be a partner in this faith family - there is no rush, but if you are being led by the Spirit to be a part of what He is doing here, we would be delighted and honored.

Our old membership list is going away. Those who sign up and say yes to this commitment are going to join our list of partners. God is doing a great work in this city. We are so blessed to get to worship him alongside one another and serve his purpose in our generation together.

I began the message talking about running through the airport and almost missing our plane. We had to rush so that it didn't take off without us. That's not what this is like. There is no rush on making this decision at all. Pray, seek God's guidance, talk as a family, as a life group. If God confines this, we would love to take this journey together!