Nine Traits of the Outwardly Focused Christian

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I will... I might... I should...
Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction: A Tale of a Joyous Church Member 1
Chapter 1: I Will Move from “I Am” to “I Will” 13
Chapter 2: I Will Worship with Others 25
Chapter 3: I Will Grow Together with Others 35
Chapter 4: I Will Serve 47
Chapter 5: I Will Go 59
Chapter 6: I Will Give Generously 71
Chapter 7: I Will Not Be a Church Dropout 81
Chapter 8: I Will Avoid the Traps of Churchianity 93
Chapter 9: I Will Make a Difference 105
Appendix: A Commitment to “I Will” 111
Introduction

A Tale of a Joyous Church Member

Her name is Heather.

Heather is a single mom with three kids, two boys and a girl. The ages of the children are five, seven, and ten. Heather is concerned about her children because of the divorce, because they are struggling in school, and because they are failing to obey at home. Yet she has not taken them to church in more than three years.

The divorce was messy. But then again, divorces are not neat and joyous situations. When Dan and Heather split almost four years ago, Heather decided to leave the church. Her ex-husband was staying at the church with his soon-to-be wife. It just would not work for Heather to be around them.

So she left Resurrection Community Church.

And she has not returned to any church for more than four years.

Heather’s friends and family sympathized with her regularly. “Poor dear, you lost your husband, many of his
friends, and the church you love,” some would say. And Heather nodded her head, receiving the condolences with quiet acceptance. It’s okay with her if they feel that way.

But Heather has a secret, a secret she has confided to no one. Yes, the divorce was incredibly painful. Yes, so much of the change for her and the kids hurt deeply. Still, she has told no one the full story.

Heather was glad to leave Resurrection Community Church. Indeed, she had become really miserable at the church long before the marital problems began. Leaving the church was one of the blessings of her life changes. It was a big relief.

In order to understand Heather’s sentiments, we need to take you back about twelve years ago. That was when Dan and Heather were married. They bought a home where Dan was working. And they both made a commitment to get involved in a church. They mutually decided it would be Resurrection Community Church.

That’s where this story begins.

I Am Not a Happy Church Member

From Heather’s perspective, Resurrection Community Church was an easy choice. Dan and his parents had been members there for many years. The church had about 250 in worship attendance. Obviously, Dan knew most of the members. The church members were friendly to Heather as well. They accepted her immediately. After all, she was now part of Dan’s family.

Heather really did not have to do much to get involved. Within a few weeks of joining, she was asked to be in a women’s
Bible study, to help with the church finances since she was a certified public accountant, and to be a greeter.

When the children came along, it was pretty natural for them to connect in the church as well. Dan and Heather had many good relationships in the congregation. Some of them were young parents with children of similar ages to Dan and Heather’s.

So she began church life just fine. Her attitude was great. Her relationships were solid. Her involvement was good.

She has trouble remembering exactly when the change took place. It was more gradual than sudden. Heather, just a few years later, had become an unhappy church member. There was no one negative event. Indeed, she barely noticed the change day by day.

Heather does remember waking up one Sunday morning with a dread about attending church. *When did these feelings develop?* she asked herself. *Why am I no longer a happy church member?*

This story is Heather’s story.

But it can be repeated in the lives of church members by the millions.

### The Attitude Shift

Depending on your perspective, you could say that Heather had an advantage. She did not have to wait or seek permission to get involved in the church. Through Dan and his family, she had immediate connections and immediate acceptance. It was as if she had been a member of the church for years.
It was fun for her at first. She loved all the relationships she developed in the church. The members were good people. They took care of one another.

Heather did not attend a church business meeting the first six months after she joined. The church treasurer, though, asked her to attend since she would soon become the assistant treasurer. She needed the background and the experience.

She thought it was strange to have a business meeting every month. But she honored the request. The meeting was nothing like she had expected. The treasurer gave his report, and six or seven church members asked questions about almost every dime of expenditures.

Then the pastor made a presentation to change the worship time from 11:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. His logic was sound. The 11:00 time was really late, and it had no obvious benefit. It was just the way the church had always done it.

The opposition was pretty intense. The pastor politely suggested that the change might appeal to younger families who are not members of the church. They often prefer to eat before noon, especially if they have children. Betty, a long-term member, was quick to speak. “I don’t know why you’re always talking about people who aren’t members of this church. This is our church, and our needs come first,” she said without hesitation.

The pastor heard the chorus of “amens,” and he saw several heads nod affirmatively. He knew the issue was dead. He took the idea off the table.
The pastor would leave the church eight months later. He barely made it to his second anniversary at the church.

In the past twenty years, the church has had eight different pastors. Only one pastor made it to four years of tenure.

Heather would soon fit in with the longer-term members. From them, she learned that church was mostly about getting her needs met. She would often join the chorus of critics when anyone suggested change in the church. Though she would not admit it or articulate it, she really began to view the church as a religious country club that was very careful about letting outsiders in.

You see, Heather joined the church expecting to make a difference. She became a part of the congregation expecting to give and to serve. That is where she found true fulfillment.

Sure, Heather’s church experiences were enjoyable initially. She enjoyed at the onset being a part of a club where she was included and others were excluded.

But that self-serving behavior and attitude provided no true fulfillment. When she woke up one Sunday morning with dread and angst, it was the culmination of months of a haughty attitude and selfishness. It was the result of being inwardly focused instead of being outwardly focused. It was analogous to the child who eats too much ice cream and gets sick. It was all about her needs, her desires, and her selfishness.

Heather was spiritually sick and she felt it.

So when the divorce was finalized, leaving the church was the easiest thing to do. She never told anyone how relieved she
was to get away from such a self-serving place. And she had no desire to go back to a church. She was done.

A Time to Return to the Body

Four years passed. Heather was getting restless. The intense pain of the divorce had eased. And she knew something was missing in her life. She realized that as a believer in Christ, she needed to find a church to connect with other believers. For certain, she needed to get her kids back in church.

So the single mom became an unchurched person looking for a church home. Heather began her quest with high hopes, but they were soon dashed.

She told a neighbor “none of the churches have their acts together.” There are obvious problems in all of them, she observed.

She reluctantly agreed to a visit from the pastor and his wife from a church she and the kids had visited three times. From her perspective, that church was the best of the bad choices. But Heather would be ready for them. She had the perfect article to show them.

Jordan and Megan, the pastor and his wife from The Church at Fountain Hill, arrived promptly at Heather’s home. After exchanging pleasantries, Heather spoke. “Pastor Jordan,” she began, “let me get to the bottom line. I have been out of church for four years. I have visited a ton of churches with a good motive to return. Frankly, though, I can’t find a decent one to go to. The Church at Fountain Hill is the best of them, but your church has its problems.”
Jordan and Megan were patient and kind. You could tell they had heard similar stories. Megan spoke: “Heather, what have been your bad experiences? I think it would help us to know some specifics.”

“I thought you might ask,” Heather responded. “I saw a blog post this week called ‘The Top Nine Ways Churches Drive Away First-time Guests.’ I made a copy so you could read it. I have experienced every one of these nine ways at the churches I visited.”

Jordan and Megan read the blog post together. The author was brief and to the point:

**Top Nine Ways Churches Drive Away First-time Guests**

1. **Unfriendly church members.** This response was anticipated. But the surprise was the number of respondents who included non-genuine friendliness in their answers. In other words, the guests perceived some of the church members were faking it.

2. **Unsafe and unclean children’s area.** This response generated the greatest emotional reactions. If your church does not give a high priority to children, don’t expect young families to attend.

3. **No place to get information.** If your church does not have a clear and obvious place to get information, you
probably have lowered the chances of a return visit by half. There should also be someone to greet and assist guests at that information center as well.

4. **Bad church website.** Most of the church guests went to the church website before they attended a worship service. Even if they attended the service after visiting a bad website, they attended with a prejudicial perspective. The two indispensable items guests want on a website are address and times of service. It’s just that basic.

5. **Poor signage.** If you have been attending a church for a few weeks, you forget all about the signage. You don’t need it any more. But guests do. And they are frustrated when it’s not there.

6. **Insider church language.** Most of the respondents were not referring to theological language as much as language that only the members know. My favorite example was: “The WMU will meet in the CLC in the room where the GAs usually meet.”

7. **Boring or bad service.** My surprise was not the presence of this item. The surprise was that it was not ranked higher.

8. **Members telling guests that they were in their seat or pew.** Yes, this obviously still takes place in some churches.
9. **Dirty facilities.** Some of the comments: “Didn’t look like it had been cleaned in a week.” “No trash cans anywhere.” “Restrooms were worse than a bad truck stop.” “Pews had more stains than a Tide commercial.”

Jordan had actually read the article earlier in the week. It was written by an obscure blogger who gained a lot of attention with that single post. But Megan spoke first.

“Heather,” she began. “That’s a good article. We leaders in churches can certainly heed its message. But you could be viewing church the wrong way. Maybe you should not be asking what you can get out of a church, but how God would have you serve through a church. Instead of saying ‘I want,’ consider saying ‘I will.’”

Heather was obviously agitated by Megan’s comments. She tried to maintain her composure, but she was clearly bothered by those words. The exit of the couple could not have come sooner.

*Why did those comments bother her so much?* Heather wondered after they left. *Am I really that sensitive?*

**The “I Will” Church Member**

Heather slept fitfully that night. She kept hearing Megan’s words: “Instead of saying ‘I want,’ consider saying ‘I will.’”

At one point, she opened her Bible. She had just begun reading through the book of Philippians. This time, these words from Philippians 2:3–4 jumped out at her: “Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more
important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”

“Oh my goodness,” she muttered to herself. “That’s it! That’s why I was so miserable at Resurrection Community Church. I focused on my wants and needs. I did not focus on serving others.”

Heather also realized that she had been very critical and picky of churches she had been visiting. She was looking for her wants instead of being willing to say, “I will.”

She returned to visit The Church at Fountain Hill. Her perspective was totally different this time. She knew that no churches were perfect. There would always be room for improvement. But now she would, in God’s power, serve others first. Her own personal motto became, “Don’t say ‘I want,’ say ‘I will.’”

Heather joined the church with her children. She became a joyous church member. Her life became a testimony of “I will.” She served with a sacrificial spirit. When other church members frustrated her, she committed to pray for them and forgive them. After all, Christ did that for us at a great cost. It was the least she could do.

Even more, she became an “I will” church member without feeling legalistically obligated or burned out. When she served, she served with joy.

From Her Story to Your Story

The first few pages of this book were about Heather. The rest of the book is about you, a believer in Christ and a church
member. It is about learning how to have complete joy in your service through your church. It is about becoming a fully functioning member of the body.

It is about saying, “I will.”

A few years ago, I wrote a book about being a part of the body of Christ, or about being a joyous church member. *I Am a Church Member* became one of the best-selling books in its genre. Its theme was basic: What attitude should I have to be a biblical and joyous church member?

We now move to the next and critical step of being a part of the body of Christ. We move from a right attitude (“I am”) to right actions (“I will”).

It’s really basic. It’s a matter of learning what the Bible says about being a part of the body of Christ. It’s about hearing His voice through His Word.

And when Christ asks you to serve Him and others in His church, you should have one joyous response. Of course, by now you know the response.

“I will.”
Points to Ponder

1. Why do so many church members have a critical and negative view of local churches?

2. How are some local churches acting like a religious country club?

3. Read Philippians 2:1–11. Discuss how that passage relates to being a sacrificial church member.

4. How does the right attitude of church membership naturally lead to the right actions of church membership?
Chapter 1

I Will Move from “I Am” to “I Will”

It was one of the best days of my life. I was a very young man of twenty-one years. And I was deeply in love.

The day was May 6, 1977. I asked my girlfriend, Nellie Jo, to marry me. I asked her to be my wife. And she gave me an incredible gift of grace.

She said “yes.”

We would get married on December 17, 1977. And after nearly four decades, I still look back on that day in May in amazement. At times, I am dumbfounded by her response.

She said “yes.”

You see, I can really be a jerk at times. I can let my temper get the best of me. I can be so busy doing good things that I neglect the best things. Like my family. Like my wife.

But, through it all, Nellie Jo has stood by me. She has loved me. She has forgiven me.
One time, in fear and trembling, I asked her. I asked her why she has remained so faithful and loving when I have been a lousy husband at times. Her response was incredibly simple, but incredibly revealing.

“Thomas,” she began. She’s the only person who calls me “Thomas.” I like it. She continued, “When I said, ‘I do’ and ‘for better or worse,’ I meant it. I knew we would not always have easy times. I knew there would be struggles. But I made a commitment to you. I made my mind up. That has been my attitude from the first day of our marriage.”

Stop for just a moment. Did you catch that last sentence? “That has been my attitude from the first day of our marriage.”

Nellie Jo made a decision. She made a decision about her attitude.

Our Attitude about Our Church

This book is about what we should do in our church. But before we go further talking about doing, we must address the issue of our attitude.

If we do without the right attitude, we submit to legalistic guidelines. We become frustrated. We burn out.

But if we have the right attitude, doing becomes natural. It becomes joyous. In other words, if you have a right, biblically directed attitude, you will experience joy in church membership.

The right attitude means we recognize that no church is perfect. We expect that some church members will be irritants
to us. We acknowledge that no pastor or church staff member is perfect.

But we serve and do anyway. We serve and do, not out of a sense of legalistic obligation, but out of an overflow of gratitude of what God has done for us through His Son.

So what exactly does the right attitude look like? Let’s look at four biblical examples.

**The Right Attitude: I Am a Unifying Church Member**

The health of any group is tied to its unity. It’s true for sports teams. It’s true for businesses. It’s true for families. And it’s true for churches.

But here is the thing about unity. It only works when individuals have made a decision. Each individual in the group must decide to put the good of the group before his or her own needs. It only works for individuals who have the right attitude.

Paul emphasized unity very clearly as he wrote to different churches. Read what he said to the church at Ephesus: “Therefore I, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love, diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds us” (Eph. 4:1–3).

Let’s be clear. The Bible mandates us to have an attitude of unity in the church. But look at what it requires: humility, gentleness, patience, and acceptance of one another in love. Have you ever been to a church business meeting where some
of those requirements were not met? Have you ever been to a church business meeting where none of those requirements were met? Have you ever been to a church business meeting where true humility is displayed?

Unity requires humility. That means we view others as better than ourselves.

Unity requires gentleness. That means we control our temper and demonstrate kindness to other church members, whether they are good guys or jerks.

Unity requires patience. That means we put up with a lot even if we are frustrated and perplexed at the behavior and attitude of others.

Unity requires acceptance of one another in love. That means we accept people unconditionally. It doesn’t mean we condone sinful behavior. But it does mean we demonstrate a lot of grace.

Okay, I admit it. I just read my own words. I looked at the requirements of unity, and I thought, No way! There is no way I can be humble, gentle, patient, and loving to some of the people I know.

And then I remember.

I remember how much Christ loves me. I remember how He died for me. I remember how I deserve none of it.

It was grace. Totally unmerited favor. In His strength, I can have an attitude of unity. Indeed, I must have an attitude of unity.
The Right Attitude: *I Am a Sacrificial Church Member*

If we have any doubt about this attitude, look at these words from Philippians 2:5–8:

Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage. Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross.

Read those words again slowly. We are to have the attitude of Christ, the sacrificial attitude that took Him to death on a cross.

I wish I had asked my dad a lot more questions before he died. I wish I had insisted he tell me more about his life. I now want to hear more about how he sacrificed for his siblings when his mother died. He was only ten years old. His dad, an alcoholic, took to the bottle until his death.

I now want to hear more about how he sacrificed for his country. He was a top turret gunner on a B21 airplane in World War II. He was wounded and received the Purple Heart. He received other medals of valor.

I now want to hear more about how he sacrificed for his home, a small town in south Alabama. I want to hear about his
years as a mayor where he guided the town in the turbulent 60s and 70s when race tensions were at a peak.

But Dad died when I was twenty-eight years old. I never asked him enough questions. I never listened enough to him tell his stories of courage and sacrifice.

You see, when we sacrifice, we are acting most like Christ. We are learning that the greatest joy comes when we put others before ourselves.

By the way, Paul wrote these words to church members in Philippi. They were written in the very clear context regarding the attitude of church members. They were to have an attitude of sacrifice. It was a clear and powerful mandate for church members 2,000 years ago.

And it still is for us today.

**The Right Attitude: I Am a Prayerful Church Member**

Her name is Lillian. When I became the pastor of a church in St. Petersburg, Florida, I immediately noticed her attitude. It was obvious. She told me she would be praying for me and for my ministry every day. She meant it.

I have no doubt Lillian prayed for me. I have no doubt her prayers were a primary reason my ministry in St. Petersburg was so blessed.

The apostle Paul knew about the power of prayer in the church. These powerful words were written to the church at Colosse:
For this reason also, since the day we heard this, we haven’t stopped praying for you. We are asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God. (Col. 1:9–10)

Paul had an attitude of prayerfulness. And he wanted all the members of the church to have that attitude.

Let me remind you of this prayerful attitude in the context of 1 Timothy 3:7: “Furthermore, he must have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he does not fall into disgrace and the Devil’s trap.” This sentence is one of the qualifications of a pastor. He must have a good reputation among the outsiders, or the unbelievers, who are not a part of the church. Then the verse refers to “the Devil’s trap.”

The word *trap* is a rare usage in the Bible. Traps are never set unintentionally. It is a strategic and powerful threat by Satan to take down pastors and church leaders. It is a real threat, a powerful threat.

So how do we respond? The Bible is very clear that we fight this spiritual reality with our spiritual strength: prayer. Immediately after Paul tells the church to put on the full armor of God to fight spiritual warfare, he closes with an admonition of prayer: “Pray at all times in the Spirit with every prayer and request, and stay alert in this with all perseverance and intercession for all the saints” (Eph. 6:18).
There are all kinds of attitudes you can have in your church. One of those is an attitude of prayer.

The Right Attitude: *I Am a Joyful Church Member*

Have you ever noticed that grateful people are joyous people? Paul gave the Philippian church a command to rejoice, and he tied the spirit of joy to an attitude of thanksgiving or gratitude:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your graciousness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses every thought, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:4–7)

Paul shoots straight with us. If we are to really have joy in our lives, we must be gentle and gracious. We are to pray instead of worry. And as we pray, we are to pray with a spirit of thanksgiving or gratitude.

Have you ever seen a GCM? That’s my acronym for a “grumpy church member.” They are the church members most likely to complain at church business meetings. They are the persistent critics of the pastor and staff. They are the members who view the church as an organization where they pay their dues to get their perks and their privileges. And they are grumpy and divisive when they don’t.
Contrast them to a JCM (“joyous church member”). A joyous church member counts her blessings. She is grateful for the freedom and opportunity to worship with other believers. She is a constant source of encouragement to pastors, church staff, and fellow church members.

The JCM is always grateful. The GCM is regularly complaining and frustrated. The JCM looks for opportunities to encourage and give. The GCM nitpicks and finds fault in many things.

That is why one member is joyful and another is grumpy. It’s all a matter of attitude.

When we received the gift of salvation, we became a part of the body of Christ. Read how the Bible describes this gift: “Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. And God has placed these in the church” (1 Cor. 12:27–28).

Did you get that? When you received the free gift of salvation, you also received the gift of membership into the body of Christ.

Membership in the body of Christ, the church, is a gift from God.

And when we receive a gift, we should be joyous and grateful.

It really is a matter of our attitude.

**Time to Move from “I Am” to “I Will”**

Your attitude determines who you are: I am joyous. I am angry. I am grateful. I am jealous.
You get the picture. Our attitudes are the foundations of our actions. If I am joyous, I will tend to be an encouraging person. If I am angry, I will tend to be a critical person.

Let me return to the opening story in this chapter. This time let me talk about my marriage to Nellie Jo from my own perspective.

Let’s presume I have all the healthy attitudes in place. I love her unconditionally. I focus on her strengths more than her weaknesses. I am grateful for her, for the gift from God that she is to me.

And that’s it.

I never serve her. I never ask her out for a date. I never offer her words of encouragement. I rarely spend time with her.

So what would Nellie Jo think of my good attitudes? She would rightly think they are contrived and insincere. She would doubt my commitment. She would wonder if I am truly committed to our marriage.

Maybe many of you church members do indeed have a good attitude. Maybe you are not in the group that whines, complains, nags, and pouts. Maybe your heart is really in the right place.

So here is my simple question. Is your attitude reflected in your actions? In case you are wondering where I am headed with this question, let me offer you an example.

Several years ago, we considered the most active church members who attended church around three times a week. They might attend a Sunday morning Bible study or a Sunday
morning worship service. Others might return for Sunday evening events or Wednesday activities.

Do you know how much that perspective has changed in just a few years? Today, many pundits define an active church member as someone who attends church events or services at least three times a month.

Did you get that? An active church member has now been re-defined from three times a week to three times a month!

I can anticipate potential objections, “Don’t make this matter a legalistic obligation! We don’t need an activity checklist to be close to God!”

I understand. But let me ask you this question. Would your spouse think you are still devoted to him or her if you decided to reduce your time with him or her by 75 percent? That’s what is happening with even some of our most committed church members.

It’s time. It’s time for a decision. It’s time for a church membership revolution. Not because we are legalistically obligated. Not because we equate activities to commitment. But because a great attitude toward your church, the bride of Christ, will result in great actions for her.

Will you join me in this revolution? Will you prayerfully consider giving your life’s all in commitment to Christ through His church? Will you be a part of a movement that will change the world as the body of Christ unites in force with renewed effort and renewed zeal?

It’s time. Christ is calling all church members to forsake self and to serve others for His sake. In doing so, our church
becomes our priority and our focus as it was in the New Testament.

Listen carefully to this call of God. Listen to how you can discern your commitment in His church. And when you begin to understand the action plans He has set before you, be prepared to respond with two simple words.

I will.

**Points to Ponder**

1. Explain how Ephesians 4:1–3 works in the context of our relationship with fellow church members.

2. Why do you think church members are less committed to their churches today than they were several years ago?

3. Read again Philippians 2:5–8. How does this passage relate to our commitment in our church today?

4. Would you say your commitment to your church is more or less today than it was five years ago? Why?