

# WORSHIP THE FIRST-CENTURY WAY

One of a Two-Book Series

**WANDERING SOUL,  
ENTITLED HEART, AND  
THE SIDE-TRACKED CHURCH**

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# 1 DARE-TO-CARE WORSHIP

*Pride goes before destruction,  
A haughty spirit before a fall.*  
Proverbs 16:18

In 2010, a Harris Poll revealed only 26% of Americans attend religious services every week. Which countries are worse than the US? Canada listed 20%, Austria 18%. Belgium 7%, France 12%, Hungary 12%, Latvia 7%, United Kingdom 12% attending religious services every week.<sup>i</sup>

What if church attendance was required? During the reigns of Edward VI and Elizabeth I in England, church attendance was required. But religious leaders often complained about the rudeness of congregations during worship “whilst those that did not attend would go to public houses or be watching cock fighting [or other games].” This was a regular occurrence despite the fact that non-attendance was punished with a shilling fine per week.<sup>ii</sup>

According to *Open Doors* (an organization that helps get Bibles to restricted countries and helps persecuted congregations) today, whereas western nations used to send missionaries to South America, Africa, and Asia, now they are beginning to send missionaries to western nations where they are planting churches. These are nations whose people have experienced hardships unknown in western nations. But they grew and western congregations did not.

## No Atheists in Foxholes

We can learn indirectly that, during World War I, church attendance was fairly high. That’s because the *Literary Digest* reported “Male Church Attendance Dropped in the Twenties.” By 1929, only one male out of every nine attended Sunday services with any regularity.<sup>iii</sup>

Then it rose again during World War II as reported in 1942. “Two years ago, most churches were considered fortunate if forty-five people attended the morning services; today devout

worshippers fill the pews morning and night.”<sup>iv</sup>

In 1991, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that church attendance grew during the Gulf War.<sup>v</sup>

Jason Hansman, Director of Member Services with Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America said that veterans frequently turn to faith-based communities as a bridge between combat and civilian life. In fact, a 2011 Pew Forum survey found that faith increases the chances of a veteran readjusting more easily.<sup>vi</sup>

How long lasting is the devotion of veterans to their Christianity? In 2013, Professor John S. Dyson of Cornell University, and Craig Wansink, Professor at Virginia Wesleyan College, revealed results of their survey of 1,123 veterans of World War II. Prayer during combat rose from 42% to 72% on average. Those who remained or became religious after returning to civilian life were those who had experienced heavy combat and disliked war.

Fifty years after combat, many of these same veterans were still loyal to and participating actively with the church. This loyalty to the church was attributed to the powerful commitment between comrades in their units that carried through in civilian life.<sup>vii</sup>

As shown in the other book of this series, *Worship Changes Since the First Century*, the persecuted church standing up for right has always had much in common with “persecuted” individuals standing up for right. Their Christianity always grew. When hardships and persecutions ceased to exist, entire congregations gradually ceased to exist or became rather “worldly” as they tried to attract the less spiritually minded.

What type of Christianity do both men and women prefer? *Christian Century* reported that those serious about their Christianity tend to prefer organizations that are demanding on their personal life for change and growth. One man interviewed said he was “sick of bourgeois, feel-good American Christianity.”

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*Lord, God. Give us the stout hearted. The truth defenders. The self-sacrificers. Jesus, help us be like You.*

## Demanding God’s Gifts in an Age of Entitlement

*I will ascend above the tops of the clouds.  
I will make myself like the Most High  
Isaiah 14:14 (NKJV)*

Has our present society lifted itself up above God to the degree that everyone is sure of invading heaven and even being welcomed into heaven, despite never having had much time for God in this life here on earth? Has our society lifted itself up above God to the degree that we are now telling God what to do? Are people basically saying, “God, you’d better take me into heaven, or I will deny you exist, because God is supposed to be good”?

*Because you say, ‘I am a god, I sit in the seat of gods...’  
Yet you are a man, and not a god.  
Ezekiel 28:2b (NKJV)*

Does this present society even want God? Well, probably. But the more it makes itself god, the more it creates its own gods. This present society is head-over-heels in love with its media super heroes—men in capes and other-world aliens—gods they can control to do what they want.

Although those born and raised during the 1980s and 1990s are often called the Entitlement Generation, we must also include parents. This younger generation didn’t raise itself. It seems that most generations in our society today feel entitled. Entitled to things now, entitled to mansions in heaven later.

*By your great wisdom in trade  
You have increased your riches,  
And your heart is lifted up  
Because of your riches.  
Ezekiel 28:5 (NKJV)*

Some of the studies explained below are of young people, but we cannot claim the youngest part of society originated entitlement.

An Inventory of Narcissistic Personality given to over 14,000 university students reported in 2006 that over 65% of the

students fit into the narcissistic category.<sup>ix</sup>

A report made public in 2013 by the American Freshman Survey covering roughly nine million students over 50 years revealed that “egotism and a sense of entitlement among college students is at an all-time high, even though their actual abilities as assessed on objective aptitude screenings are on the decline.”<sup>x</sup>

More and more at the end of the school year, every player on a team “won” a trophy. Instead of just one “student a month”, there were many. Teachers inflated grades so no one would fail, and the “C” became the new “F”.

In “Practical Family Living: Entitlement, Money and Families” it found, “Children growing up with few resources can feel deprived and that others owe them things....They may feel the pain of their upbringing justifies their feelings of entitlement. Children growing up with plentiful resources can grow up believing that whatever they want, they deserve. Sometimes this is because they have not had to work for or sacrifice anything in order to receive material things or money.”<sup>xi</sup>

What is the attitude of entitlement people toward God? “As long as I don’t murder someone, Jesus will feel obligated to save me from hell.” “As long as I pray sometimes, God will feel obligated to take me into his home, heaven.” “Even though I don’t have time for God, he will make time for me.” “Even though I don’t think God is very important, God must surely think I am important.” “Even though I think it’s rather boring to adore God at a worship service, God surely does not think I am boring!”

What does all this have to do with loneliness? People who feel they never have enough, never can do enough, never can be handsome or beautiful enough, have centered their lives on themselves. It is a lonely life being centered on oneself.

*Dear God, we praise you, adore you, and worship you. Your majesty is all power and all nobility. You wear the universe as your robe, the stars as your crown. You sit on the throne of eternity. We love to sing your praises. It’s such an exciting time!*

## The Neverwents and the Dropouts

Murray dropped out of his denomination as a teenager. Later he went back because of his kids. He chose a congregation that did not have rigid guidelines and wasn't always asking for money.

Would Murray feel comfortable in our congregation? Would he learn that the few rules our loving heavenly Father has for us are just as much to help his holy household as Murray's rules for his own household? Or would he find multitudinous regulations as set forth in the creeds, the synods, and church politics?

Alicia never did go to church; her husband did, but stopped when grown. She basically believes organized religion interferes with people's lives. She has questions about the meaning of life, but forces them into the recesses of her mind.

Would Alicia feel comfortable in our congregation? Would she find services that reflected both interest in and care for what happens to the members in their everyday life and in their hereafter? Or would she find it impersonal with only a few up front doing the officiating and performing?

Dylan says he is Catholic although neither he nor his parents ever attended. He feels the church won't let people do what is best for their own lives and is materialistic. He prays sometimes and is curious about what in the Bible could possibly get some people so interested in it.

Would Dylan feel comfortable in our congregation? Would he find tithing sermons, pledge cards in the pews, fund-raising thermometers on the walls, bake sales in the lobbies? Would he find a church where the Bible is never referred to except an isolated verse here and there from who knows where?

Mary Ann grew up in an active denominational church family but now only occasionally goes church hopping, searching for a church interested in solving people's problems and in providing her with a deep sense of spirituality she cannot get alone.

Would Mary Ann feel comfortable in our congregation? Are people with needs mentioned in the bulletin, in announcements, in prayers, in sign-up sheets in the lobby? Is the worship full of performances that she is expected to appreciate but which she

could never feel qualified to be a part of?

Sam grew up Jewish, and finds church formalistic, narrow and limiting. He considers creeds divisive of the religious world. He longs for the spiritualistic, so searches for it through world religions and time spent alone contemplating what it might be.

Would Sam feel comfortable in our congregation? Are parts of the denomination's creed written in the backs of song books or up on the wall? When a particular form of worship is begun, is its inclusion in the service explained intelligently from the Bible only? Would he feel as though he really touched the heart and soul of God, and the love and devotion of the members after visiting just one time?

This survey was related in the book *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* by Wade Clark Roof.<sup>xii</sup> Isn't it interesting that in his survey no one complained that the entertainment was not as good as TV or the building was not as grand as an opera house or Madison Square Gardens? They all complained about relationships they were not getting in worship.

*Oh, God, we didn't realize. The visitors and dropouts never told us what they were really thinking. Perhaps we never gave them a chance.*

## Lonely At the Top

It is lonely at the top. As long as we consider ourselves entitled to even things we did not work for, did not struggle for, we will carry our burdens alone, sometimes even hiding them from ourselves.

In *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, Jean M. Twenge and W. Keith Campbell said the sense of entitlement that so many of us has shows itself in bigger houses, increased plastic surgery, out-of-control credit card debt, among other things.<sup>xiii</sup>

In "Entitlement, Money and Families", it states, "**A rigid sense of entitlement can feed a strong sense of self-centeredness and narcissism. This rigidity can lead to the closing off of the heart and pride. Pride does not promote care, compassion and**

**connection. Pride leads to isolation and intense loneliness.<sup>xiv</sup>**

Whether or not they admit it, people everywhere feel isolated from others who really care about them. They don't feel as though they belong; and if they did, they're not sure they want to belong. So, they stand aloof with an outward shell of being self-sufficient. But only outwardly. And behind the shell. An unknown author wrote this:

*There is so much of loneliness  
On this uncharted earth  
It seems each one's an outcast  
Overlooked from birth.  
There is such need for union,  
Such need for clasping hands,  
Yet we deny the brotherhood  
The human heart demands.*

Loneliness has always been with us. The first problem of Adam was not disobedience. It was loneliness. Humans have suffered from loneliness since.

Pioneer psychologist Eric Fromm declared the most basic fear of every human is a dread of being separated from other humans. It is first encountered in infancy. It is the source of anxiety until death. Separation and interpersonal loss are at the roots of the human experiences of fear, sadness, and sorrow.

Clarence Macartney, a Presbyterian minister, in a previous generation, described loneliness in a crowded city by saying, "You could lie down on the sidewalk and breathe your last, and not a heart among all those thousands of hearts would beat more rapidly, and not an eye would be suffused with tears."

In *Look Homeward Angel*, Thomas Wolfe says, "Naked and alone we came...into her womb ...from there we have come into the unspeakable and incommunicable...earth ...Which of us is not forever a stranger and alone?"<sup>xv</sup>

Possibly the most desolate description of loneliness was given in the book, *How Green Was My Valley* by Richard Llewellyn: "A man is a coward in space, for he is by himself, and if you feel you are lone, with not even yourself, that is fright for you. I wonder where the real You goes to when you are strange like that."<sup>xvi</sup>



Over one-fourth of American adults reported they had felt extremely lonely at least once within the previous two weeks. This was referred to by Dan McAdams in his book, *Intimacy: The Need to be Close* as reported over thirty years ago.<sup>xvii</sup>

What is it like now?

In an article entitled "All Alone," in *Ladies Home Journal*, 1991, Margery Rosen quoted Anne Peplau as saying, "At any given time, at least ten percent of the population feels lonely."<sup>xviii</sup> In 2013, studies revealed people on Facebook feel more lonely after going off line.

Why today? One of the main reasons is because half America's population moves residences within a typical ten-year period.

Vickie Kraft in her book, *The Influential Woman*, said, "Our mobility has made us rootless. It is difficult to sustain intensive friendships when forty million of us move every year. These facts encourage shallow personal relationships. Consequently, there is a pervasive loneliness eating away at the deep inner core of millions of people."<sup>xix</sup>

There are still other reasons, reasons of our own making. In the book, *The Day America Told the Truth*, Peter Kim and James Patterson reported that 50% of Americans said they'd never spent an evening with the people next door, 25% said they'd never been in their neighbor's house, and 20% said they didn't even know their name.<sup>xx</sup>

We add more and more activities to our day in an effort to alleviate our loneliness. This same survey revealed that adults watch an average of 24 to 41 hours of television every week, more than teens and children. But all we do is get more and more lonely.

*God, we know there are lonely people out there. But how are we supposed to know who they are? Help us understand.*

## Even Within the Church

The book, *Building People Through a Caring Sharing Fellowship* by Donald L. Bubna and Sarah Ricketts, begins with this account of one of their "active members."

"I want to withdraw my membership from the church. I have been living a lie, and I can't continue to hide it...I have discovered I don't believe in Christianity as a valid philosophy of life. Therefore, I can't remain a member of this church. I can't pretend any longer."<sup>xxi</sup>

James Thompson, in his book, *Our Life Together: A Fresh Look at Christian Fellowship*, explains that a few years ago some congregations allowed themselves to be analyzed by a specialist studying how groups work together. The response? "The great majority of church members had to admit that they knew a very small percentage of the people. Those who gathered for worship on Sunday were an anonymous group of worshipers."

Many go to church as they would go to the movie theater, the author concluded.<sup>xxii</sup>

Admittedly, in our day everyone seems to be time poor. We rush, rush everywhere. We don't have time for Christian fellowship. An hour or two on Sunday is all we feel we have time for, and even then, once a month or less.

Some people purposely avoid getting intimate with the members because it only means heartache when they have to move on. Who could fault them for trying to protect their hearts?

Others would like to get intimate, but the worship is not conducive to it. In fact, the only reason many attend church is to make sure they "get saved;" that is, to make sure God feels obligated to take them to heaven when they die. But they would never invite their friends to attend with them. Maybe they would a civic club meeting, but not a meeting of the church. The visitor would be even more bored than the member. Or, if the church offered entertainment, once that was over, their questions about the loneliness of life would remain hidden.

In the first-century Church, "Within the Christian community there was a sense of warmth: Someone was interested in them both here and hereafter. Here the stranger found a place where the people were 'members of one another!' It is no wonder that the church enjoyed such growth. There was no other community quite like it. The fellowship of the church meant far more than inviting one's close friends to a social gathering; it meant providing a little warmth to people who wanted to belong....The

church can minister to loneliness and uprootedness."<sup>xxiii</sup>

Although people today feel they do not have time for functions outside the Sunday morning worship, their needs can be met right then. We do not have to wait for a separate period of fellowship to accomplish this.

The first-century church certainly did not flourish because the twelve apostles were an impressive group of leaders with their MBAs or degrees in theology. It did not grow because of their superior organizational skills or the talents of its members.

It grew because of an active sense of family. It started with Jesus and grew like wildfire. One day "he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'" (Mark 3:34). Indeed, it caught on with the apostles, for one of them announced all believers in Christ were "brothers" (1 Peter 2:17).<sup>xxiv</sup>

Although Jesus' sacrifice and forgiveness was the power, caring for each other was the essential ingredient that kept the Christians together and drew others into them. Jesus said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

Do we show our love for each other by holding an important position in the church where we're seen a lot? Jesus said to be the most important we must become everyone's servant (Luke 22:24-27). That means that, if one member suffers, we all suffer; and if one member rejoices, we all rejoice (1 Corinthians 12:26). That means bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). That means receiving our weak brothers (Romans 14:1). That means strengthening each other's feeble arms and weak knees, and helping to make life's paths more level (Hebrews 12:12-13).

How are we to do this if our worship services are full of formalism or emotionalism and people always in charge of other people? Not only have we created a clergy system, but we now have a clergy auxiliary system—all the chairmen and performers. And we will move heaven and earth to protect our system that continually magnifies the leaders, and demands respect by the rest of the congregation—albeit "in the name of the Lord."

Do we claim Christian worship is impossible without all the highly-qualified leaders? That is not necessarily so.

Paul said over and over in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 14 that what we do in our worship services is to edify each other. This is not an "if we want to" type of thing. This is not an "if we have time" type of thing. This is a command. Is our congregation doing it?

As Thompson explains, "Our Christianity was never meant to be lived alone." The first-century church took its inter-relationships very seriously. They did not view "going to church" as just something to enhance their own relationship with Jesus.

The writer of Hebrews said the purpose of our worship services was to stir up one another. To emotionalism? To legalism? To admiration for people? No. Hebrews said we are to stir up each other to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Apparently when this was written, many Christians had quit going to church. Apparently they had gotten bored because the worship was not relative to their lives. Hebrews 13:16 says we are to "not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased."

If our worship services are designed strictly to "get more faith," maybe we're missing the boat. Jesus' brother in James 2:17-19 said, "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead....You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder."

Thompson concludes, "As long as the church is incapable of caring for the sufferer, it has not broken through to establish real fellowship."<sup>xxv</sup>

Dr. Frederic Flach concluded in his *Secret Strength of Depression* that more and more as each year passes, loneliness is being manifest in our society through casual sex, drive for success, and suicide.

*Oh, God. All this time I thought I was helping the church. They said my talents were needed to glorify God. But, if people are truly going away lonely, what am I doing wrong?*

## Symptoms of Hidden Loneliness

*Casual Sex Emphasis*

Dr. Flach related, "The growing demand for intimacy and sexual fulfillment in human relationships [over the past several years], both heterosexual and homosexual, arises in part....the demise of family life, with parents, grandparents, and adolescents all inhabiting their own separate worlds.

"In spite of crowdedness, loneliness is epidemic. The average individual feels isolated and alienated, and these feelings reinforce the need for, and challenge of, intimacy.

"....profound depersonalization fostered by this culture.... with millions of people the computer has helped to feel like things....The social scientists aptly describe this as a marketing society...more than a little disquieting to hear people discussed statistically as if they were items for sale or rent. The individual begins to feel like an object....

"Loneliness and a feeling of being alienated have become common ways of experiencing depression. At the same time, many lonely and depressed people turn to sex as a way of relieving that inner emptiness....yet there is usually a sharp return of depression afterward, when the bogus reassurance wears off."<sup>xxvi</sup>

In *The Day America Told the Truth*, interviews revealed that "this sexual hunger leads us to places and practices where the Bible and many federal and state laws explicitly tell us not to go. We couldn't care less....At a time when greed is celebrated, it is only fitting that sexual greed in the form of the harem should be popular both for men and women."<sup>xxvii</sup>

The Bible says in Ecclesiastes 2:1-2; 8-11, "I thought in my heart, 'Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good. But that also proved to be meaningless. 'Laughter,' I said, 'is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?....I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man....I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.... everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."

But the Bible does not leave us hopeless. Hosea 8:9-10 says, "They have gone up...wandering alone...sold self to lovers....I will now gather them together."

Do members of our congregation feel so alone that, at some time or another, many of them have gotten involved in illicit affairs,

just searching for someone who cares about them? Do our members have an opportunity to share their cares with others every time they come, or are they expected to act "decently and in order"?

How are these lonely people supposed to know the Bible addresses their problem if they don't think anyone in the church cares about them, and neither does God?

Those of you who have attended your congregation for a long time, get out some old directories and note those who no longer attend. Make a note of all the people who left because they got involved in a sexual relationship that was not good for them.

### *Career Emphasis*

I have heard female clerks earning minimum wage during a lull at work tell each other they didn't have to work, but they could never stay home because they had no idea what they would do with their time. They had no confidence they could even think of anything.

Elsewhere in his book, Dr. Flach relates what one career person told him: "There just wasn't anyone I could talk to. At work I had what I would call working friends, but I couldn't open up to them. We had a veneer of camaraderie, but under the surface there was always the jockeying for better position. Besides, in business you're not supposed to have problems. Everybody does – but if you admit it or show it, you get tagged as unstable....

"And having no one to share feelings with, everything became magnified in my mind. I couldn't get rid of things that kept bothering me or get any perspective. I just kept feeling more and more hopeless about things at home, and about my life in general."<sup>xxviii</sup>

Many people today pursue success in the business world to fill the loneliness. Resulting success finally brings a lot of friends, but they are superficial. Some people's marriage is even based on status, and so it too fails.

Then the loneliness comes crashing in. The loneliness can't even be filled by children, for they were never really close either. The loneliness can't be filled by aging parents because they've become separated and distanced through the process of trying to gain success. The final question: Is the cost for success too much?

Ecclesiastes 2:4-11 and 4:8 says, "I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them....I amassed silver and gold for myself....I became greater by far than anyone....My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve....There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth."

But the Bible does not leave us hopeless. Luke 10:40-42a relates, "But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed.'"

Do members of our congregation only feel religiously successful if they have some kind of title, thus thrusting them in a control atmosphere? Although we don't say it, is importance measured by title—head of this project, leader of that committee, member of the 'See-How-Holy-I-Can-Look movement? Is our congregation so caught up in success that there is always some program for the improvement of the building, a building that everyone claims is, of course, for the glory of God?

How are these lonely people supposed to know the Bible addresses their problem if they don't think anyone in the church cares about them, and neither does God?

Those of you who have attended your congregation for a long time, get out some old membership directories. Make a note of those who no longer attend because of power pulls or arguments or never being a part of anything.

### *Suicide Emphasis*

After "trying everything," some people come to a dead end and see no hope. They see no answers. They feel completely deserted by the world.

In *The Day America Told the Truth*, it was reported that nearly half the people they interviewed knew someone who had committed suicide, usually someone close to them. One-third of

those they interviewed said they had seriously contemplated suicide.<sup>xxix</sup>

Numbers 11:14 tells about the greatest law-giver in history, Moses, and what he went through: "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now – if I have found favor in your eyes – and do not let me face my own ruin."

Psalms 102:7-8, 11 tells about King David. "I lie awake; I have become like a bird alone on a roof. All day long my enemies taunt me....My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass."

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 refers so matter-of-factly – so fatalistically – to things that should be important in our lives, as though there was no use fighting fate. "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die....a time to kill and a time to heal....a time to mourn and a time to dance....a time to search and a time to give up....a time to love and a time to hate."

In fact in verse 18-21 he says outright that he was thinking fatalistically. "Man's fate is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. all have the same breath; man has no advantage over the animal. Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return. Who knows if the spirit of man rises upward and if the spirit of the animal goes down into the earth?"

But the Bible does not leave us hopeless. The writer of Ecclesiastes ends his hopelessness this way: "Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole of man" (12:13). When Jesus felt deserted, he said, "The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone....You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me" (John 8:29; 16:32).

Do members of our congregation feel that meeting with the other members is not worth fighting for, resulting in a constant outflow of members? Over the past ten years, have our members been committing spiritual suicide by just ceasing to attend church at all?

How are these lonely people supposed to know the Bible



addresses their problem if they don't think anyone in the church cares about them, and neither does God?

Those of you who have attended your congregation for a long time, get out some old membership directories. Make a note of those who no longer attend, and whose lives have gone down farther and farther since then.

*God, I thought they were just defying the Bible. I thought I should keep my distance from people like that. We're doing something wrong, God. What is it?*

## Denials and Coverups

It was reported that, when Rupert Brooke, an English poet, was boarding a ship to travel from Liverpool to New York, he noticed everyone had friends waving farewell to them. But he had no friends. He looked around and eventually spotted a little urchin nearby.

The poet rushed over to the pauper and asked, "What is your name?" "William" was the reply. "Do you want to earn six pence, William?" Of course he did. "Then wave to me when the boat goes."

The world is full of people trying to buy their way out of loneliness, and their purchases are only artificial.

Why, then, aren't the churches full of those lonely people? They certainly should be. And could be.

Psalms 142:4 reports, "No man cared for my soul." But we can always have a friend in Jesus can't we? Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God "has also set eternity in the hearts of men."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote nearly two centuries ago, "So lonely 't was, that God himself scarce seemed there to be" (*The Ancient Mariner*, Part vii).

In the play, *Our town* by Thornton Wilder, a teenage girl who died was allowed to return to see her family one more time and to watch herself in earlier days with them. When she went into the kitchen of her childhood home, she went up to her mother and began talking to her, but her mother did not even look up. She cried out, "Look at me, Mama! Just look at me!" Then she went over

to where her father was reading the newspaper and tried to get his attention. She failed there too, though she pled once more, "Look at me, Papa! Just look at me!"

When people come to our worship services, especially the visitors or those whom members do not know very well, is this their plea? "Look at me, Christians! Just look at me!"

What is the church like to outsiders? What is our congregation like to people in the neighborhood of our building? Do they see people go into a building and come out again and that's all? No one is any different from what anyone else can tell?

Do we even care what outsiders think of us? **Are we afraid outsiders will come in and "change everything"**? Are we putting our egos in front of their eternity? We may pay with our own eternity. What kind of defenses does our congregation set up against intrusion by strangers and change?

How many souls are being saved because our congregation exists and because we worship as we do? We must face it. Can we do it? Do we dare make those lists of all the people our congregation has lost through the years? Do we dare look at each name, each one representing a soul, and cry out to God, "Did we try hard enough? Did we try the right things? Did these souls ever know that everyone in our congregation loved them?"

It might be easier to stay in denial and not make those lists. Facing it may cause a frightening depression.

*God, I know people in the community aren't attracted to us. But I thought it was just because they didn't love you as much as we do.*

## Temporary Congregational Depression

The book, *The Secret Strength of Depression*, offers many suggestions for individuals that could be carried out by congregations because congregations are made up of individuals. Below, whenever this book is quoted, a word referring to congregations will be substituted for individuals.

Chapter two states, "Any event or any change in a [congregation's] life that forces [them] to break down some of these defenses, for whatever reason, is going to be painful. To experience

acute depression is an opportunity for a [congregation] not just to learn more about [themselves], but to become more whole than [they were]."<sup>xxx</sup>

The loss of past members and failure to bring in new ones as they move into our neighborhood is good cause for depression. For our congregation, such a loss is like a death. Are these losses being mourned like they should be? If the loss of members, just like the loss of a personal loved one, is not acknowledged, the problem will come out eventually in a disguised form.

"Not only does depression afford a chance for insight," Dr. Flack continues, "but 'falling apart' can accelerate the process of reordering [a congregation's] life after a serious stress—a loss, for example. Becoming depressed is an inevitable concomitant of letting go—of [people, positions, pieces of our identity]."

A congregation falling apart can be symptomized, not only by loss of members, but also by arguing and spitting. Take time to discover the deeper problem such behavior is reflecting. Why do individual members feel frustrated enough to argue or to quit? Is that hard to do? It's as hard as any individual trying to discover their own faults. We can see others' faults, but it is next to impossible to see our own, as hard as we try. But it can be done in an atmosphere of humility.

Jesus' brother said, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill [reputations?] and covet [positions?], but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight...." (James 4:1-2).

Dr. Flach goes on to say, "Depression reduces vitality. The mood makes it difficult, if not impossible, to envision solutions to problems....denial of [members'] emotional needs in order to defend [our own emotional needs] against the possible hurt of another rejection, were the first steps in the building of [the congregation's] trap....Instead of reacting to them appropriately and working the issues through, [a congregation] denies the feelings, shuts them out of consciousness, and conceals them through the formation of mechanisms designed to protect [the long-time members] against future hurt."<sup>xxxi</sup>

*God, don't make me face this. I know the only way it seems we can get along is to not try anything new and keep our mouths shut. We're not growing, true, but....*

## Funeral: From Death to Resurrection

Before a congregation can be resurrected, it must go through a death. That does not mean it literally closes its doors and goes out of existence. We're not talking about a physical death here. We're talking about a spiritual death.

Even though some of the individual members have gone through a spiritual death and resurrection, everyone recognizes that not every member of a congregation is really and truly a Christian.

Repentance is a form of death. The word comes from the Greek *meta-noeo*, *meta* meaning afterward, and *noeo* meaning perception. It contrasts with *pro-noeo* meaning to perceive beforehand.

We must put to death our mindsets, our habits, our egos. Romans 8:6 says, "The mind of sinful [congregations] is death."

Paul told the weak congregation at Corinth in his second letter to them, "We always carry around in our [congregational] body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our [congregational] body" (4:10-11).

Here he was talking about persecutions and threats of death to the apostles. But can not this concept be carried into the church? Can not our congregation put its ego to death so that the plain gospel of Jesus Christ—his saving grace made possible by his death and resurrection—can be made obvious to our members and visitors EVERY TIME WE ATTEND?

Jesus was so determined to carry out the things necessary to be done for the salvation of mankind, that he did everything God told him to—all the way to torture and death on the cross. Is our congregation led by Jesus' example? Are we willing to put to death the way we've always done things, so that we may carry out the things necessary to be done for the salvation of our members and our neighborhood?

Was this easy for Jesus? Indeed not. Hebrews 5:7 says that "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death."

To put our wills, our egos, our identity, our habits—everything we've always done—to death is torture. Jesus did not want to face it. Just what made him go through with it all?

Verse 8 explains, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered." And what was the result? Verse 9 says, "and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

By suffering for awhile, our congregation could be perfected and, vicariously through Jesus Christ, become the source of eternal salvation to people in our community.

Obviously, no congregation will be made perfect, except by the blood of Jesus. Still, we have to face each other's faults and our corporate faults each time we come together. But we can at least try to put them to death. Why? So that our congregation can "become the [citadel for] eternal salvation for all who obey him."

What it does mean is for the congregation to come together alone—with no visitors—and allow each person to stand and say something about self, but definitely not about other people: "I have had this attitude which I thought was protecting the church because to me...."; "I have been pushing my pet program because in my mind...."; "I have resented....because I always thought...."; "I have insisted on directing...because I felt...."; "I have been afraid of new people coming into the congregation, because...."

Then, in the spirit of repentance, let the congregation go to God in prayer—perhaps even silent prayer at first—and ask God to forgive all our inabilities to see things the way other members do, see things the way visitors do, and see things the way God does.

Then have your funeral.

Just as imperfect people are not remembered for their imperfections at funerals, we must not either. Just as imperfect people are eulogized for the good they did and for a savior who forgives and offers life anyway, we must do that for our congregation.

Let us not use this as an opportunity to bash the programs

our congregation has tried in the past or is now trying, but to no avail; or to bash people who always insist on being in the forefront "lest the congregation go astray" without this person's leadership.

Instead, let us remind ourselves as a congregation that we are now forgiven. And now forgiven, we look to God the Son and once more make Jesus our only leader. Now forgiven, we look to God the Father to raise us from our death unto a marvelous resurrection as a congregation. Now forgiven, we look to God the Spirit as revealed in the Word (John 14:17 and 17:17) to lead us as we lead others to that same forgiveness.

Let us openly declare at our funeral, "Jesus, we will have no leader besides you, regardless of how religiously important other leaders may seem." "Father, we will base our resurrected congregational life on the way you want us to live." "Spirit, we will follow you, the Word, to the ends of the earth, and we will bow down to no other word besides you."

*Forgive us, God. And forgive my specific part in what we have failed to do. I fall at your feet just as unworthy to be saved as everyone else. I fall at your feet in tears. And I whisper, thank you.*

## The New Regenerated Life

Now that the funeral is over, what? People do not just automatically "snap out of it" after the funeral. Congregations cannot. After the funeral, there is a whole strange new life ahead. A life so completely different that we can hardly fathom it. Life without the way we always were before? Life without all those activities we always had to do together?

It may be that in the days that follow when your congregation assembles, you will reach over and long for that which you miss so much, just like a widow or widower in the night. Oh, to have things back the way they always were.

But a new life means just that: A new life. A life of starting all over again as though we were just born. Just born, like the first congregation in the history of mankind. Is that possible? Could it be? Can any congregation be just like the first congregation of the

church of Jesus Christ in history? Can we possibly know what it was like? Is there enough written about the first-century church to know?

Oh, to be like them! Oh, to start over so fresh that everyone in our congregation feels they, too, are newborn with us. So fresh that everyone in our neighborhood feels they can be newborn with us. Oh to have the same form and spirit as they did in the first century so that lonely and frustrated souls can be brought to the Lord every day (Acts 2:47).

*God, I'm not sure we can do it. We've been like this since we organized years ago. Change is too frightening. What if we lose control? How can we possibly do it?*

## God's New Last Will and Testament

What does it take to be like the church was in its infancy back there in Jerusalem?

First, we need to recognize that there have been many changes to the church since then. Some call it growing and maturing. But, if we are going to be like the infant church of the first century, we new-borns must go back to doing things as they did.

Well, didn't Martin Luther accomplish that? After all, he got rid of the priest-laity system, and he got rid of indulgences that "paid" in full the penalty for our sins, and he got rid of the worldly headquarters at Rome. Didn't Martin Luther go all the way back to that first-century church?

We must realize that, by Martin Luther's time, there were hundreds and hundreds of church laws. To work backwards and one by one strip away each law is practically, if not actually, impossible. By sifting through them all, eliminating some and keeping the rest until we can figure them out, is not restoring our infancy. It may take us back to an earlier age, but it is not a complete restoration.

Darryl Tippens wrote "Rediscovering Christian Worship" for *21<sup>st</sup> Century Christian Magazine*. He began his article this way:

"Saul Bellow, the prize-winning American novelist, tells of his visit to an Israeli kibbutz, a small farming community near Herod's Caesarea. Bellow was struck by the fact that Roman ruins lay all about the farm....[While they were plowing] a field one day they turned up an entire Roman street.

"As I read Bellow's description, I couldn't help thinking of the state of today's Christians who seek to renew Christian worship. Just as those modern citizens of Israel carry out their mundane chores on top of a buried classical culture, today's Christian worshipers live atop a rich spiritual past which they only dimly recognize. How these worshipers would be nourished if only they could get in touch with the resources of their past!

"Much of Christian worship today is safe, predictable, and orderly, but it also may be dull, lifeless, and shallow. Does it have to be? Not at all. Christians everywhere are seeking and finding biblical ways to improve their public worship....

"We need archaeologists of the spirit who can sift the past of biblical tradition and restore the rich possibilities for devoting ourselves to our Maker. Fortunately, there are churches today still practicing these lost-forgotten elements of worship, and they have much to teach us, if we will listen and observe."<sup>xxxii</sup>

What would those farmers have if they dug up those classical ruins and incorporated them with the houses and barns they presently have? They certainly would not have a restored first-century.

But that's exactly what we've been doing for centuries to try to recreate first-century worship. We only got rid of what we were doing that we didn't like, and filled it in with first-century worship we happened to like. This is not restoring the original. This is reforming what we presently have with just SOME of the original. Reformation is not Restoration.

Centuries ago there was a grand Reformation Movement. Its purpose was to reform the world-controlling Catholic church by sifting through all its practices and trashing all that we did not agree with.

As a result, we came up with major denominations beginning with the Lutherans, then the Episcopalians, then the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and so on. People who attend



one of the major denominations are part of the Reformation Movement.

Although this was an outstanding movement with God's blessings, they did not go far enough. They did not put completely to death the church as it was in their day and let it start all over again, resurrected as a first-century church in its infancy.

Probably the main thing that has interfered with congregations returning to the way things were in New Testament times is our not understanding that God has taken mankind through three eras, and his rules for one era never applied to actions in the other eras.

## Ages of Mankind's Life

The first era could be called the "Father Age." It lasted from the creation to the time of Moses. In those days, there was no organized religion as such. Each family worshipped the way the father led them. The book of Genesis covers this "Father Age."

Romans 1:19-23 explains that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him....and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."

However, there were a few godly people. Job, for instance, lived in this "Father Age" and whenever his grown children got together for a feast, "Job would send and have them purified. Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them, thinking, 'Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.' This was Job's regular custom" (Job 1:5).

This first era was God's way of showing mankind that we, left on our own with our own imagination, cannot be perfect.

The second era was called the "Mosaic Age." God selected one nation on earth to give his special law to—the Jews. He gave it to them through Moses on Mount Sinai. The books of Exodus,

Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy lists all the laws, about six hundred in all. They covered types of worship God wanted from them (such as having a high priest and going to the temple three times a year) and the way they should live day to day (such as not eating pork and not doing any work on Saturdays).

This second era was God's way of showing mankind that we still—even with every conceivable type of law to show us how—can't be perfect. In fact, Romans 3:20 says, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

Romans 2:12 says, "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law." And later in his explanation, God concludes, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The third era is called the "Christian Age." Colossians 2:14 says, "Having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross." Ephesians explains this further by saying that Jesus destroyed the old law, "by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations" (2:15).

The book of Hebrews in the New Testament says that Jesus was without sin (4:15); he is the only one who ever kept the laws of the Old Testament perfectly.

There is a reason for calling the first half of the Bible the Old Testament, and the second half the New Testament. Hebrews 9:15 explains that Jesus "is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first [old] testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance" (KJV—Hebrews 9:15).

We all know what a last will and testament is. The Bible is God's. He had one last will and testament until Jesus came—the Old Testament. Then he changed his will.

"For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth" (KJV—Hebrews 9:16-17).

The Old Testament was kept in effect by the death of animals.

"Whereupon neither the first [old] testament was dedicated without blood...according to the law [of Moses], he took the blood of calves and goats...saying, This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you" (KJV – Hebrews 9:18-20).

Likewise, the New Testament was put into effect by the death of the Lamb of God (John 1:29).

"So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many" (KJV – Hebrews 9:28).

What does all this mean? It means that we are not to keep the Old Testament, whether it be from the "Father Age" where individual families were led in worship by their fathers, or from the "Mosaic Age" where people were hounded day in and day out with hundreds of minute laws.

James, the brother of Jesus said, "Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it" (James 2:10). The apostle Paul warned in Galatians 3:10, "All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do EVERYTHING written in the Book of the Law."

Therefore, if on Sundays we use one kind of worship from the Old Testament, we have to use all the other kinds. And that includes animal sacrifices, having a temple, not eating pork, reporting to priests when we recover from illnesses for permission to return to worship, living in tents one week a year, etc.

Paul says it again in Galatians 5:3: "Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the WHOLE law [of Moses]. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace."

Pulling things equally out of the Old Testament and the New Testament to guide us in worship is throwing us into confusion. Paul said so himself, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit: "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?...The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty" (Galatians 5:7, 10).

As stated earlier, what would we have if we mixed the ruins of ancient buildings with buildings that have been built since then? We would not have a restoration of the ancient building. But that is

what we have been doing in our worship.

As a result, we are confusing people. And we are missing the real intimacy that simple and true New Testament worship offers us. As a result, people are popping in and out of churches searching for an immediate sense of spirituality among the worshippers and an immediate sense of connectedness with God that they are not getting.

*We want that, God. We want to be like the first century church. But how? How can we know what it was really like? Help us.*

## Restoring First-Century Worship

Believe it or not, a large part of the way most protestant denominations worship today is a direct influence of the Roman Catholic church, and their influence was the Old Testament. Some readers will throw up their hands in denial at the thought. Follow the pope? Never! But it is true.

Many Catholic additions to and changes in our worship were resurrected from the Old Testament Law of Moses. Most are nearly carbon copies of Jewish worship except for animal sacrifices. There is even a movement among Protestants to rebuild the Temple on its old foundation in Jerusalem. What in the world for?! God destroyed it. How arrogant of us.

Infant baptism was introduced in 187 AD, copying the Jews who circumcised babies. They made it church law in 1457. Sprinkling as a form of baptism was introduced in 250 AD, but was not very well accepted until the twelfth century.

In 451, priests began wearing sacred vestments, copying priests under the law of Moses, and it was made church law in 850 AD.

Also in 451, the Roman church insisted church heads refrain from changing their dress to the more modern styles, saying they must imitate the clothing of our first parents, Adam and Eve. It was also in imitation of the Jewish practice of the priests wearing special vestments for respect. It was made official in 850 AD.

In 666 AD musical instruments were introduced into

Christian worship, copying the Jews who had instruments during the daily worship at the temple.

In 1079 candles were introduced into worship, copying the use of candles in the Jewish temple, and it became church law in 1611. Incense was introduced into worship in 1079 copying the use of incense in Jewish worship, and it became church law in 1213.

In 1095, common Christians were told they could take the bread if given by a bishop, but not the cup ever, by copying Old Testament Jewish priests who drank the wine part of the sacrifices.

In 1215, taking the Lord's Supper was declared to be necessary only once a year, copying the Jews who celebrated the Passover Feast once a year, and it became church law that same year.

In 1274, the church announced that presbyters (elders) were the same thing as pastors, and pastors were the same thing as priests. Therefore, priests and pastors could head the local congregations. This was copied from Aaron's descendants in the Old Testament being priests.

In 1495, choirs were introduced, copying the choirs in the Jewish temple. In 1547, the use of choirs became official, and their wearing of vestments like the priests was required. This copied the Jewish use of choirs in the temple and their wearing fine linen vestments.

In 1547, the Catholic church declared ministers and pastors had to be ordained, copying Jewish priests and Levites being ordained in the Law of Moses.

The Old Testament not only proved our sinfulness, but it showed on a literal and material level what Christians are to do on a spiritual level. The Old Testament is a commentary for the more spiritual New Testament. Galatians 3:24-25 says the Old Testament is our schoolmaster. We cannot fully understand or appreciate the benefits of Christianity without studying the Old Testament with its literalness.

For instance, Romans 12:1 says we are to offer our own bodies as daily sacrifices, not the bodies of animals. Christians are to circumcise our hearts (Romans 2:25-31). All Christians are priests (1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2:5-9). All Christians, as priests, wear vestments of sinless white. Christians are to pluck the harp strings of their heart

(Ephesians 5:1). Jesus is our high priest (Hebrews 2:17-3:1) and only potentate (1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 6:15). Each candle used in the temple is now a congregation of the church (Revelation 1:20-2:1,5). The incense of worship is the prayers of Christians (Revelation 8:34).

May we never substitute our glorious and New Testament with its spiritual law of grace for all the material and literal things that had to be practiced under the restricting Old Testament. The more we practice Old Testament forms of worship, the less we touch hearts and lives in our public worship.

While the Old Law of Moses brought God into a somewhat personal relationship with mankind, it was nothing compared with the New Law of Grace which brought us into the very presence of God's throne of grace. Who, in their right mind, would want to go back?

God literally poured out his heart in his Word (Proverbs 1:19, 23; John 1:1-3). How could anyone arrogantly believe they could improve on it? To worship God or man?

None of the Reformers sifted through all the hundreds of Catholic church laws. It was too difficult. So they kept a lot of it. Which ones do our congregations follow? By following them, whether or not we knew it before, we are still following the pope!

The only parts of the Old Law of Moses Christians are to keep are those things which were repeated in the New Testament. For instance, every one of the Ten Commandments was repeated in the New Testament except "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy."

*God, I didn't know. None of us did. Even our pastor didn't realize this. God, we're confused. We want to please you. How? How do we find out how, and then actually do it?*

## The Island and Blank Sheet of Paper

Let us try to pretend that we and our friends have been pagans on an isolated island somewhere, a Bible suddenly dropped out of the sky, and we were just converted to Christianity.

There are no church buildings around and no one we know

ever heard of church buildings, so we have no concept of them. Our past pagan religion had few rituals for individuals, and did not require formal public gatherings, so we have no concept of a "worship service."

We were left with only a Bible. Is that enough? Now, what do we do? Obviously, we must start from square one.

In order to start from square one, we must pretend we haven't ever worshipped God before. Just keep as our motto: **Where the Bible speaks, we speak.** Can we do it? Yes! By getting out a blank sheet of paper, searching the New Testament, and noting only those things the Christians did in their first-century worship.

And remember the remainder of our motto: **Where the Bible is silent, we remain silent.** If it doesn't mention a particular form of worship, it cannot appear on our list.

We will end up with the Christian world that the first century converts lived in. In the process, we will also find out why they attracted so many and grew so fast.

So, when the early Christians "came together on the first day of the week" (Acts 20:7), what did they do? Did they suddenly begin having all the formalism we have today? Or has formalism evolved to the detriment of a personal and personable type of worship?

If first-century Christians attended one of our worship services today, how comfortable would they be? Would much happen that they were familiar with? Would we be spending much more time on something they considered less important, and much less time on something they considered more important? Just what is important anyway?

Do you think any of them left their worship services feeling lonely? Do you think they avoided any visitors searching for answers? Answers to who and what they were? Answers to who and what God Is? Answers to how Jesus could touch their lives?

And, by the way, how comfortable would Jesus be?

*God, everyone told me I had this talent to do things in front of the congregation. I want to use my talent for you. How can I do that and get intimate with the other members at the same time?*

## Meeting the Roots of Entitlement in the Heart

We have developed a presumptuous society that is covering up lonely hearts. We have developed an entitlement society that is covering up frightened hearts.

We have come full circle from the beginning of this chapter centering on fear of death via war and persecution. Kahoe and Dunn reported that people who attend religious services weekly are least afraid of dying.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In another study made of both denominational and self-declared spiritualized people, it was discovered that only those whose spiritual life centered around a congregation protected them against the fear of death.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Just how fearful are we—even we healthy ones—on a day-to-day basis of death or bodily harm? The chairman and CEO of Gallup wrote in a blog in 2013. “Walking the streets in countries around the world carries a real risk....kidnapping [in] South America, and rape [in] India....sub-Saharan Africa.” Rather than rely on police reports, Gallup asked a question of thousands of subjects worldwide that seemed to get to the heart of the matter: “Do you feel safe walking alone at night in the city or area where you live?”

One-fourth of Americans are afraid to walk alone at night. One-fifth of Canadians are afraid. Half of Russians are. Sixty-percent of Afghans are. Seventy-four percent of Venezuelans are.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Indeed, fear of losing something important to life coupled with an age of entitlement which masks itself in false pride in order to hide the fears is what we face, what the church faces.

It seems that we, in the church, need to address fear and entitlement (pride) in our lessons. If it is fear that motivates us to do the drastic in our life, perhaps a little love-fear in our lessons wouldn't hurt. Usually fear comes first, and true, deep deep love follows.

But entitlement covering up fear of loss is nothing new. Back in the days when the Law of Moses was being kept, God



condemned Jewish priests, even though they were doing exactly what God had told them to do in worship. Why? Because they were being self-serving and legalistic and not reaching out to others. They were looking out for number one. As long as they had job security in their religious hierarchy, that's all that mattered. Here is what he said:

"The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?...Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies....When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you....wash and make yourselves clean....learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Isaiah 1:11-17).

Then when the Christian Age started, did the early church grow because of the great choirs or magnificent bands? Did it grow because the church services were more exciting than the pagan temple services down the street? Did it grow because Sundays at church were more entertaining than Sundays at the amphitheater on the other side of town?

Christians in the first century were willing to die for the God they worshipped and the way they worshipped. Are we? Would we be willing to die for the way we worship? Or is the whole thing boring?

This is what was written about 150 AD in a *Letter of the Smyrnaeans*, and includes also an account of how far those early Christians were willing to go to defend their simple way of worshiping God:

"For it is the office of true and steadfast love, not only to desire that oneself be saved, but all the brethren also....seeing that when they were so torn by lashes that the mechanism of their flesh was visible even as far as the inward veins and arteries, they were endured patiently...

"...none of them uttered a cry or a groan....And they found the fire of their inhuman torturers cold....And in like manner also those that were condemned to the wild beasts endured fearful punishments, being made to lie upon sharp shells and buffeted with other forms of manifold tortures....

"...[a youth] used violence and dragged the wild beast towards him[self], desiring the more speedily to obtain a release from their unrighteous and lawless life."<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Dear reader, let us clear our minds now, as we begin our pursuit of first-century worship. Clear it of all the formalism and informalism, or all decorous buildings and uniforms, and all preconceived notions of what works and doesn't work.

We have become a presumptuous society, presuming God will take us to heaven no matter how much we avoid him in favor of pursuing things. Are we presuming too much? What is missing in our worship that makes most people in our society think they can do without it? What kind of presumptuous, entitled heart do we hide in the shadows because we are afraid we will sink alone without those attitudes?

Let us open our hearts to the possibilities in worship that may have escaped us. Grab hold of them, wrestle with them, and in the process perhaps even submit to them.

Loneliness and emptiness is at the root of entitlement. 1<sup>st</sup> John 2:16 summarizes it: Lust and pride. We deserve, don't get, then feel empty and lonely. We think happiness is right around the corner if we could just get what we're entitled to. But it isn't there, so we try something else. We're never truly satisfied. In the rest of the book, loneliness, emptiness, and entitlement will be interchangeable.

Think of all the loneliness in the world. Our own loneliness. The loneliness of others. The loneliness of God as he pursues us and cries out, "Look at me! Really look at me! I love you!"

Think of the Savior we all wish to find and embrace together.

*Oh, God. We've got so caught up in our traditions. Forgive us. We didn't mean to. Help us see ourselves as we are, see the lost and lonely as they are, and see you as you are. Help us see clearly, even through the mist of our tears.*

## Second-Generation Church Accounts

Written about 95 AD, the Epistle of Clement, v. 59 relates this: "Save

those among us who are in tribulation; have mercy on the lowly; lift up the fallen...convert the wanderers...raise up the weak; comfort the faint-hearted. Let all the Gentiles know...."

**An Ancient Homily written about 120 AD** by an unknown Christian says in verse 13: "Neither let us desire to please one another only, but also those men that are without, by our righteousness, that the Name be not blasphemed by reason of us...For the Gentiles, when they hear from our mouth the oracles of God, marvel at them for their beauty and greatness; then, when they discover that our works are not worthy of the words which we speak, forthwith they betake themselves to blasphemy, saying that it is an idle story and a delusion."

**A letter written about 150 AD** by an unknown Christian who called himself a "**disciple of Apostles**," explains Christianity to a non-believer, **Epistle to Diognetus**, v. 1, 5, 9: "Since I see, most excellent Diognetus, that thou art exceedingly anxious to understand the religion of the Christians....they love all men...they are reviled and they bless; they are insulted, and they respect...being punished they rejoice...."....being convicted in the past time by our own deeds as unworthy of life, we might now be made deserving by the goodness of God....He hated us not, neither rejected us, nor bore us malice, but was long-suffering and patient....O the sweet exchange, O the inscrutable creation, O the unexpected benefits....we should believe in His goodness and should regard Him as nurse, father, teacher, counsellor, physician, mind, light, honour, glory, strength and life."

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ENDNOTES FOR CH. 1 ~

DARE-TO-CARE WORSHIP

- i. *Wikipedia*, "Weekly church Attendance Statistics"
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