



*The Church
You've Been
Longing For*

THE HOSPERS PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH IN AMERICA (PCA)

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Longing For

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Brian V. Janssen

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Introduction

CAN YOU GET TO HEAVEN WITHOUT JOINING A CHURCH?

“Everybody knows you don’t have to join a church to go to heaven.” This view is widely held today, considered by many to be unassailable truth, which is pretty amazing since the opposite is so clearly taught throughout the Bible. “What really matters,” we are told, “is to invite Jesus into your heart,” a statement that is *not* found in the Bible.

But the truth is that *you certainly cannot get to heaven without joining the church*. The church is the Bride of Christ. If you refuse to be a part of the Bride of Christ, then the Groom (Christ) will not invite you to attend the wedding. To become a Christian *is* to join his church.

Ah, but can you get to heaven without joining *a local* church? The answer, beyond all doubt is, “PROBABLY NOT.”

Where did we ever get the idea that following Jesus Christ meant something other than belonging to a local church? Like many errors in the evangelical church today, it arose in the mid-1800s springing from the revivalism which swept through the English-speaking church in Great Britain and North America, sometime after the Second Great Awakening.

Many of these revivalist preachers sought to awaken sleepy or nominal church members creating excitement through dramatics and high-pressure techniques of persuasion. Numerous church leaders, however, objected to such overt emotionalism. So revivalist preachers often criticized churches openly. They pronounced church membership unnecessary, even irrelevant to vital, “heart-felt” Christianity, an astonishing development. After all, if one could be a church member and not be a Christian, then perhaps one could be a Christian and not a church member. One revivalist preacher put it this way: “Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going into a stable makes you a

horse.” Of course that’s true. But what would we think of a horse that consistently chose not to go into a stable, a place that normal horses love and enjoy? In time we might start to think that it was not really a horse after all. And we would probably be right.

To defeat this dreadful notion that church membership is unnecessary or optional for the Christian, I have compiled a Top Ten List of biblical reasons why (ordinarily) *only church members will go to heaven.*

10. God’s plan from the beginning was to form a people, not merely individuals. All through the Bible, God announced his plan to create his people (plural). He has said repeatedly, “*And they (plural) shall be my people, and I will be their (plural) God.*” (Jer. 30:22; 31:33; 32:38; Deut. 26:17; 26:18-19; Ezek. 37:23; 37:27; Zech. 8:8; Zech. 13:9; Heb. 8:10)

9. The New Testament is filled with numerous “one anothers.” These frequent commands call believers to help and support their fellow believers. Yet how are any of us to obey any of these instructions if we are not in close fellowship with other believers? Such close fellowship presupposes some regular connection with other Christians. Traditionally, this has meant church membership. To my knowledge, no better system has arisen to replace the church. Perhaps this is because God intended us to belong to churches.

8. The Bible commands believers to obey their Christian leaders. The reason is because these leaders watch over our souls. “*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*” (Hebrews 13:17) If one does not join a church and come under the authority of the church’s eldership, then it is hard to see how or why he or she should obey those church leaders. But it is also hard to see how these leaders can keep watch over the souls of those who do not join the church, and why these leaders should have to give an account for the condition of souls who did not become accountable to them. This kind of relationship sounds suspiciously like the church, and, if so, membership would seem commanded by this text.

7. Even clearer is the command for believers to meet together regularly. “*And let us consider how to stir up one another to*

love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24-25) This is one of those “one anothers.” And this time it is in the context of stirring one another up to love by meeting together for that end. I suppose one could meet with other Christians regularly without joining them, but why not join them?

6. The New Testament pictures the church as “the Body of Christ.” (1 Cor. 12:12ff, Eph. 4:1ff.). In these contexts the emphasis is on many diverse members united into one body working together. Question: does that imagery make you think more of church members formally bound together by covenant promises or a haphazard collection of individuals who may or may not belong to each other and who may or may not be committed to each other? The question answers itself.

5. The New Testament also speaks of the need for accountability and church discipline. Paul wrote that a guilty offender should be removed from the church. How would this be possible if he were not a part of the church (a member) in some formal way? Those of us in church leadership know that you cannot discipline non-members. Jesus said that if an offending brother will not listen to the church, then the church is to treat him like a “Gentile and a tax collector,” that is, as a non-Christian. But that would presuppose that at some point he was being treated like a brother, a fellow-believer, a *church member*.

4. The whole of the New Testament itself witnesses against the view that you can go to heaven without becoming a church member. Since the consistent and invariable pattern of the New Testament is that believers professed their faith in Christ publicly and joined the church, the burden of proof is on those who deny that this is important today. The only exception to this pattern of church membership among all believers is that of the Ethiopian Eunuch converted in Acts 8:26ff. He had no opportunity to join a church, but tradition says that he carried the message of Christ back to Ethiopia and planted the church there. If the universal pattern of the New Testament was that all believers joined the church, what would make us conclude it is unnecessary today?

3. On the Day of Pentecost Peter declared that to be saved people had to be baptized. (Acts 2:38ff.) This baptism

of professing believers was undoubtedly a public act, a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Luke then says that these people were “added.” What does that mean? God added them to the company of his people. But even more, they were “numbered.” Somebody was keeping count because these new believers were enrolled among the number of God’s people. The next thing Luke tells us in Acts was that they immediately began meeting together with other believers, even on a daily basis. These people had been baptized and counted as members of the church. They professed their faith in Jesus Christ publicly and were baptized publicly, identifying themselves not simply as Christians in general, but clearly identifying themselves with the church. So one must be excused for thinking that this baptism and public profession of faith in Christ was necessary for salvation, required in order to get to heaven, as Peter clearly declared.

2. Jesus announced that he would build his church, not just individual Christians. To be specific, Jesus said, *“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:18) Of course the Greek term translated “church” means “assembly” and necessarily requires a number more than one. Jesus’ plan was to build up the assembly of his people, and not simply disconnected believers here and there. In fact, Jesus promises that the gates of hell shall not prevail against his assembly. Presumably, the individual believer on his or her own could accomplish little, but the assembly of God’s people together would be his unstoppable force for overthrowing hell’s dominion on earth. In view of our Lord’s own words, what possible rationale could remain for the lone Christian refusing to join the assembly of Christ’s blood-bought people?

1. Jesus said that we must confess him before others. Luke records his words: *“And I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God, but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God.”* (12:8-9) Jesus clearly **required** that his people confess him publicly if they expected him to acknowledge them before God. It’s hard to see what shape this public profession of faith in Jesus Christ might take without self-identifying as his follower **by joining a local church.** Jesus could not be referring to wearing a

Christian T-shirt or sporting a Christian bumper sticker, for, of course, there were no T-shirts or bumper stickers (or bumpers!). He was clearly speaking of making a permanent, public identification with Christ and his people. We usually call that covenant relationship “church membership.”

For these reasons it would seem that the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is correct when it states that outside of the visible (local) church, “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” (25.2)

This explains why you have been longing for the church. You know in your heart that you were not meant to go it alone, but that you were created to be reconciled to God and to belong to his people. The truth is that you will never find your true purpose apart from the people of God. This yearning for belonging and to be a part to something greater and more enduring is God’s gift, drawing you to himself.

THE CHURCH YOU’VE BEEN LONGING FOR

But what kind of church should you join? There are so many choices, and not all of them seem so healthy or genuine. Let me suggest that you consider three important qualities in a church before you join it or even attend it regularly.

A Safe Church

It is wise to seek out a church that is *safe*. Certainly you have heard stories of churches that seek to ensnare and exploit people. Thankfully these are rare, and many of them have already been identified. Often these churches are called “cults.” This is not really a pejorative term so much as a technical description of sub-groups which have strayed so far from the center and substance of Christianity as to constitute a different religion altogether. Some of these cults are harmful and destructive. The distinguishing marks of dangerous cults include: 1) a single, charismatic leader who demands obedience and even worship; 2) the use of psychologically manipulative techniques; and 3) some kind of exploitation of members, usually economic or sexual (or both). Obviously these groups are evil and should be denounced and avoided.

Yet there is another way in which churches may not be so safe, and I'm referring to churches that do not *save*. That may seem harsh, but the Bible is very clear that all people are born under God's just judgment for sin and are not only lost but also incapable of saving themselves. God gave his Son to save sinners (the name "Jesus" literally means "he saves"), which he did by living a perfect life and then offering himself to God on the cross as a sacrifice, paying the penalty for sinners like us. Some churches in our day have forgotten or even overtly deny these all-important truths. They do not warn sinners of God's judgment; they do not offer Jesus Christ as God's only hope for salvation; or they may tell the sinner that they must cooperate with God and help God save themselves. Because these churches do not herald the good news of God's salvation, they are definitely not safe and should be avoided at all costs.

A Serious Church

First it was the sitcoms (situation comedies), then stand-up comedians, then the comedy club and the comedy channel. And there were the late night comedy shows, followed by the later night comedy shows, and the weekend, late-night, Saturday Night comedy shows. Every newspaper has comics. Every movie theater is showing at least one comedy. *Reader's Digest* has several joke columns. Step back from it all for a moment—don't you get a strange feeling that they're trying too hard? Why do we need so many omnipresent, 24/7/365 venues to make us laugh? Could it be that in spite all of our pretending, all of our protesting, and all of our phony plastic smiles, we know, deep down, that we are not really happy?

The church you've been longing for must be a *serious* church. The Gospels record no instance of Jesus ever laughing. Instead he was "*a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.*" And he had to be that way because the same Bible passage tells us that "*he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.*" (Isaiah 53:3-4). Jesus lived a serious life for us. When sin entered our world it brought death and misery, and there is nothing whatsoever humorous about that. I think this explains why we crave the sitcoms and comedy clubs. Denial is not just a river in Egypt.

Sadly many churches today attempt to attract members by

perpetuating this denial. They refuse to be serious and seek rather to entertain people through skits and stories and shows and dramatics (you will learn more about this in chapter 1). Let me suggest that you are not really longing for more distracting entertainment. Your heart yearns for something real, because you know that you are in a serious situation facing grave and sobering problems, requiring a solemn, even shocking solution. You long for a serious church.

What is surprising is that a truly serious church inspires great joy. Because the serious church honestly faces our need and brings God's Word to bear on our perplexing predicament, it deals with our trouble and lack decisively in Christ. And the result is relief, real salvation in Christ: the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God, eternal life, and everlasting hope. These are the most significant sources of profound and sustained joy. So the serious church, which takes our sin and misery seriously (and but the Son of God and his salvation even more seriously!) is the church that will be characterized by gratitude and joy, and you are longing for a church like that.

A Significant Church

In 1972, the United Negro College Fund, a philanthropic organization which raises funding for college tuition for African American students, adopted the motto: "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." It became one of the most widely recognized slogans in advertising history. Of course the reason it became so popular is because we all recognize its validity. Human beings were created with great nobility and dignity. To waste a human mind is unspeakably tragic.

Wasting your life is worse. You know that you have only one life, and you deeply desire that your life count for something. You secretly fear that after you are gone the only trace of your existence remaining will be a granite marker on a windswept hill in some lonely cemetery. So you want to be a part of something that is **significant**. You are really longing to be a part of God's everlasting people: the church.

Jesus said, "*Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*" (Matthew 24:35) His words will endure after the elements (and cemeteries) have long been dissolved. As

mentioned before, Jesus also said, "...*I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*" (Matthew 16:18) His church, the company of those who keep his words, will be unstoppable and will endure. And John wrote: "*And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*" (1 John 2:17) That's true, lasting significance.

The greatest and most enduring enterprise ever undertaken in the history of our planet is the church of Jesus Christ. All other works, though they may be of some temporal value, will perish over time. They are disposable because they are tied to an age that is itself passing away. Your life will only count if you are connected to Jesus Christ, and Christ calls you to belong to his church.

At the same time understand that the size of the church does not matter. Churches come in all sizes and there are advantages and disadvantages to small, medium, and large churches alike. Most of the churches we meet in the New Testament were probably small (less than 100 people), with some notable exceptions such as the very large churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. God uses churches of all sizes to accomplish his everlasting work.

The nineteenth century Scottish writer Allan Chalmers is famous for the line, "The grand essentials of happiness are: something to do, something to love, and something to hope for." And we find all of these in their fullness in the church of Jesus Christ. In the church God gives us something to do, work for his kingdom which has eternal value. In the church we find the people of God, those whom Christ has called out of the world to be his very own, a fellowship of deep affection that will never pass away. And in the church we find the greatest hope of all, the restoration of all things when Christ returns. No wonder you have been longing for the church!

So read on and learn more about the church. And then come visit and partake and explore and, God willing, join

THE CHURCH YOU'VE BEEN LONGING FOR!

Chapter 1

Worship with Integrity, Not Entertainment

Our highest priority, our greatest need in life, is to worship God. How do we know this? We know this because that's what people did whenever God appeared to them in the Bible. They fell down in terror and acknowledged God's greatness. (They got back on track as it were.) They immediately knew what they should have been doing all along: worshipping God. Somehow they had become distracted into following other pursuits, but when God appeared they fell down and worshiped.

It's like the teenager home alone all day. Before his parents left for the day, they told him he must clean up his room. So what does he do? He goes back to bed. Then he gets up and eats breakfast. He may watch television or surf the internet or play video games or text his friends. But suddenly he hears his parents coming home and runs to his room, frantically cleaning it up. Why? Because he was supposed to be doing that all along. And that's why the people in the Bible all dropped what they were doing and fell on their faces whenever God came around. They knew all along they should have been worshipping God. And that's what we are to be doing as well.

Worship is a response to God's glory. The proper response to glory in general is *wonder*. But the proper response to God's glory is *worship*. The Old Testament word translated "glory" means "weighty." If someone was rich or powerful, the Hebrews would describe him as "weighty." We do the same thing. If something is important we say that it has "substance" (we used to say it was "heavy"). A significant person has "gravitas." But we describe something unimportant as "light" or "fluff."

If God is the weightiest of all to you, then you will worship him gladly, with wonder and awe. The main problem today is that God is not weighty, not even in our churches. Worship has become about me and my needs. I am most important in worship. I am weighty, while God is virtually weightless.

HUMAN SELF-WORSHIP

When we refuse to worship God, we inevitably wind up worshiping self instead. The Apostle Paul identifies this human self-worship, this stubborn refusal to worship God, as the very root of human sin. Every evil springs from this root of human self-worship. Consider this foundational text from Romans 1:18ff. *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”* (1:18) Where does all this ungodliness and unrighteousness come from? Read on. *“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.”* (1:19-20) We do not need any special invitation to worship God: his greatness and glory are inescapably evident from what he has created.

But here's the problem: *“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”* (1:21) Here we find a succinct definition of worship: to *“honor him as God”* and to *“give thanks to him.”* But all of these problems of ungodliness and unrighteousness have arisen because, *“although they knew God, they did **not** honor him as God or give thanks to him.”* Yet these people did not instead worship nothing. As G.K. Chesterton once observed, *“When people quit believing in God they do not believe nothing, they believe anything.”* And so, *“Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”* (1:22-23)

People are compulsive, habitual worshipers. We cannot help it. It's in our DNA. We were created to worship God. But

even if we don't, we cannot escape our design to be worshipers. And so we will always worship something. The names and faces of the false gods are virtually unlimited, but the fact is that there is only, truly one false god we serve, and that is self. No wonder Jesus said that before anyone could come after him he must first deny self (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23). Self is the great idol, stretching back all the way to the Garden. The serpent's false promise to the woman was this: *"you will be like God"* (Genesis 3:5). Self will be exalted to godhood. Self is the idol above the altar. Money, sex, and power are common avenues to self-satisfaction (or prestige or pleasure or possessions) but the one, true (false) god is really self.

GOD'S REJECTION OF HUMAN SELF-WORSHIP

God's punishment of these self worshipers is remarkable. Paul says that their penalty is that they get what they want! *"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."* (Romans 1:24-25) God's penalty for sin is more sin. But God does not cause the sinner to sin more frequently. He merely removes his restraint. In mercy God ordinarily prevents us from reaching the depths of our depravity until we are condemned to hell. But when people fail to worship him and worship self instead, God finally gives them what they want.

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." (1:26-27) Who ever said that the Bible is not relevant, that it does not speak to our day? When God removes his restraint, not only do people become so morally turned upside down that sexual perversion results, but in the quest for self worship, even the other gender is rejected. The height (or depth, as it were) of self worship is relations with the same sex. The world today calls this "liberation," but here God calls it *"receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error."*

And then it all unravels: “*And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*” (1:28-32) It is important to point out that Paul is not here describing twenty-first century American culture but the Greco-Roman culture of his present day. Yet the same process is fast occurring in our day as well.

And remarkably it all begins with false worship, with the stubborn refusal to worship God, or as Paul writes, to “*honor him as God*” and to “*give thanks to him.*” The result will always be self-worship, because humans are habitual worshipers. Apart from God the void is so great and the emptiness is so horrifying, that we must somehow fill the abyss. We have no life in ourselves, so we will always look to some other for our satisfaction. But make no mistake, *my* satisfaction is the goal.

THE EMPTINESS OF HUMAN SELF-WORSHIP

Here is the problem: in false, human worship, we have “*exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*” The immortal, infinite God can utterly satisfy. But mortal, limited humanity and birds and animals and reptiles can never truly satisfy. They may offer a temporary fix, but they can never truly quench the thirst.

This rejection of the glory of the immortal God for some other supposed source of happiness is to the heart of our fallen human condition. In his book, *What’s So Great About Christianity* (Tyndale House, 2008), Dinesh D’Souza takes up the question of why atheism, the belief that there is no God, is so attractive. He notes that many modern atheists attack Christianity by alleging that Christians believe for purely psychological and not rational reasons. He notes Karl Marx’s famous indictment that “religion is the opium of the people.” People turn to religion for the same

reason that addicts turn to drugs, to escape a painful reality. He quotes French Atheist Michael Onfray, “God is a fiction invented by men so as not to confront the reality of their condition.” (266)

But if atheists can allege inferior motives for Christian belief, what about the atheists themselves? Is there any hidden benefit to unbelief? Are there ulterior motives for rejecting God’s existence and claims over us? You’d better believe there are! D’Souza writes:

Some atheists even acknowledge that they would prefer a universe in which there were no God, no immortal soul, and no afterlife....On the possibility of life after death, [atheist] H.L. Mencken wrote, ‘My private inclination is to hope that it is not so.’ In *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, physicist Victor Stenger confesses that not only does he disbelieve in God, he doesn’t like the Christian God: ‘If he does exist, I personally want nothing to do with him.’ And philosopher Thomas Nagel recently confessed to a ‘fear of religion itself.’ As he put it, ‘I want atheism to be true....It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God....I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.’ (267)

But why? The atheist’s universe is a terribly dull and dismal place. We exist for no purpose, we have no future, and there is no justice—none of the wrongs of this life will ever be righted in the next life, because there is no next life. Why would anyone hope that something so abysmal is true?

In fact, many atheists find all of this to be quite liberating. In what way? D’Souza quotes the noted atheist, Aldous Huxley:

I had motives for not wanting the world to have meaning; consequently I assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption....For myself, as no doubt for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was...liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom. (270)

After citing several other examples, D'Souza charges:

“It is chiefly because of sex that most contemporary atheists have chosen to break with Christianity. ‘The worst feature of the Christian religion,’ Bertrand Russell wrote in *Why I Am Not a Christian*, ‘is its attitude toward sex.’ [Atheist Christopher] Hitchens writes that ‘the divorce between the sexual life and fear...can now at last be attempted on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse.’ When an atheist gives elaborate justification for why God does not exist and why traditional morality is an illusion, he is very likely thinking of his sex organs. It may well be that if it weren’t for that single commandment against adultery, Western man would still be Christian!” (273)

In other words, “We wanted sexual freedom. We thought that would make us happy. But God and his law stood in the way. So we reasoned God out of existence.” Or, as the Apostle Paul declared long ago: “*For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*” (Romans 1:21-22) It all began with the stubborn refusal to worship God, and replacing self and its happiness on the throne instead. Human worship can never satisfy because it cannot offer true life. In human, self-worship, we have “*exchanged the glory of the **immortal** God for images resembling **mortal** man and birds and animals and reptiles.*” In human worship we forfeit the true life of the *immortal* God in exchange for the illusion of life in and through God’s mortal creation, through pleasure and power and prestige, all of which are passing away.

HUMAN SELF-WORSHIP IN THE CHURCH TODAY

Much of the present-day disease with respect to worship has come about due to a basic confusion of two biblical practices:

worship and evangelism. In worship we turn our eyes fully on the Lord. We then “*honor him as God [and] give thanks to him*” (Romans 1:21). But because of our stubborn refusal to do this, we turn our eyes elsewhere and declare, “This is my god, and I will look to this or that to bring happiness, life, and satisfaction.” And in doing so, we unleash all manner of sin and misery upon ourselves as the result of the wrath of God who gives us over to our sinful cravings. So worship means that we focus on God alone, we honor God and give thanks to him. If we think about or talk about ourselves at all in worship it is either to confess our sins to God, or to give thanks for the blessings he has given us, or to pray for his grace and help. But the focus of worship is on God. Our goal is “to honor him as God” and “give thanks to him.”

Evangelism, understandably, has a different goal. It is to win the opportunity to share the Gospel with sinners. Normally this is done by making some point of contact with the sinner (there are many, for we are sinners as well), and then from that point of contact, with permission, going on to share the good news of God’s love in Christ and calling the sinner to faith in Christ and repentance from sin. In evangelism we seek to meet people where they are (which is typically lost in self-absorption). So as a point of contact we may address some of their needs. Evangelist Billy Graham said that whenever he spoke to people, he assumed that four needs were present in his non-Christian audience: fear of death, loneliness, emptiness, and guilt.

But what has happened is that worship services have been redesigned to become like evangelistic services. Billy Graham did not pioneer the evangelistic service, but did much to perfect it. So the Billy Graham Crusade did not look much like a traditional worship service. There was more lively music, there were celebrity testimonials, and the sermons were much more about people and their needs than they were about God’s glory. For example, a subject like loneliness was addressed at length, raising the hearer’s feelings of loneliness to a fever pitch, and then Christ was introduced as the answer to loneliness. People were then urged to come forward to receive Christ. And, due to the remarkable planning and raising of enthusiasm through the lively format, the results were quite remarkable with respect to the number of professions of faith. In truth Billy Graham’s own organization recognized that only between 5 and 10% of the

“conversions” lasted and translated into a life of Christian commitment and church membership.

In the name of evangelism, these practices were soon employed on Sunday mornings. And so arose this confusion between worship and evangelism. The sorry result now is that worship, honoring the Lord as God and giving thanks to him, the biblical practices that constitute our weekly, Lord’s Day renewing our covenant with the Lord, all of this has been forfeited in the name of evangelism. At all costs, this new kind of (misnamed) “worship” had to make a point of contact with unbelievers, had to become attractive, not to God’s people who have come to know him in Christ, but attractive to unbelievers, those whom the Bible describes as enslaved to sin and self and utterly hostile to God. And the result is these so-called “worship” services that sinners like but that God does not like.

Worship is adoring what you value the most. And here is the problem with these new “worship” services: they are engineered to appeal to the unconverted, those who value self most of all. Now if you value self above all, and you attend a “worship” service that specifically appeals to you, then the centerpiece of this kind of “worship” service will be your favorite subject: self. But if a worship service is about you, if its overriding burden is how you are responding, then what, by definition, can it not be focusing on? The answer is God, and that explains why God does not like these new kinds of “worship” services. It also explains why these new kinds of “worship” services cannot truly help—God does not attend them, except in judgment. And this explains why these new kinds of self-worship churches are doomed to failure and are already beginning to stumble.

1. Entertainment “Worship”

The most common kind of self-worship promoted by churches today is entertainment worship. This was probably inevitable, especially in America. In his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in an Age of Show Business*, author Neil Postman demonstrates how most every form of communication

in America today has been re-cast in terms of entertainment. News reporting, for example, is not a sober recounting of the most significant issues of the day, but rather the most sensational, those which pique the greatest interest. Even then there is little true analysis, but rather only the most salacious details. *CNN Headline News* is what most news has become: just the headlines, with the constant scrawl of unrelated and useless information at the bottom of the page. Segments offer “the world in a minute.” Really? How is that possible? It is possible only in the entertainment world. It is only possible by offering stimulating, decontextualized, and unrelated snippets of trivia, not for understanding but for...entertainment.

And education, following the advent of *Sesame Street*, must also be entertainment. Education today must feature continual movement, vivid colors, lively music, and especially humor, or students will (can) not pay attention. He notes that what *Sesame Street* has largely done is to educate children to expect this kind of show and to disable them from substantive learning. The same may be said of politics. We are expected to cast our precious votes on the basis of a relentless barrage of 30-second attack ads in which candidates accuse each other of terrible crimes and misdemeanors or make promises that no one could possibly keep.

But the same is now true of the church. Thanks largely to Robert H. Schuller and his “Crystal Cathedral,” worship as entertainment has become the norm, the standard, the rule instead of the exception. The Billy Graham Crusade Show was moved to Sunday morning and rebroadcast on nationwide TV. When Schuller’s approach was criticized in the early years, the criticism was specifically to our point: “This is not worship, it is evangelism. Your church is not really worshipping God.” To this he replied that this did not really matter since the congregation actually worshiped on a week night. Instead they had deliberately chosen a different purpose for Sunday mornings.” Really? As a result, thousands of churches began to copy the Sunday morning show, and worship got lost in the shuffle.

The Crystal Cathedral is broke. This should send shock waves through the many churches that secretly admired Schuller and not so secretly copied his strategy. A January 10, 2011 *Christianity Today* editorial notes, “This past October, the mega-

church prototype of the late 20th century filed for bankruptcy. A 24 percent drop in donations and a \$50-100 million debt owed to more than 550 creditors forced the Crystal Cathedral to file.”

From the beginning, Schuller’s focus was on “emotional hunger” leading him to develop his “gospel of self-esteem” (which is as bad as it sounds). Again, the focus was on self, on me and my needs. It led inevitably to self-worship. Is it too much to quote again Paul’s warning from Romans 1? *“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.... For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”* (1:18, 21-23)

2. Sentimental “Worship”

Pre-dating Schuller’s “entertainment worship” was another distorted form of worship which we could call “sentimental worship.” Schuller was not the first to identify the problem of “emotional hunger.” Emotion can be very powerful, and some strong emotions can be very pleasant. Most pleasant of all, perhaps, is the catharsis through which we suddenly release a lot of pent up emotions, usually through having a good cry but also through deep and vigorous laughing. Afterward, we feel rather light and airy, cleansed and euphoric (“catharsis” literally means “washing”).

And it was also noticed that biblical truths and themes can evoke strong emotion: heaven and hell, sin and repentance, forgiveness and grace, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, etc. When we dwell on these great truths we cannot help but to become emotional. We shed tears or we shout for joy. Indeed, the Holy Spirit produces fruit in us that certainly engages our emotions: love, joy, and peace, for example.

But it was also noticed that these deep feelings can be engineered through various means: the manipulation of lighting, mood music, the person’s physical condition through rhythmic

clapping, breathing, dancing, or chanting, and though a lack of sleep or an irregular diet. Those of us who were raised on watching Billy Graham Crusades on television can hardly hear an organ playing “Just As I Am,” without getting a bit misty-eyed.

Hollywood has certainly noticed these means and uses them to great effect in “tear-jerker” movies. They make multiple millions of dollars by making us cry, and we gladly pay them for the privilege. And cults have noticed this as well. Some cults deliberately draw in emotionally starved people, wear down their defenses, and nearly force them to have a dramatic emotional experience. How do they do it? Through the glorious, dramatic truth of the Gospel? No, through the very techniques which were described above. And in order to maintain this deeply felt, euphoric breakthrough, one has to go even deeper into the teachings and practices of the group, relinquishing control to them which often results in some kind of exploitation by the leadership.

Western culture has often vacillated between periods of rationalism and romanticism. On the one extreme, rationalism is the belief that the mind, logic and reason, are our surest guides. Emotions or feelings are utterly unreliable, and the wise person strives to control his or her emotions. On the other extreme, romanticism tells us that our feelings or emotions are what we are at the deepest level. Our mind may play tricks on us, and reason is rejected as cold and calculating, but our feelings will never fail to show us the way. Emotions are pure and are the unflinching guide into reality and truth. Of course the Bible tells us to trust neither our reasoning nor our emotions: both are fallen into sin, and both will deceive us. Rather we are to trust God’s revelation in his Word.

But we are in a deeply romantic age today in which the mind is almost completely discounted and our feelings are thought to be infallible. So from this context, true Christianity is no longer something to be studied and learned, as though we simply read the Bible, believe what it says, and live through faith in our Redeemer. Rather, “authentic” (a key word today) Christianity is about having deep experiences. It is about our emotions, our feelings. “I don’t want *head* knowledge,” a contemporary Christian will say, “I want to feel it in my *heart*.”

For some people, the most important skill of a preacher is

“inspiration”: telling heartwarming, touching stories that alternately cause the audience to laugh or cry. We might think that this is entertainment, but the focus on getting people to laugh or cry is the first step in this emotionalism, this sentimentalism. I heard a missionary tell of his father’s visit to the mission field in South America. They attended a worship service, and the natives praised God with great vigor and enthusiasm in their own tongue with their own songs. The father was completely unmoved. But when the natives began to sing a song that had been translated into their language yet retained the familiar, Western tune, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,” the father began to weep. Why? The tune was familiar even though he could not understand the words. This is sentimentalism.

When the church service is focusing on creating an emotional response from the audience, what is it *NOT* focusing on? “Honoring the Lord as God and giving thanks to him.” Please do not misunderstand me: I *expect* the Christian faith to touch people deeply. Christian truth ought to move us to grief, sadness, repentance, resolve, compassion, and joy. But to focus on this response in order to create and craft worship “experiences” which will facilitate deep emotion is idolatry. We have suddenly lost our focus on “honoring the Lord as God” and “giving thanks to him,” and begun to focus on our feelings, on self.

3. Therapeutic “Worship”

Worship is about adoring what is most precious. For the *unbeliever*, God is not most precious, self is. God is largely irrelevant, while self is all absorbing, for self is all the unbeliever really has left. When it comes to *evangelism*, we need to reach out to those isolated self’s, to expose the folly of self-idolatry, and to repeat our Lord Jesus’ words that “*if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*” (Matthew 16:24)

But leave it to modern evangelicalism to come up with an ingenious (diabolical) compromise that leaves the postmodern self-seeker still utterly self-absorbed, but also eagerly attending

“worship” services. The innovation was to create “therapeutic worship.” “Are you in love with your self? So are we! We think self is the greatest thing on earth. And we gather together not only to celebrate self, but also to improve self. We want to make you the best self you can be, and that’s what God wants, too.”

These therapeutic worship churches are a dime a dozen today. They focus alternately on three subjects: 1) helping you better understand yourself, 2) helping you feel better about yourself (or helping your self to feel better), and 3) helping you become a better self. I know that when I state it this way, it sounds astonishingly crass and hollow, but this is what many churches are pedaling these days.

The epitome of this self-worshipping, therapeutic church is the largest church in North America, Lakewood Community Church in suburban Houston, with over 40,000 in attendance each weekend. It is headed by the multi-millionaire preacher (or motivational speaker), Joel Osteen. In his case, I think it is quite possible to judge his books by their covers or at least their titles: *Your Best Life Now*, *A Better You*, and *It’s Your Time*. After reading these titles, do you have any doubt concerning the object of worship? It is “you” (self). Yes, God is occasionally mentioned, but only as a divine cheerleader praising the wonders of you or a coach leading you to the promised land of a better self. But it is you, your *self*, that is truly worthy of praise.

RESCUE FROM HUMAN SELF-WORSHIP

This self-idolatry is deeply ingrained in all of us. If not, these aberrations would not be so popular. Please do not misunderstand me: this is not a call to cluck our tongues and wag our fingers at Joel Osteen or Robert Schuller, but to repent. It is to reject and to flee from the mercenary worship that says first and foremost, “what’s in it for me?” It is a call to admit that we too have these deep and unquenchable yearnings and longings and that if we seek to satisfy them with entertainment or sentimentalism or therapy then we are idolaters worse than the prophets of Baal.

At the same time there is relief available. And this relief comes only in worshipping the Lord God, honoring the Lord as God and giving thanks to him. In divine worship we do not find

the façade of reality or an escape from reality, but Reality Himself. Our misery, our emptiness, longings, and cravings only came about in the first place because we stubbornly refused to “honor the Lord as God and give thanks to him.” Our misery, emptiness, longings, and cravings can only be relieved when we return to God in repentance from sin and self, put our faith in Christ, and become true worshipers once again.

Neil Postman writes in his book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. “I believe I am not mistaken in saying that Christianity is a demanding and serious religion. When it is delivered as easy and amusing, it is another kind of religion altogether.” I think we need to realize that what he is describing is not just another *kind* of religion; it is another religion. The church you've been longing for is a worshiping church. It will focus first and foremost on worship with integrity, not entertainment.

Chapter 2

Nurture through Families, Not Programs

The church is always only one generation from extinction. Oh, we do believe that in God's providence the church's light may grow dim on the earth, but will never be extinguished. As the *Westminster Confession* states: "The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no Churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth to worship God according to His will." (XXV.5)

But practically speaking, if one generation fails to transmit the faith to the next, then as that failed generation dies away, the church is lost. It may be shocking to discover that Western Europe has largely seen this specter become a reality. On average, less than 10% of Western Europeans attend church even once a month. What is striking is that the numbers of Americans in church has likewise plummeted in past few decades. Thirty years ago, four out of ten Americans were in church on any given Sunday, 40%. That has now dropped to less than 20%. Best estimates place about 15% of Americans as a meaningful part of Christian churches.

What has caused this erosion? Part of it may be explained by the fact that the statistical figures of Christians in America never were all that significant. Certainly many Americans have been influenced by Christianity, but the number of committed followers of Jesus Christ has never been all that high. And there is also a powerful dynamic that has arisen over the past few generations which has had a diminishing effect on vital Christianity in our land.

It has to do with the manner in which the faith is transmitted to the next generation. In the relay race of the Christian church, somebody dropped the baton. God has had a plan for passing on the faith for thousands of years. It is called the family. From the very beginning, God has called the family to do the heavy lifting when it comes to teaching the faith to the next generation. But in recent generations, this God-given responsibility has been increasingly given over to the church, a practice which is clearly unbiblical and which has had catastrophic consequences.

GOD'S PATTERN FOR A STRONG CHURCH

Come with me as we trace God's plan for creating a strong church. In what we call the "Great Commission," our Lord Jesus Christ left these instructions for church advancement: *"And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:18-20)

Christ's command is for the church to make disciples, literally "students or followers," of all nations by baptizing them and teaching them to observe all that he commanded. You cannot miss the emphasis on Christian nurture, that is, teaching the disciples or students the treasures of Christ's doctrine, along with the call to obey him. And who is to accomplish the teaching? The leadership of the church, that is, those with the spiritual gifts of teaching, especially the elders of the church.

And this is, in fact, what the church began to do a short time later as the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church on the Day of Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2. As Peter preached the good news to the gathered crowd, the Holy Spirit gave the gift of repentance unto life, and over 3,000 were added to the church in one day. And what did the church leadership immediately begin to do with the newly-converted? The Apostles began to teach "them to observe everything" Jesus had commanded them, just as he had called them to do. Acts 2:42 tells us: *"And they devoted*

themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." So they heard the truth and began to practice the faith. The Apostles immediately commenced the work of making disciples of all nations by baptizing those who believed and teaching them the faith.

That was the first generation in the church. But what about the next generation? Did they simply wait for their children to grow up as untaught pagans and then try to evangelize them? Did they instruct their parents to turn them over to the church for Sunday School, children's church, and youth group? Not exactly.

Here's what the Apostle Paul writes to Christian parents regarding the spiritual nurture and training of their children in the faith: *"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."* (Ephesians 6:4) Fathers. The spiritual teacher in the home, the one who is charged with bringing up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, is the father of the household. "What about the youth pastor?" (What youth pastor?)

"You mean the father was to shoulder the responsibility on his own?" Mostly, yes. The parents did, of course, bring their children to worship where they heard the Word of God explained and preached to them. But the father was to be his children's primary pastor and teacher.

Where did the Apostles get this notion? The fact is that this was God's plan all along, from the very beginning of the nation of Israel. The book of Deuteronomy was God's instruction for covenant life in the Promised Land. And God's plan was for countless generations to be raised up and to grow mighty in that good land. But how was the faith to be transmitted to each new generation? It was to be accomplished by the parents. True, each community was to have Levites or pastors who would instruct the people and lead them in worship. But it was primarily the parents who were to learn from them and then translate and transmit the truth to their children.

After God repeated the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5, we read this in the next chapter: *"Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you*

and your son and your son's son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long.” (6:1-2) Notice the clear emphasis on the succeeding generations learning to fear the Lord by learning his commandments. But how were they to be taught? “And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children....” (6:6-7a) How were the children to be taught? By hosting Sunday Schools and children’s church and youth groups? No, “...and [you] shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”(6:7b-9)

SPIRITUAL CHILD NEGLECT

So when the Apostles charged the fathers, not the church, with the responsibility for the spiritual training of their children, they did not pluck this idea from the air. This was God’s plan from the beginning. Can parents ignore this plan, abdicate their responsibility, and simply turn their children over to Sunday School, children’s church, and youth pastors? Apparently not. There is certainly no New Testament warrant for doing so. And the results of doing so, as we have been doing for the past few generations, are now becoming clear. The faith is not being transmitted. There is now whole scale abandonment of the church by the succeeding generations. The church, first in Western Europe and now in North America, is in freefall.

In his message titled, “Feminism, Youth Culture, and the History of the Sunday School Movement,” Pastor Doug Phillips, director of *Vision Forum Ministries*, explains the historic foundations of what he calls some of our most popular extra-biblical, family-fragmenting, modern church traditions. He also exposes the theological presuppositions behind practices widely embraced by the modern church. He notes that there have been two competing models of education in the church: the relationship-based vision of Hebrew, covenantal discipleship, and the efficiency model stemming from the Greek emphasis on

youth and the Platonic ideal of separating children from their parents.

He draws a distinction between the early, American, Puritan vision of family-integrated Sunday training on the one hand and the Sunday School as a family-fragmenting and evolutionary theory-influenced, late nineteenth century proto-feminist movement on the other. The Sunday School Movement, he says, was a well-intentioned “Social Gospel” outreach to children without Christian parents. But in its present form it has become an unfortunate substitute for father-directed discipleship of the children of Christian parents.

Phillips quotes the scholar Otto Scott as he traces the evolution of this secular humanistic separation of ages in the church as the church copied the culture.

Elementary school children were segregated from secondary schools along the lines of [humanistic] ‘observations.’ Twelve was the age of the break. The new fashion spread even into religion, and the clergy began to aim different lessons at special age groups: the Bible was too much for the young....There are many variations of this development — from youth gangs to the forced retirement. In fact, we have almost achieved a society nearly completely segregated by age in which the generations have been narrowed from the traditional thirty years to far fewer. Age now separates us more than ever before in any society; persons raised only a few decades apart find one another nearly incomprehensible.

Not only are the generations more and more fragmented by this process, the faith which was to be transmitted from one generation to the next through the Christian home has, in fact, largely been lost. And, due to younger people having less and less contact with responsible, adult role models in the church, a kind of immaturity and irresponsibility has been unwittingly reinforced by the church. Instead of interacting with adults (or their parents, for that matter) on weighty issues of spiritual substance, the average, churched, young person today will more likely be found at the youth-group-sponsored “Jello Fight Night.”

Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Chapel Hill University in North Carolina, Christian Smith, recently completed the largest and most detailed sociological study of teenagers and religion ever undertaken. It was called, "The National Study of Youth and Religion." His conclusion was that most teenagers in America follow the same religion, whatever the brand-name: Lutheran, Evangelical, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist; Protestant or Roman Catholic, even Mormons and Jews. The term he coined for this religion was "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." He declares that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the largest religion among teenagers in America today. He summarizes the unwritten beliefs of most American teenagers in his 2005 book, *Soul Searching* (Oxford University Press, 2005):

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die. (162-163)

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the religion that follows these beliefs.

First, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about inculcating a moralistic approach to life. It teaches that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one's health, and doing one's best to be successful... (163)

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is, second, about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents. This is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one's prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God's love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etcetera. Rather what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.... (163-164)

Finally, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about belief in a particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one's affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved. Most of the time, the God of this faith keeps a safe distance. (164)

Smith is careful to note that this Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not an organized religion but cuts across organized religions in America, and that most of its followers would not recognize it by that name. Nonetheless, after his extensive surveys and interviews, he is convinced that this is the religion followed by most American teenagers whatever the brand name they use. And the two sources for this pervasive, sub-Christian religion embraced by the vast majority of religious, American teenagers are the generic youth group model and the generic, “lowest common denominator” educational materials.

RESTORING GOD'S PATTERN

So what does the church do to restore God's plan for evangelizing and raising up the next generation? Should the church quit holding Sunday School or Catechism classes? Not at all. Rather, the church must reassert the parents' primary role in

the spiritual nurture and training of their children. At the same time, the church must continue to stress her teaching ministry, but primarily to adults, to parents and grandparents, so that they will be fully equipped to fulfill God's calling to teach and train their children in the faith. If anything, adult education in the church is far more crucial than children's education.

Why have parents so quickly and cheerfully abandoned their responsibility to their children? Perhaps we should look again at that foundational text from Deuteronomy 6: "*And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children....*" (6-7a) Did you spot the problem? To the parents, God says, "*these words...shall be on your heart.*" But what if they are not on the parents' hearts? What if the parents are unconcerned about spiritual matters? It takes an adult to make an adult. And it takes a disciple to make a disciple. If the parents are not following Christ, why would we expect them to have any success in training their children to do so? No matter how often such hypocritical parents take their children to church or make them go to Sunday School or youth group, all the while these parents are loudly announcing: "This is not real. We are just pretending for appearances sake. You do not really have to take this to heart because we certainly do not. We too wish we did not have to be Christians."

So it begins with the parents. It takes a disciple to make a disciple.

1. It begins with **adult** education in the church. The new believers in Jerusalem gathered daily for the apostles' teaching and to practice the faith, daily. As we said before, if anything, **adult** Sunday school is far more important than children's Sunday school or youth group. Dads and Moms must master the faith and have it in their hearts so they can teach and model it for their children.

2. It continues with the intentional training of young people in Bible Study and Catechism. As an assistant to the parents, the wise church will use the gifts and skills of mature Christians who are able to teach the practice of the biblical faith, methods of Bible study, and Bible doctrine. So, yes, these children and youth classes do have a place, but only as a

supplement to what Dad and Mom are already doing in the home.

3. Intergenerational studies are a great step in the right direction. They keep the generations together and allow this vital, life-transferring interaction as all ages study the Bible together.

4. Small groups are sometimes employed in churches today. The main error with many of these small groups is that they are segregated by age. Small groups for older adults can tend devolve into commiserating about the problems of older people. Small groups for younger adults often share the limitations of those younger adults: high energy and low wisdom. Of course *youth* groups (which are small groups) tend to perpetuate immaturity. All of these tend to fragment the family, fragment the church, and separate the generations.

But what if small groups in the church met regularly for worship, study, caring and prayer, and outreach, and these groups contained all generations because they were family-based? Then the fragmenting would stop, the older folks would gain some enthusiasm from the young, and the young would have some mature role models for their developing faith and life.

The church you've been longing for will de-emphasize unbiblical and ineffective programs which fragment both family and church and instead train and empower parents, especially fathers, to fulfill their God-given calling to raise their children in the "discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Chapter Three

Obedience in Faithfulness, Not Optional Sanctification

Did you know that the tomato was once considered poisonous? So, of course, nobody ate them: no tomatoes on your sub sandwich or tossed salad, no tomato sauce, pizza sauce, or spaghetti sauce, no tomato soup, stewed tomatoes, tomato juice, or catsup! Tomatoes are loaded with the essential Vitamin C. Without Vitamin C, people develop the fatal disease of scurvy. So, while tomatoes could have cured many and saved their lives, they were believed to be poisonous, and thrown away.

Such is the power of a false idea. It can lead not only to serious error, but to dire, practical consequences. And spiritually speaking, error can have even more serious outcomes. Once spiritual error becomes deeply rooted in a people, it can, like a noxious weed, be very difficult to eradicate.

In the foundational Great Commission, our Lord Jesus Christ called his church to “make disciples of all nations” by baptizing these new believers and “teaching them to obey everything” he has commanded. Yet for several generations now, a segment of the evangelical church has taught that obedience to Jesus Christ is not essential to salvation, that it is rather an option that you may choose if you want to, but is certainly not required, perhaps not even very important. That is astonishing! In view of our Lord’s plain command, where in the world did a church get the idea that it could teach disciples that they need NOT obey everything he has commanded?

In this chapter I will define the glorious gospel of salvation. I will also show where this poisonous idea of “optional obedience” came from, and finally consider ways the church can recover from this fatal error.

HOW GOD SAVES SINNERS

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is a shorthand account of how God saves sinners. The second chapter begins with a description of the predicament: why sinners need to be saved in the first place. "*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*" (Ephesians 2:1-3) That is about as hopeless a picture as anyone could imagine.

1. The first problem sinners have is that they are in fact ***spiritually dead***. Paul is addressing believers, but he describes their former condition. And those who are spiritually dead have no hope because the dead do not strive, try harder, or do better. They do not even believe because...they are dead.

2. But even more, sinners are ***enslaved***. They are "*in the trespasses and sins*"; they are bound to them, and as a consequence walk in them and follow the doomed course of the world and the prince of the power of the air. What's more, they are enslaved by their own sinful passions and desires. So, spiritually dead sinners find themselves hopelessly enslaved to the world, to the devil, and to their own sinful flesh or cravings. But it gets worse.

3. They are "***children of wrath***." Sinners are under God's wrath and curse for their willful disobedience. What this means is that they should not expect any help coming from above.

So, even if they want to believe (which they don't), they ***cannot*** believe because they are spiritually dead, incapable of believing. And none of this matters anyhow, because they are already guilty as charged and condemned to everlasting wrath.

I know that this paints an utterly bleak and impossible situation, but that is how God describes it in his Word. And the truth is that nothing good can come about until we recognize this truth and own up to it. Jesus came not to call the righteous (because there are none!) but sinners to repentance.

But here is the word that changes everything: "*But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by*

grace you have been saved..." (2:4-5a) The truly astonishing wonder is that God, who by rights should be wrathful to such desperate sinners like us, is instead "rich in mercy." We were spiritually dead, but he has made us alive together with Christ. This action is purely "gracious," which means it is entirely from God. We do not earn it or deserve it.

What's more, he has "*raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus*" (2:5b). What this means, of course, is that we are no longer "in our trespasses and sins." We are no longer enslaved to the world or to the devil or even to our sinful passions and cravings (our "flesh" or sinful nature). So God, by his grace (not because we deserve it or have earned it), has completely solved our problem for us. We were dead—he made us alive with Christ. We were enslaved to the world, the devil, and our sinful flesh—he raised us up above all that and seated us with him in the heavenly places. We were under God's justly-deserved wrath—but he poured out that wrath on his Son instead, for us, in our place.

Given all that God has done, do you think that sounds like obedience should only be optional for his revived, freed, and dearly-beloved children? Of course not! Under those circumstances, why would anyone *not* want to obey Jesus Christ? And so Paul summarizes with the familiar words: "*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*" (2:8-10)

Be sure you get the order correct. God's saving his people is purely by his grace. It is a gift which he offers to us, and he even gives us the faith to believe and receive his gift of salvation. This means that it is not because of our good works that anyone is saved, so no one may boast about being good enough or smart enough or virtuous enough to have paid his or her own way. And it only gets better, because instead of leaving us to wallow in the moral cesspool of sin, God has made us new to do new works, good works which are noble and godly and far more fitting and in keeping with our exalted character as those created in God's image and re-created to become the image of his Son.

HOW THE GOSPEL GOT TWISTED

The Protestant reformers (those who led the church in reformation and renewal beginning in the early 1500s) insisted that this was the very heart of the Gospel. Prior to their time, the church had largely lost the glory of this hopeful message of salvation by grace alone, received through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. Instead, the church taught that God gave a certain measure of grace to dead sinners through baptism, but that they must finish the work on their own through their good works. Only at the end of their life would the score be tallied, and, if they had done enough good works and avoided enough sins, would they be justified or declared righteous and accepted into heaven. To claim to be sure of salvation in this life, the church had taught, was arrogance. It was to presume that your good works would remain good.

But Martin Luther (the first of these reformers) found no comfort in this scheme of self-salvation because he recognized that he was not good enough, nor could he ever be good enough to measure up to God's perfect standard. And it was by going back to the Scriptures, to God's Word, that he rediscovered that salvation is not at all based upon our goodness, but is entirely a gift of God to the helpless and undeserving. Faith is merely the instrument through which the gift is received. Even the faith itself is given as a gift. And once the gift is received, the sinner is counted righteous with God and can be sure of heaven. All of this is possible because Jesus paid the way for us.

The same Protestant reformers insisted that while salvation is received through faith alone, it is not a faith that remains alone. No, once God gives this new life, the new birth through the Holy Spirit, the new child of God will love his or her Father and diligently seek to serve and obey him. And if that change of heart and life does not take place, then something has gone wrong. The new birth was in fact a spiritual "still birth." It may have been a mere emotional or rational response, but the untransformed convert is no convert at all. One of the early catechisms from the Reformation era, the Heidelberg Catechism, states this quite clearly. Even though salvation is a gift entirely won by Christ and given freely without our earning or deserving, that salvation does completely transform the sinner: "Therefore,

by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.” (Q1)

After the Reformation, however, the church has witnessed a dramatic reversal. The dreadful, fatal error was introduced about 150 years ago in the second half of the nineteenth century by revivalist preachers, and the error has continued up to the present. Here's how it came about.

In the century or so following the Reformation, this truth of the Gospel spread rapidly. But in time the fervor of the churches began to cool off. Churches had been established, but there were few new converts, and there was little excitement about this great hope in Christ. The Gospel began to be taken for granted.

But some preachers found that through dramatics and emotionalism, excitement could be manufactured. If the churches were cold, they needed warming up. As a result, fiery, itinerant preachers went from town to town whipping up the crowds. Since there were few entertainment opportunities in the villages, a stirring preacher was as good a show as any. And the often untrained preachers began to rely more and more on theatrics and high-pressure sales techniques to make “converts.” The great goal was to press the sinner to make a decision for Christ, even though the content of that decision often was not very clearly defined. And, as you can imagine, the revivalist preachers were quite successful in pressuring people into making decisions. Did these people really understand the Gospel? Many times they did not. In fact, in many cases the Gospel as the New Testament announces it was not clearly explained. But, in the heat of emotion, these converts had made a decision. After the campaign, the revivalist preacher moved on.

But what had he accomplished? He had garnered some decisions, but many of these were false conversions due to the heavy emotional sway and the lack of clear teaching. Most of these new “converts” quickly fell away as the emotion wore off.

How do you solve the problem of masses of “converted” people who are not really converted at all and who go back to the same old sinful lives they supposedly left?

The solution was to fall into the error that we described at the beginning. It was to make “going to heaven” a mere **decision**, while obedience became a mere **option**. Eventually people were assured that they could accept Jesus as their **Savior** and be sure of heaven, and that they could later make Christ their **Lord** as an added bonus if they wanted to. Some additional, heavenly rewards were promised for those who took the second step, but many did not.

But you see what has happened. The seamless garment of salvation has been torn in two. In fact, Christ himself has been torn in two: his priestly office as sacrifice and Savior has been separated from his kingly office as Lord, and that is impossible. Using Paul’s language from Ephesians 2, those who were dead in their trespasses and sins were never made alive together with Christ. They were never raised up with him and seated with him in the heavenly places, or they would never have returned to the bondage of sin or to the enslavement of the world, the flesh, the devil. The supposed “faith” of these decisional conversions was in fact a false faith, what James calls “dead faith,” for living faith responds with love and obedience. Their assurance was a false assurance, and on the judgment day all will be revealed to their horrible and inconsolable dismay. How clearly has Jesus called his church to “make disciples of all nations” “teaching them *to obey*” everything he has commanded!

RECLAIMING THE GOSPEL

How can the church correct an error that is 150 years old and still grips a good portion of the evangelical church? How can the church “unlearn” a “truth” that for many has been embraced as a foundational article of truth? We can illustrate the problem through a joke. Moses comes down from the mountain and announces, “I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I got him down to only Ten Commandments. The bad news is that adultery is still a sin.”

Now why is that funny? It’s funny because “everybody knows” that sin makes us happy and that God’s commandments are wet blanket, fun-hating, joy killers. That’s the problem. Sin is still enticing, exciting, glamorous, and inviting. That is what makes this easy-believism, decisional salvation so attractive. On

the one hand, we want to go to heaven when we die. But on the other hand, we still want to enjoy life, and we think that sin is the fast track to happiness. So a “gospel” that assures us of heaven in the future even while we are living like the devil now seems the best of both worlds.

And that is where we have been deceived. Sin *IS* misery. Jesus, in great mercy, came to save us from sin, not just from the penalty for sin, but from the horrible sin itself.

This is seldom understood. My guess is that most people really consider sin to be pleasant and enjoyable, even quite desirable. Oh, we know that sin will get us into trouble, but we long to get away with just as much as we can, without getting into too much trouble. I have had people ask me, “How much sin can I commit and still go to heaven?” They were considering sin to be something quite positive, and were hoping to have “the best of both worlds,” as it were. They were echoing the sentiment of St. Augustine before he came to faith in Christ, when he prayed, “O Lord, save me from all my sins, but not yet.” It takes a greater wisdom, a God-given wisdom, true conversion, to see that it is not just the penalty of sin that is undesirable, but sin itself. In a legal sense, sin leads to condemnation. But in a spiritual sense, sin leads to corruption. In fact, sin is corruption.

To put it in medical terms, sin does not simply lead to disease, sin is the disease itself. Suppose someone has the dreadful disease of cancer, and it is eating away at their body, killing them. Imagine that patient going to the doctor and saying, “Please cure me of this cancer. Now don’t get me wrong: I like the agony, the pain, the contorting disfigurement, and crippling disability caused by the disease. I just don’t want to die. So could you keep me alive, but somehow allow the cancer to continue to destroy my body?” The thought is ridiculous.

Yet that is precisely what many professing Christians are saying. And Jesus came to save us not only from sin’s condemnation, but from sin’s corruption. Ageing, the gradual decline and corruption of the body, is a picture of what’s taking place in our souls within. We are our own walking object lessons of what’s happening to our souls. As our bodies waste away, continuing on the steady decline toward death and disintegration,

so our souls are taking the same path. And that is why it is so hopeful when the Apostle Paul writes that though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16). Christ came to save us from our sins themselves, from their corruption.

Jesus calls his church to proclaim the truly good news that he saves not merely from the penalty of sin, but from the power of sin as well. If a church avoids the admittedly unpleasant subjects of sin, misery, God's wrath and judgment, and the need for repentance, that church has neutered the power of the Gospel itself and has condemned its people to the wretched gloom of slavery to sin in this life and a false and unsure hope for the life to come. The church you've been longing for will never slink away from the full glory of the Gospel, of a powerful Savior who rescues sinners from the consequences of sin in both this life and the life to come.

Chapter 4

Community with Purpose, Not Self-Absorption

It is not quite science fiction, but it certainly sounds like it: subtle forces are at work re-programming your identity, causing you to think and feel and eventually to act out your new personality, that of a...consumer.

A “**consumer**” is one who understands his or her life to be measured by the quantity and quality of their material possessions or exciting experiences. A consumer thinks often about and thinks much of **things**: what to buy, where to buy it, how to use it, and eventually how to pay for it. It is doubtful that any consumer consciously sets the accumulation of more and more stuff as their life’s goal, but through constant exposure to our consumer culture, it is nearly impossible to escape being squeezed into this mold. Americans receive over 12 billion catalogs a year (about a third of them seem to arrive in my mailbox!). On average we watch 3-4 hours of television a day with 20-30 advertisements per hour. That’s over a 20 thousand advertisements per year. The marketers spend countless billions each year to turn us into consumers.

And I suppose some of this is inevitable, even necessary. A market-based economy truly needs people in the marketplace spending money and purchasing goods and services. This creates jobs, which provide income, which is used to buy more stuff, and this is the circle of (economic) life.

But the danger arises when we accept the message that we are consumers. Consumers believe that the sum of their life is their stuff (hence the relatively recent advent of the storage unit).

But Jesus said that our life “*does not consist in the abundance of [our] possessions*” (Luke 12:15). Obviously only one of these can be true. And, of course, Jesus is right and not the marketers.

The church you’ve been longing for will recognize the danger consumerism poses to the church’s life and well-being.

THE FOCUS OF TRUE CHRISTIANITY

In Hebrews 10 we find a reforming text of Scripture which calls us back to basic Christianity. Hebrews 10:19 begins with the word “therefore” which points to what preceded. And what preceded was the Gospel, the good news of how God sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice to pay for our sins and to reconcile us to himself. So, “therefore,” since God has reconciled us to himself, “*since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*” (10:19-22). What the author is saying is that since we have access to our heavenly Father, we must draw near to him to enjoy his grace and to be strengthened in faith.

This is necessary because the world is constantly seeking to pull us down and pull us away from this great hope. In the context of Hebrews 10, it was a rather overt attack: believers were being openly persecuted for their faith in Christ, and were being tempted to give it up. So the writer urges them to go to God often in prayer and seek the strengthening of the Holy Spirit. In our day, the temptation is often more subtle. It is the temptation to become distracted, to become enamored by what the world loves so that we lose our hope in Christ.

He urges them to stand firm in this great faith. “*Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful*” (10:23). And what great help does he offer to enable them to stand firm, to resist the deadly draw of the world, the flesh, and the devil? It is the strength that comes through the fellowship of God’s people. “*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*” (10:24-25).

The main purpose of Christian fellowship, then, is to help our fellow believers “*bold fast the confession of our hope.*” In fact, God calls us to do something nearly impossible today, and that is to consider *others*, not out of envy or desire, but to consider how to help others grow in love and good works. To be a Christian is to consider others above yourself.

CONSUMER CHRISTIANITY

But the world tells us that we are consumers: that our utmost concern is to be accumulating stuff for ourselves or enjoying experiences for ourselves. The consumer is trained to approach every situation with one thought: “What can I get out of this? What’s in it for me? What can others do for me?” Of course, due to our basic, sinful, self-centeredness, we do not need much training in this: it all comes rather naturally to us. You can see how this consumer perspective would be deadly to a church and diametrically opposed to the call of Christ to “*consider how to stir up one another to love and good works.*” But in recent decades, an innovation has crept into the evangelical church which is nothing short of breathtaking.

Nearly forty years ago, a segment of the evangelical church embarked upon an experiment. Its design was very clever, though unwittingly demonic, I think. This church started with this premise: “People see themselves as consumers. So let’s create a church that appeals to consumers. Let’s give them what they want!” So this church knocked on doors and asked non-Christians what kind of church they would like, and then gave them that church. It followed the business principle, “The customer is king.” But they forgot that Christ is King.

A consumer assesses a provider on its perceived value, but also on the impact it has on image. McDonalds may be fast and cheap, for example, but Olive Garden is more upscale. “I would look more impressive walking out of an Olive Garden than a McDonalds.” And you can get a full wardrobe at Walmart (always low prices), but “I really need to wear designer labels.”

The churches which tried to play the consumer game started advertising themselves for the goods and services and the

image they could provide.

“Do you want to be entertained? We have a good show.”

“Do you need therapy? We can help you feel better.”

“Do you want a good, moral education for your children, yet one that is hip and cool? We can do that.”

“Do you want to move up in social standing? Look at the prominent, community leaders who attend our church.”

The message is this: “We have what you want. And even if we don’t, we’ll get it.”

In 1983, pastor and church administrator Kennon Callahan fully applied the business model to the church in his book, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, one of countless similar books of that day. Of course, one would have to define the word “effective” to be sure that God would agree with it. By “effective,” Callahan meant successful in the objective, business-like terms of membership and offerings. His “twelve keys” are straight out of business school.

1. Specific, Concrete Missional Objectives (the Harvard Business School model of “management by objectives.”)
2. Pastoral and Lay Visitation (or constant contact with the customer)
3. Corporate, Dynamic Worship (the product to be marketed)
4. Significant Relational Groups (or peer group reinforcement of the company’s vision)
5. Strong Leadership Resources (the chain of command model)
6. Streamlined Structure and Solid, Participatory Decision Making (keeping the stockholders informed and on board)
7. Several Competent Programs and Activities (more of the product to be marketed)
8. Open Accessibility (utilizing pre-existing traffic patterns)
9. High Visibility (promotion through advertising)
10. Adequate Parking, Land, and Landscaping (creating the appearance of success)

11. Adequate Space and Facilities (an impressive home office)
12. Solid Financial Resources (long-term capital reserves)

If I were starting a small business or seeking to revitalize a mid-level company, I would slavishly follow these steps. But the church? Really? What about prayer? You can have an “effective” church without prayer? What about the ministry of the Word? What about repentance and humbling yourself before the Lord? Well, all of these are assumed: “Of course we will be praying and sharing the gospel. But here are some other steps we can take to improve our impact.” And the truth is that praying and preaching and seeking the Lord often got shoved to the side while the dynamic worship, the adequate parking, and the artistic landscaping took the spotlight.

This consumer church was wildly successful for a time and is still much copied across the nation. The rationale behind it was to appeal to consumers, to draw them in, and then, I guess, to convert them from being consumers or takers into Christians or givers, though this was never clearly defined. Now that the experiment has been underway for a few decades we have some long-term data coming in, the results have been surprising. Lots of people were “converted,” but not in the way it was hoped. Not many consumers became Christians, but this experiment trained many Christians to become Christian consumers.

And it is all collapsing: the consumers remained consumers, continually clamoring for a better show, refusing to commit to any brand name. If you live by the market share, you die by the market share, and many of the jaded consumers are moving out and moving on to other things or to nothing.

Is the consumer church even possible? Only if you radically redefine the church. God’s Word declares that the church is the company of people whom God has called out of the world, rescued from sin and judgment through the reconciling work of Christ, and formed together into a body of believers who do the will of God. The church is an island of hope in a fading world, the alternative society, a model and example to

the watching world of what God intended. The church calls and trains self-centered, self-focused consumers to be Christ-centered, others-focused Christians. The church trains believers to repeat Jesus' words, *"I came not to be served, but to give my life for others"* (Mark 10:45).

Everybody today says, "It's not about me." But the fact is that for the vast majority, it really is all about me. This is the consumer's creed. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to shatter this pretense, to break the shackles of self-enslavement, and to wrench the door of this self-prison off its hinges.

The only way Christ's church can rescue consumers from themselves is to expose this consumerism for the lethal trap it is, to call sinners up front to repent from consumerism, to believe and be reconciled to God, and then to *"consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near"* (Hebrews 10:24-25).

STIRRING ONE ANOTHER

Still, the church needs some kind of structure to encourage and allow time for believers to meet together in groups of manageable size for this kind of stirring up and encouraging. The first church in Jerusalem included many new believers, thousands who met together in large numbers for teaching, but then also met together in smaller groups in homes. Acts 2:46-47 tells us: *"And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."* The large group attended the temple together, but met in closer fellowship in smaller, home groups.

The move in many churches toward small groups has great potential: groups which meet regularly for worship, Bible study, caring and prayer, and outreach. It is hard to see how a church could adequately care for one another without these times of formal and informal fellowship. What is remarkable is that even non-Christians instinctively know their need to gather with others. During the 1960s when young people began abandoning the church, secular small groups sprang up across the nation.

These were collectively called “encounter groups” whose purpose was essentially therapeutic self-discovery. By venting my feelings, I achieve a catharsis and feel better about myself, but really share no lasting bond with the other self-seekers in the group. Some labeled this “commitmentless communion.”

Christ calls us to Christian community, to loving, helping, encouraging, accepting, admonishing, and strengthening one another. This is true communion through commitment. God's people will develop deep friendships in the church as we meet together, share our lives with each other, and as we worship, work, serve, pray, rejoice, and yes, even weep together. The church you've been longing for will continually expose the folly of consumer-Christianity, calling God's people to Christian community, to continually “*consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as (we) see the Day drawing near.*”

Chapter 5

Compassion with Discernment, Not Handouts

Works of mercy and compassion are essential for Christians who follow the call of Christ. Jesus himself fed the hungry multitude, healed the sick, released Satan's captives, and even raised the dead. He did so first to demonstrate his authority as the Son of God and promised Messiah. But he also came to show the kindness of God. As our heavenly Father is merciful to the just and the unjust, so we desire to imitate him.

"The greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13) Faith and hope are essential, but love is the greatest. In fact, the New Testament declares that without love, faith is false and knowledge, miracles, even great self-sacrifice are all an empty sham (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). James tells us that this love must be a practical love, not just a good intention or well-wishing, but must demonstrate real care (2:14-18). John tells us in his first letter that if someone claims to love God but hates his brother, he is a liar (1 John 4:20).

This was true in the New Testament church in Jerusalem. There were no needs. Everyone contributed gladly and showed care for one another. This extended on into the first centuries of the church's life. In fact, one of the undeniable proofs of the reality of the Christian faith was the evidence of lavish Christian compassion. Julian the Apostate (A.D. 331-362), an emperor who wished to return the Christian Roman Empire to paganism, found that he could get no traction for his plans. The Christians kept beating him through their kindness and mercy. Julian complained to a friend:

“Atheism (i.e. Christianity) has been specially advanced through loving service rendered to strangers, and through their care for the burial of the dead. It is a scandal that there is not a single Jew who is a beggar, and that the godless Galileans care not only for their own poor but for ours as well; while those who belong to us look in vain for the help that we should render them.” The early church father, Tertullian, recorded the amazement of the pagans when they considered the example of Christians: “See how these Christians love one another.”

The church you've been longing for must be filled with compassion for the needy, yet showing that compassion with wisdom and discernment.

THE DELIGHT OF DOING GOOD

New Testament believers understood that they were to follow Jesus who *“went about doing good.”* (Acts 10:38) In his letter to the Galatians, Paul declared: *“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”* (6:10) Good works to other believers were expected, but even non-Christians were to experience the love of God's people. The New Testament church in Jerusalem, as we said, had all things in common so that there were no needs. This was a continuation of the Old Testament promise in Deuteronomy 15:4 that in the Promised Land there would be no poor. This blessing had now been realized among the New Testament church.

In Acts 5 we learn that the church in Jerusalem had assumed provision for the Christian widows, and even created a new class of officers, the deacons, for just that purpose. Apparently the Jewish Christian widows, who should have been supported by Jewish benevolence, had been cut off from Jewish beneficence, so the church took up their care.

Later in the New Testament, Paul gives some guidelines for the support of believing widows. This is quite pertinent, so we must quote him at length: *“Honor widows who are truly widows”* (1 Timothy 5:3). Immediately we find that the widow who would receive support (and we could expand this to other impoverished people) must meet qualifications.

1. First, she should look to her family for help. *“But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God”* (5:4).

2. Second, she must be worthy of support. *“She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day, but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives. Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach. But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”* (5:5-8).

3. Third, if she is yet able to work and support herself, she should do so. And even in her older age, she is expected to continue serving Christ through his church according to her ability: *“Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work”* (5:9-10) Yet if she is younger and able to work for her support, she should do so. *“But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith”* (5:11-12). Apparently such widows were expected to devote themselves to Christ and his church if they were enrolled and received benefits.

But here is the real problem with supporting an able-bodied person like a young widow. *“Besides that, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not. So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander. For some have already strayed after Satan”* (5:13-15). Working for your living is a great blessing of God. Without that daily occupation, filling our time with productivity, our restless, sinful hearts tend to become occupied with other, less wholesome pursuits.

THE BLESSING OF PRODUCTIVITY

Work is often considered a dreary curse. But according to Genesis 1, God works, and he has created work for people to accomplish. People are to be workers like God. Work is a “godly”

activity. *“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done.”* (Genesis 2:1-2)

When God created our first parents, he did not set them in the Garden to sit idly by watching the butterflies and imagining shapes in the clouds. *“And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed.... The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”* (Genesis 8:8, 15) Work was a part of God’s original design BEFORE sin had spoiled his world. Theologians call work a “creation ordinance”; it is a part of God’s good creation, and a benefit to all people. God calls us to fill six of our seven days with productive work and the seventh day with worship.

Not without good reason do people say, “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop.” We were created to be productive, and we only find contentment through such productivity. This means that the church is not to be burdened with the support of intentionally non-productive people, and should not offer support to them. At the same time, God’s people are to be generous to those who are truly needy, whom some call the “worthy poor.” *“If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are really widows”* (1 Timothy 5:16).

THE LIMITS OF MERCY MINISTRY

In fact, the New Testament does deal with an example of intentionally non-productive people. The believers in Thessalonica heard the message clearly that Christ was coming back. They expected him to return at any moment. Here is an example of where a good doctrine can be poorly applied. “If Christ is coming back at any time,” some of them reasoned, “what’s the use in making any long-term plans? In fact, if Christ is coming back, perhaps tomorrow, why go to work today? Why go to work ever?” Add to this our natural, sinful propensity for laziness, and you have a serious problem. Some believers did go to work and were productive, while others concluded that work

was pointless. And yet when Christ did not return immediately, the non-working Christians still needed to eat, and sought support from those who were productive.

Here, again, Paul's response to this is so foundational that we must quote him at length. "*Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us*" (2 Thessalonians 3:6). Please note that the Christian tradition does not endorse idleness, but rather work and productivity. And Paul reinforced this with his own, industrious example. He often supported himself in his missionary work through the family business of making tents. "*For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate*" (3:7-9).

And here is the principle of productivity: "*For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat*" (3:10). Jesus sets people free, but not to be freeloaders. "*For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living*" (3:11-12). Apparently these intentionally non-productive people were resented by those who were working hard and having to support the idle. "*As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother*" (3:13-15). I have always found God's people to be generous. Yet we should rightly be reluctant to support intentionally non-productive people. If we do so, it usually does more harm than good.

The wonderful truth is that Jesus Christ transforms takers into givers. We were created to be workers, those who are productive. Our Lord Jesus Christ said he came not to be served but to serve others (Mark 10:45). The pattern and flow of his life was outward. As we noted in the previous chapter, the flow of a consumer's life is always inward. The empty chasm must be filled with something, yet it can never be filled. For the consumer, there is only restless, insatiable desire.

But Jesus is the Bread of Life. He satisfies and fills. Jesus is the living water. He told the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, *"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."* (John 4:13-14). The flow of a sinkhole is always inward, but the flow of a spring of water is always outward.

Jesus transforms takers into givers. When God created our race, we were made to be springs, to work and be productive. When we fell into sin, we became sinkholes, never satisfied, always needing more. And when we are born again, when Christ gives us new hearts and minds and fills us with his inexhaustible Holy Spirit, we become springs once again. Takers become givers.

But givers with discernment.

It is easiest, I suppose, to give nothing and to somehow convince yourself this is alright.

It is a bit harder, but not too hard, to give from a distance, to send a check to those poor people "over there." It will cost us, but it may relieve our guilt some.

It is hardest of all to follow Christ, to get to know others, to invest our life in others, to know them well enough that we learn their true needs and come to their genuine aid.

Jesus did not just give an offering. He gave himself.

GIVERS AND TAKERS

We can illustrate the difference between givers and takers, producers and consumers by considering cattle in a pasture. In the pasture the cattle are the consumers. They cannot help themselves—they have to eat (consume). The grass is the producer. The grass produces feed, and the cattle consume the feed. One may say, "Yes, but the cattle produce manure which fertilizes the grass." True, but the manure only comes from the grass in the first place. The other thing we should note is that the grass itself is dependent on something else: sunshine, rain, and the rich soil. But basically speaking, the grass is the producer and the cattle are the consumers.

All that is well and good if there is more grass than the cattle can eat. But what if there are too many cattle and not enough pasture, too many consumers and not enough producers? Now we have a serious problem. Eventually the cattle will clip the producer-grass too short, perhaps killing it, and either the grass will die or it will at least not be able to keep up with the demand. The consumer-cattle will then starve or break down the fence. In this pasture there will be limited resources to meet an unlimited need: too many consumers and not enough producers.

These dynamics apply to other realms of life. If a nation ever gets to the point where a majority is receiving welfare, that nation's economy will collapse. In a short while the producers will not be able to keep up and will grow to resent the heavy taxation and the support of the able-bodied indolent and unworthy poor at their expense. And if a church ever finds itself with a minority of givers trying to satisfy a majority of takers, that church will be severely crippled.

And that is why the New Testament sets some limits and qualifications for mercy ministry. The able-bodied, widowed or not, are to be as productive as possible. This will ensure that there will always be more producers than consumers, otherwise the cattle will deplete the grass: the grass will wither, and the cattle will starve.

MISTAKEN MERCY MINISTRY

Due to the enduring, complicating effects of sin, the desire simply to go about doing good can actually do more harm than good if it is not tempered with biblical wisdom. Mistaken mercy ministry, compassion *without* discernment has severely hampered genuine care for the needy in recent decades.

The Social Gospel. In the late-1800s and early 1900s American Baptist seminary professor Walter Rauchenbush developed what is now called the “social gospel,” a biblically naïve attempt at mercy ministry to the poor. Instead of the Gospel of grace leading to transformed lives and, as a result, to social action and social betterment, the “social gospel” declares that the Gospel *IS* social action. Helping the poor and raising the standard of living of the oppressed is what the Gospel is all about.

This is a dreadful teaching which produces disastrous consequences. It is based on universalism, the teaching that, for whatever reason, all people will go to heaven in the end. If believers no longer need to worry about saving souls from hell, what is left to Christian ministry? Christian ministry, then, *only* involves doing good deeds, especially helping the poor and disadvantaged. At first this teaching would seem attractive and would be successful in garnering a response. This new brand of Christianity has become “kinder and gentler.” Gone, for example, are that nasty doctrine of original sin and the offense of the cross Paul writes about in Galatians 5:11.

However, the Bible teaches that people are so helplessly broken by sin that they cannot save themselves from divine judgment or everlasting torment. Sinners are so weak and unworthy and helpless that it required the Son of God to be made man and to take the hell we deserved on the cross. This Gospel message is the best news that anyone could possibly hear. But to the rebellious sinner, it is bitterly offensive. The “social gospel” bypasses all of this unpleasantness by asserting the basic goodness of all people and by merely focusing on material problems and social solutions.

The danger of this social gospel has been twofold. On the one hand, it is not the gospel of grace, and so it saves no one. It leaves people as well-fed takers, still under God’s wrath. As the ranks of the givers in the church are depleted, and with the conversion of no others, these well-fed takers do not replace them, and the social gospel church will necessarily decline. The end will be worse than the beginning.

But the other danger is that evangelicals, who saw the folly and error of the social gospel and rightly resisted and rejected it, tended to swing too far in the other direction. Suddenly *any* care for the physical needs of the poor became suspect. So instead of the biblical pattern of the Gospel creating believers who become givers and who then care for the needy and evangelize the lost, social ministry by believers was largely abandoned.

Indiscriminate Compassion. Another form of mistaken mercy ministry, compassion without discernment, is

also based on faulty theology. This faulty theology assumes (against the clear teaching of Scripture) that people are basically good and really want to do the right thing. This assumption leads to indiscriminate compassion. It assumes that the problem is always that there is not enough grass. Its remedy is the handout: more money. Truck in a load of hay, and the cattle will be fine.

This biblically naïve view will often seem to work in the short run. But what if the cattle immediately gorge themselves on the hay? Or what if they treat the hay as bedding and trample it into the ground? In a short while they will be back to clipping the grass too short and starving to death. The addition of the extra hay did not really change the situation. The consumers will only demand more.

Here is a more serious example. A father is charged by God to support his family. But suppose, for whatever reason, he does not support them. And suppose some well-meaning Christians (or government) step in and start paying the bills. In doing so, they have compounded the problem. The father, whose conscience should have been pricked by the despondent looks and desperate pleas of his hungry children, has been relieved from this pain. What's more, he has been aided in his irresponsibility. As long as others are going to do his job for him, he can apply himself to more interesting matters like loafing or fishing or tinkering or hanging out at the bar.

The Bible says that people were created good, but have been deeply broken by sin. We are now inclined to worship the creature rather than the Creator. But the creature (money, food, property, pleasure, experiences, or stuff) can never satisfy, and we will only misuse it and demand more. No amount of special offerings can fill a bottomless pit.

Removing the Consequences of Sin. Another form of mistaken mercy ministry, compassion without discernment, occurs when well-meaning people rush to alleviate the suffering that comes as the result of sinful decisions and actions. God has woven into his world natural penalties for foolish choices. Gravity was created to chasten people who think they are birds, for example, and that painful bump at the bottom can be a powerful teacher. Poverty due to intentional non-productivity can have the same, natural effect, so long as well-meaning Christians (or governments) do not set up too many safety nets.

Several years ago, a woman who lived near our church called the church for financial assistance. The power company had shut off her electricity. I suspected, by reputation, that drug use had something to do with it. It is pretty hard to keep a job when you are habitually stoned. And since there were no children involved, I was reluctant to bring it to the church. To pay her electric bill for her would have been to reinforce her foolish behavior. So, instead, I brought her a box of old, unused candles the church was going to discard. Perhaps living for a while without electricity would be a wake-up call for her.

We tend to think that if someone is hurting our job is to alleviate their pain with an aspirin or band-aid. What Christians must bear in mind is that pain is often a symptom of a much more serious problem. The New Testament requires believers to give real help. But Paul's rule for the church in Thessalonica was this: *"If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat"* (2 Thessalonians 3:10). That may seem cold-hearted, but it is better to see it as hard-headed. In truth, it is the indiscriminate welfare, the compassion without discernment which is too easy. It is soft-headed and cold-hearted. Christ calls us to be warm-hearted but hard-headed.

Dependency Creation. A fourth form of mistaken mercy ministry, compassion without discernment, is in the quick-fix, dependency creation that results from some forms of cross-cultural missions. Many years ago, our church hosted a missionary from Haiti. In the informal conversation that followed, he explained something important: "One of the main problems with Haiti," he said, "is the missionaries."

He continued: "Anyone who can gather a few thousand dollars can become a missionary to Haiti. Haiti is only a cheap plane ticket away from the United States, and living in Haiti, though sometimes unpleasant, is also very inexpensive. So if someone has a few thousand dollars, they can quickly set up a "ministry" in Haiti and send lots of sobering pictures back to stateside supporters. And over the years many well-meaning people have attempted to 'save' Haiti.

"So they raised support and headed down to Haiti. But the Haitians have learned how to handle these 'missionaries.'

They come to the mission, profess newfound faith, ask for a handout, and walk away with more money than they would see in several months' wages. The missionary writes home about all the wonderful conversions and poor people being helped, and the illusion is perpetuated. Eventually the missionary packs up, and the people wait for the next missionary to come to 'save' them."

But nobody is being helped. In fact, the people are harmed by this cycle of deception and dependency. This is another form of compassion without discernment.

EFFECTIVE MERCY MINISTRY

Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert help us to think carefully about truly effective mercy ministry in their book, *When Helping Hurts*, subtitled, *How to Alleviate Poverty without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself*. They clear the air considerably by asking a simple question: "What is poverty?" If we are able to see poverty as something beyond mere lack of material goods, we can discern peoples' real needs and truly help them.

True wealth or well-being, according to a biblical worldview, means a healthy relationship in four directions: toward God, toward self, toward other people, and toward the created world. So people can be "rich" in some ways, but completely impoverished in others. Donald Trump, for example, appears to be rich. He enjoys money and fame. By the measure of material possessions, he seems rich. No church would ever think of taking up a special offering for him.

But in other ways, Donald Trump is a buffoon, a comic character. What's more, his marriage broke up several years ago. More serious, he apparently does not profess faith in Jesus Christ, nor does he seem to live for Christ. So, by these other measures, we would have to say that he is very poor, the object of our pity and prayers.

In Luke 12, Jesus told the parable of the rich fool. One year he harvested a bumper crop, found himself wealthy, fixed for life, and decided to take it easy and enjoy himself. Yet Jesus called him a fool: "*This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be? So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.*" (12:20-21) There it is: Jesus declares that there are different kinds of wealth. This man was

materially rich but was poor toward God.

In Mark 2, four friends brought a paralyzed man to Jesus—dropped him right down before Jesus on a stretcher through a hole in the roof. Was this man poor? Certainly, he was paralyzed, undoubtedly a pitiful beggar. Jesus saw him, took pity on him, and declared, “Your sins are forgiven.” Jesus only healed his body a bit later, almost as an afterthought. The implication is that if Jesus had not been challenged on his authority to forgive sins, he may very well have left him paralyzed. But this paralyzed man had already become rich—his sins were forgiven, and he was reconciled to God—an heir of the kingdom to come.

The book of Proverbs knows full well that there are various forms of wealth:

*Better is a little with the fear of the LORD
than great treasure and trouble with it. (15:16)*

*Better is a dinner of herbs where love is
than a fattened ox and hatred with it. (15:17)*

*Better is a little with righteousness
than great revenues with injustice. (16:8)*

*It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor
than to divide the spoil with the proud. (16:19)*

*Better is a dry morsel with quiet
than a house full of feasting with strife. (17:1)*

The Week magazine features a digest of “celebrity news” in each issue. Here’s a sampling from the February 11, 2011 issue:

Charlie Sheen has agreed to voluntary rehab as long as he can do it at home. He has reportedly spent half a million dollars on drugs and prostitutes in the last six months. His family is exploring whether it can gain legal conservatorship over the troubled 45-year-old actor, so as ‘to save his life,’ a source says. (Rich or poor?)

Halle Berry and ex-boyfriend Gabriel Aubry are headed for a court battle over custody of their 2-year-old daughter. (Rich or poor?)

Eva Longoria and Tony Parker finalized their

divorce this week. They split after public reports that Parker was trading intimate text messages with [another man's wife]. (Rich or poor?)

The truest form of mercy ministry to a broken world is...the church! If true wealth is to enjoy healthy relationships toward God, yourself, others, and God's creation, then what better, more godly work is there to create this true wealth by building up the church of Jesus Christ? The church you've been longing for will be that community of discerning compassion.

Chapter 6

Outreach with Passion, Not Compulsion

Horses run on hay. Sailboats run on wind. Cars run on gas. But people run on *passion*. People are motivated and empowered by zeal, fervor, and ardor. Often this passion can be a sinful passion. Many people are energized by greed or lust or revenge or pride or anger. And often a sinful passion only feeds itself so that greed begets more greed or anger only fuels more anger, until these passions so govern a life that the person is no longer in control but has become enslaved to his passions. Like an addict in search of the next fix, the slave of sinful passions is ruled by the desire for more and more of that sinful passion.

God has created us to run on joy. G.K. Chesterton called joy “the gigantic secret of the Christian.” We were designed to be moved and empowered by the brightly-burning fires of gladness. And at the very center of the Christian faith is a message of incomparable and unquenchable joy—the Gospel, the “*good news*.” It is news that is so great and so hopeful and so captivately delightful that it changes the believer’s whole life and invigorates him or her all their days. This good news carries the Christian through every trial, strengthens her through every hardship, cheers him in every sorrow, and steels her against every fear or foe. These glad tidings are literally better than life itself, and many have given up their lives without hesitation to hold fast to this hope. Nehemiah 8:10 affirms this truth: “*the joy of the LORD is your strength.*”

As we consider the church today, the church you’ve been longing for, we must insist that the church be a *gospel* church. This astonishing message of joy must always be front and center,

proclaimed clearly and without compromise, celebrated as the centerpiece of worship, and continually serving as the dynamic force of the church's work and witness. If it is not, then the church will not only lose her unique voice but her heart and her unique calling from God as well. If this bell of forgiveness and freedom in Christ (grace) is not rung clearly, if the trumpet sounds an uncertain note, then the Christian faith cannot help but to devolve into something else, some form of mere human religion.

Our Lord Jesus explains how crucial this is in a familiar parable from Matthew 18.

A PARABLE OF THE KINGDOM

This is a parable of the kingdom. The kingdom of God (or kingdom of heaven) refers to God's re-asserting his reign over people's lives. In the beginning our first parents gladly submitted to God as their King and enjoyed his rule and care. But when they sinned and rebelled against him, we all became outcasts, fugitives who forfeited his blessing. God calls us in Christ to return to him, to be forgiven and to come once again under his care and blessing. This parable shows us just how large and life-changing is this Gospel message.

The story begins with the debt. *"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents"* (Matthew 18:23-24). A "talent" was a certain amount of money. How much? Quite a bit! By comparison, it would take a day laborer twenty years to earn a single talent. So 10,000 talents would represent 200,000 years of wages for a day laborer, an astronomical sum equivalent to billions of dollars today. We should probably understand this servant of the king to be an official in his administration, governing some large portion of his empire. His debt would either represent astonishing mismanagement or perhaps even embezzlement. The point is that this was no mere accident, but a serious, deliberate affront to the king for which the servant was personally responsible.

At any rate, he could not pay. *"And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made"* (18:25). Their sale into slavery would not

repay even a splinter of a fraction of this debt. The debt was virtually unpayable. As a result this man and his family would be reduced to lifelong, irredeemable slavery and misery.

This is where we must make immediate and personal application. This impossible debt is our debt to God. God is the great king, and we owed him our perfect obedience, our complete loyalty, and our unfailing love. But the fact is that we have willfully, flagrantly, and repeatedly defied him. We have loved what he hates, and we hate what he loves. With a high hand we have done what he forbids and have left undone what he commands. Through our deliberate affront to his majesty we have incurred a spiritual debt that we could never repay, yet a debt for which his justice demands satisfaction in the unending torment of hell.

If you do not understand this or grasp its seriousness or believe it to be true, or if you still protest that “you are not really all that bad,” then nothing good can come from it, and quite frankly, Jesus Christ has nothing to offer you. He did not come to save the righteous, but sinners. And only those who admit this dark and dreadful truth about themselves, and hate it and grieve it can possibly apprehend the wonder of what comes next in the parable.

Because the king just forgave the debt! He forgave the mismanagement, the embezzlement, the blundering stupidity, and arrogant offensiveness of this wretched so-called servant. He had the life of this miserable creature in his hand, and he let him go. *“So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt”* (18:26-27)

This impossibly indebted servant got far more than he could have imagined. He had only asked for more time to repay the debt (as though that would help—he could never repay it in a thousand lifetimes). But the king went far beyond his request and simply forgave him the billions he owed.

What Jesus did not tell us in this parable, but would show us at the cross, was that the King could afford to forgive this debt because Someone else paid it. The King’s own Son traded his life so that this criminal could go free. This is what is so good about

the good news. This is the message that has turned the world upside down. The King's Son has paid our way! We foolishly turned from our Maker and landed in slavery to sin and misery. We deserved death and hell for our folly and error and willful rebellion. If anyone on earth deserved death and hell, it was us.

But wait! The dreadful sentence was already served...by Another! Can it be that an unpayable debt has been fully paid for us by the Son of God? Death has been overtaken by life? Guilt has been assuaged by mercy? Justice has been satisfied by a Substitute?

Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! It is true! Beyond all hope, it is true! The guilty sinner was standing on the brink of the lake of fire. It was his turn to be cast into everlasting torment. And the Son of God stepped in and said, "Not this one. I'll pay for this one." And the guilty went free. The sinner turned and saw the Father's love. He heard his voice, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord." Me? This cannot be for me? But it's true. It's all true!

THE PASSION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

This is the goodness of the good news. This is the gigantic secret of the Christian. This is the wellspring of Christian zeal that never will run dry. This is the dynamism of Christian joy. Even more wonderful: this Christian joy is multifaceted. The good news has a variegated effect.

For example, the Gospel brings the joy of *relief*. It is that sense of liberation that comes from a permanent reprieve. The danger has passed, and it will never return. The greatest fear has been overturned, so no other fear can ever overwhelm us. In fact, no other fear even moves us.

The Gospel also brings the joy of *gratitude*. This permanent reprieve was not some random stroke of luck. It was not due to our cleverness or earnestness or even to our desiring. When we had given up hope as we should have, God came to our aid. "*While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). So the joy of the Gospel is all the purer because there is no taint of self-congratulation. It was entirely at the initiation and the expense of another.

And so the Gospel brings the joy of *wonder*. This joy is

sweetened all the more by the unfathomable mystery of Another's costly kindness to us. It is transfixed on the wonder of Another's inexplicable love for us. Why would he love us so? Why would he suffer when it was my sin? Why would he pay my debt for me? Why would he help me, when I hated him? It is a warm joy because it engenders love in return and so is mingled with love in response. "*We love because he first loved us*" (1 John 4:9).

And the Gospel brings the joy of *expectancy*. If Christ has loved me so at the cross, what even greater joys can I anticipate from him when he comes again? If he has given himself for me in the past, what great future has he prepared for me? Or, as Paul declares it, "*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*" (Romans 8:31-32)

THE PRACTICE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Of course this great news will have a powerful, positive effect upon all who believe it and appropriate its benefits. In fact, this is the shocking part of the parable Jesus told. The king forgave his servant for his incredible mismanagement resulting in the loss of billions. Yet the servant, rather than being transformed by this gift of grace, refused to forgive the infinitesimal debt of a fellow servant. "*But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'* He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." (Matthew 18:28-35)

The point, of course, is that this astonishing,

incomparable grace of God to sinners like us will certainly have a positive, transforming effect. If not, then something has gone terribly wrong. The Christian faith is a gracious religion, *the* gracious religion. All of life becomes a response to God's grace.

This grace of God will transform our *worship*. Instead of worship being a performance for our enjoyment calculated to manufacture a certain emotional state in us (to be inspirational), worship is our response to God as we eagerly return thanks and receive his continued love and favor.

This grace of God will transform our *witness*. Instead of witnessing or sharing Christ with others being a dreaded, fearful duty, evangelism becomes as natural as exhaling. The first Christians did not need to be told to proclaim Christ—they just could not shut up about him. Even when threatened with punishment for their witness, they only spoke all the more about him. Their joy in Christ knew no bounds.

This grace of God will transform our *discipleship*. Obeying Christ and serving Christ becomes a delight rather than a duty. That's why it was only when he reached Romans chapter twelve that Paul called believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices. It was "in view of God's mercy." It was in response to God's astonishing grace which Paul had just described in the first eleven chapters of Romans that the call to service went forth. Discipleship is always in response to God's grace.

This grace of God will transform our *relationships with others*. No one could possibly owe us a debt comparable to the debt we owed God. On that basis we are easily able to forgive others and overlook their faults. We know how truly failing we are and are able to extend God's grace to others. "We love because he first loved us." God's grace fosters radical love, radical forgiveness, and radical mercy in the church.

NEGLECTING THE GOSPEL OF GRACE

When this gospel of grace is neglected in the church, when the brilliant glory of this gospel dims, the result is that people will naturally drift away from biblical Christianity and shift into some other kind of religion. It is often said that there is one true religion, Christianity, the gospel of grace as described above, and there is one false religion—salvation by works. All other

religions are lumped into this other category of “works righteousness.” But this is too simplistic. There are actually three false religions. Recognizing this is helpful. When people drift away from the Gospel of grace, they will gravitate toward one of these three false religions. But even more, these three false religions are already masquerading as some form of Christianity. Once we learn to spot these three false religions, we will be able to distinguish them more easily from the true faith in Christ, the Gospel of grace.

These false religions are not the same as the organized, non-Christian religions of the world such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc. These three false religions lie beneath and behind these non-Christian religions. The organized religions are expressions of one of the three false religions, or they will contain elements of one or more of the three false religions. Sometimes a religion itself will have subgroups or sects that are really devoted to one or another of the three false religions, but which exist together under the umbrella of a larger religion such as Islam. Christianity has often degenerated into one or another of these three false religions and so has ceased to be Christianity at all. Some of these sects among Christianity will have more in common with similar sects of the other organized religions than they do with other varieties of Christianity itself. The three false religions do not include the religion of hypocrites, those who do not really believe what they profess but only make a show of religion for ulterior motives. Some will profess religion because it is expected, for example, or will use religion to control or to impress others. But these hypocrites do not actually believe what they claim.

THE THREE FALSE RELIGIONS

Among the sincere, however, there are really only three false religions: moralism, mysticism, and magic. Each religion has a particular view of god (or the gods or the ultimate), each diagnoses a specific human problem that either creates a need or inhibits its fulfillment. And each religion offers a solution to the

problem, some attempt to contact, influence, or control god (or the gods or the ultimate) in an effort to satisfy this need.

For *moralism*, god is perfect and righteous and demands perfection from his creatures. The problem or perceived need is our lack of moral or intellectual completeness. People do not measure up to the standard. So god is offended by our inferiority or lack of sins or failures or false beliefs. This may also include a lack of understanding, or knowledge, or the formulation of the right doctrine. True religion consists of proper behavior or correct beliefs: those which god approves. God must be placated, appeased, or won over by our better behavior or superior beliefs. Moralism offers a way to completeness, a way to achieve what god requires. In moralism, the key desire is a sense of superiority or PRIDE.

For *mysticism*, god is exalted, transcendent, or in another, spiritual dimension or realm, and so is unreachable. Since god is the true source of happiness or blessedness, his unavailability is the main human problem. Often the reason god is unreachable is because of our human, physical nature or because we are distracted from the better, spiritual world by our physical needs and appetites. The perceived need is a lack of fulfillment or happiness. True religion involves somehow experiencing god directly or immediately. Since god is in a different dimension, a spiritual realm, we must attain an altered state of consciousness or some special, secret knowledge or esoteric insight in order to experience the divine in sustained ecstasy. This altered state of consciousness is often achieved through meditation, chanting, rhythmic breathing, prolonged vigils of sleeplessness, altered sugar levels through fasting, or the sensory deprivation of darkness and silence (or drugs). The key desire is PLEASURE.

For *magical religion*, god is powerful, the source of all success and achievement. The human problem is that we lack personal power to control our environment or other people or evil spirits. This is compounded by the fact that god is also aloof, unwilling, unable, or unpredictable for a variety of reasons. So magical religion involves the quest to find ways to get god's attention, or to manipulate, control, co-opt, or empower god (or our environment or the evil spirits) through formulas, rituals, incantations, and/or mind-over-matter/positive thinking. The key desire is for POWER.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

As we said, organized religions (Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, distorted Christianity, etc.) may contain elements of each of the three religions. And organized religions may have factions within them which are really devoted to one of the three religions (mystics, moralists, or magicians). That's why Christian, Hindu, and Islamic mystics find more in common with each other than with members of their own organized religion, for example, or why the Christian mystics Diadochus of Photice in the middle of the fifth century, and John Climacus in the early seventh century could recommend the continual repetition of the name Jesus in prayer rather than the syllable "om" as in eastern meditation. The word "Jesus" can become a meditative mantra for Christians as a mere replacement for the "om" mantra used by Hindus because both are really practicing the same religion: mysticism.

It also explains why translated episodes of *Veggie Tales* (moralism) are so well received in parts of the Arabic-speaking (moralistic Islam) world. Certain *Veggie Tales* episodes teach the religion of moralism: it does not really matter whether it is Christian moralism or Islamic moralism because it is really the same religion: moralism.

And it also explains why some followers of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism will all make pilgrimages to holy sites expecting to receive some form of spiritual empowerment from that special geographic location. They are all practicing the same religion: magic.

Scripture condemns all three of these false religions. That's because God hates all of these forms of false religion.

1. *Moralism* or salvation by works is utterly rejected in Scripture as we find, for example, in Galatians 2:15-16: "*We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.*" Our Lord Jesus also roundly condemned the self-righteous Pharisees (moralists).

2. *Mysticism* is condemned by Scripture's unanimous rejection of false prophecy: those who falsely claim to have encountered God and to speak for him.

3. And, of course, *magic*, sorcery, divination, and necromancy are all explicitly and universally condemned by God's Word. "*When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a wizard or a necromancer, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD your God, for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this. The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen.*" (Deuteronomy 18:9-15)

Each of the three false religions is a corruption of some aspect of the biblical faith. Moralists rightly observe that God is righteous and commands obedience, but moralism makes our obedience the means of placating God. Mystics seek experiences similar to those reported in Scripture, though in an unmediated and unapproved manner. Magicians note the presence of biblical rituals (signs and seals), but make them into a means of manipulating God.

But most seriously, in each of these false religions, God becomes the means to a more desirable end, i.e. pride, pleasure, or power. These other, more desirable ends are called "idols." Such blasphemy is a violation of the first commandment and should be exposed as contemptible irreligion. God will not be mocked.

THE FALSE RELIGIONS IN CHRISTIAN CLOTHING

One of the serious signs of the decline of the church in our day is how quickly it has degenerated into these three false religions. The following are examples of practices and movements that pass for Christianity, but are in fact a part of these three false religions.

There are numerous forms of *moralism* masquerading as Christianity. Moralistic Christianity subtly insinuates that God is pleased with it (or even more pleased with it than others) because of its superior performance.

1. Theological liberalism as represented by mainline Protestantism has largely reduced Christianity to a social agenda, a form of moralism. "God is more pleased with us," it implies, "because we are for the poor, or we are saving the environment, or we champion women's rights (including the right to abortion) or homosexual rights. We are true religion, God's favorites, because we do good works for others."

2. Christian Fundamentalism is also a form of moralism. "God loves us best because we do not drink, smoke, chew tobacco, dance, or go to the movies." Christian fundamentalism loves the rules and makes up more rules than even God requires, and yet somehow manages to convince itself that it is actually keeping all these rules.

3. Much of evangelicalism is devoted to another form of moralism in its ubiquitous "principles for living": 'three keys to successful parenting,' 'five principles for a happy marriage,' 'ten steps to a worry-free life.'

4. And even among the confessionally Reformed there can be a subtle form of moralism that says, "God loves us most because we have doctrinal precision." These doctrinal experts will be happy to tell you that they are not pre-mill, but a-mill or post-mill. They will energetically explain the difference between the active and passive obedience of Christ and the infra, super, and sublapsarian positions.

Why this need for moralism, for superiority through good works or rule-keeping or precise doctrine? It arises because these folks have lost the joy and wonder of the gospel of grace, so they have to substitute something else.

Mysticism also frequently masquerades as Christianity today. The evangelical ideal today is spiritual ecstasy. It is to become entranced in an altered state of consciousness, lost in some deep, emotional encounter, the pursuit of the mystical experience. Much of evangelicalism today has degenerated into another religion, the false religion called mysticism. Achieving an

altered state of consciousness is common today, with or without religion. People do it all the time, frequently with the help of drugs. Through these drugs or through rigorous chanting, meditation, altered diet or fasting, sleep and sensory deprivation (or forty-five minutes of praise and worship music), anyone can move into an altered states of consciousness, a dreamy, trance-like state. This is mysticism, not Christianity. Why does the evangelical Christian need a mystical experience? Why pursue the trance and call it Christianity? It must be because they have lost the joy and wonder of the gospel of grace.

Magical religion in the guise of Christianity also abounds today. It is rife in Roman Catholicism. Much of popular Roman Catholicism is devoted to magical superstition: holy water, prayers to saints, patron saints, St. Christopher medals, pilgrimages, rosaries, relics, indulgences, crucifixes, charms, trinkets, and weeping statues.

But we could point as well to the magical forms of “mind over matter” offered first by Norman Vincent Peale’s “Power of Positive Thinking,” and more recently by Robert H. Schuller’s “Possibility Thinking.” Robert Schuller declared the following in a taped message for the Amway Corporation entitled *Possibility Thinking: Goals*, “You don’t know what power you have within you!... You make the world into anything you choose. Yes, you can make your world into whatever you want it to be.” Elsewhere we call that magic. A close cousin to this is the “name it/claim it” practice of positive confession of the Word of Faith movement as proclaimed by Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Oral Roberts, Benny Hinn, and Joel Osteen.

And we could point even more recently to Bruce Wilkinson’s wildly popular, *The Prayer of Jabez*. Supposedly by praying or reciting or chanting each day a twenty-nine word prayer from an obscure text in the Old Testament book of Chronicles, one could claim blessings that were being stored in a warehouse in heaven, blessings that, without the reciting, would go unclaimed for all eternity. This is a blatant, shocking example of magical religion posing as Christianity, yet the book sold in the millions.

Some years ago an evangelical speaker from Wheaton, Illinois described entering a Roman Catholic bookstore and being dismayed by all of the magical trinkets and good luck charms that

were offered to the faithful. He clucked his tongue in judgment...until he went into the evangelical Christian bookstore and found even more trinkets and good luck charms, “angels on your shoulder,” etc. offered to the evangelicals. He called it “Jesus junk.” This also is superstition, magical nonsense. Why do professing Christians desire these magical trinkets and amulets? It is due the loss of the gospel of grace. When they lose the gospel, empty people must grab onto something. As noted before, G.K. Chesterton observed, “When people quit believing in God they do not believe nothing, they believe anything.”

But the point is not to cluck our tongues or wag our fingers in condescension. The point is that we too will drift if we are not continually captivated by the good news of the gospel of grace at Christ's expense. The church you've been longing for will gladly, powerfully, and continually trumpet this good news and live out the implications of the good news in its worship, witness, discipleship, and common life.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

A Young Denomination

The birth date of the *Presbyterian Church in America* is December 4, 1973. (But our spiritual roots are in the Protestant Reformation.)

We came into existence because we felt strongly the need for a scriptural, evangelical and Reformed witness to Christ. We wanted to be a part of a denomination which honors God and His Word. We desired a believing fellowship which is committed to evangelism, Christian education and training as top priorities in the Church. We believed that ministers and church officers should affirm without compromise the great biblical beliefs of Christianity.

Many of our churches separated from their denomination because of the compromise of our Christian doctrines. Though we earnestly desired closer fellowship with Christians of like mind, we wanted no part of the National or World Councils of Churches because of their pluralistic theology. (We are members of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches and the National Association of Evangelicals.) After years of sincere efforts to call our former denomination to revival and renewal we were led by God to withdraw and form a new body. The new denomination began with 250 congregations and 50,000 members.

Within a few years it grew to include more than 500 churches with nearly 80,000 members. In 1982 the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod joined with us, bringing almost 25,000 new members into the PCA. As of 2006, we counted more than 1639 churches, with over 338,873 members throughout the United States and Canada. Of the numerous Presbyterian denominations in North America, the PCA is among the fastest growing. Together we are lifting high a banner

of love and testimony to Jesus Christ the Lord, locally and globally.

A Scriptural Denomination

Our church seeks to be scriptural in both its government and its doctrine.

The form of church government we believe is most biblical is called “Presbyterian.” This means the local churches are governed by “presbyters,” or elders, who are elected by the people. There are two kinds of elders. Teaching elders are pastors. Ruling elders are ordained laymen. This was the kind of government the New Testament Church enjoyed (for instance, see Acts 20:17; Titus 1:5-7). It has been the form followed by the great Reformed and Presbyterian branches of Christendom since the days of John Calvin in Europe and John Knox in England and Scotland.

The elders sit in a “session.” This session has the oversight of the faith and life of the local church congregation.

Representatives from the session along with the ordained ministers of the churches compose the “presbytery.” The presbytery has oversight of the ministries of the churches in a given geographical area. Through the presbytery the work of many churches is coordinated and their combined efforts enable them to extend the Kingdom of Christ much farther than would otherwise be possible.

The local churches also send commissioners – elders and ministers – to the highest court of the church, the “General Assembly.” The assembly meets annually and enables all the churches to have a voice in guiding the spiritual and practical affairs of the entire denomination.

In the Presbyterian Church in America the local church owns and controls its property. A church’s relationship with the denomination is based on mutual love and commitment to the Bible, the Reformed faith, and the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. Though a congregation may withdraw from the denomination at any time by a simple majority vote of its members, we agree that congregations should be yoked in faith

and practice and should bind themselves together for the edification of the whole body of Christ.

Our form of doctrine is also scriptural. As “Presbyterian” refers to our form of government so “Reformed” denotes our doctrinal beliefs. We stand in the ancient heritage of true-to-the-Bible theology. We earnestly strive to follow Christ and His Apostles. We believe that the purest expressions of scriptural doctrine are found in the Calvinistic creeds, particularly the Westminster Confession of Faith with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms.

This means that we believe in the Trinity. There is one God who exists eternally in three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

We believe that the Bible is the written Word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit and without error in the original manuscripts. The Bible is our infallible and divine authority in all matters of faith and life.

We believe that all men are sinners and are totally unable to save themselves or even to cooperate with God in efforts to earn their salvation.

We believe that salvation is by God’s action alone, who sovereignly chooses out of the fallen race of mankind those whom He will save. God alone saves the people whom He draws to Jesus by his Holy Spirit. He convinces them of heir sin and enlightens them so that they repent of their sins and trust Jesus Christ as he is offered in the Gospel. Because God alone knows who are His, we call on people everywhere to repent and to trust in Jesus Christ.

We believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who became man and lived and died and rose again to atone for the sins of those who trust him alone for their salvation. Jesus Chris is the only mediator between God and man.

We believe that God’s Holy Spirit gives Christians the daily strength and wisdom they need to walk according to His will and to grow in holiness.

We believe that Jesus Christ shall return personally, visibly, and bodily to judge all mankind and to receive His people unto Himself.

A Progressive Denomination

We sincerely desire to spread the Gospel to every land, to make disciples and to teach them the faith once for all delivered by God to His Church. And we happily serve men in need, resisting man's inhumanity to man, working for peace, honor, and dignity among all men without discrimination.

We are "conservative," but we are not old fashioned! We hold to the faith of the Bible and of our fathers, but we strive to proclaim God's Truth as imaginatively and creatively as possible.

We are busy. Busy about God's work. Starting new churches in the United States and Canada; supporting small congregations who want a full ministry in their communities; teaching and training workers and leaders how to study, apply, obey and share the Scriptures; sending missionaries to many countries throughout the world; publishing literature and curricula for individuals, groups, schools, and churches; caring for retired ministers and their families; sponsoring youth and children's ministries; guiding men and women and families to a closer walk with the living God.

Source: Christian Education and Publications of the Presbyterian Church in America, revised July 2007

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

The Presbyterian Church in America has a strong commitment to evangelism, missionary work at home and abroad, and to Christian education. From its inception, the church has determined its purpose to be “faithful to the Scriptures, true to the reformed faith, and obedient to the Great Commission.”

Organized at a constitutional assembly in December 1973, this church was first known as the National Presbyterian Church but changed its name in 1974 to Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). It separated from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern) in opposition to the long-developing theological liberalism which denied the deity of Jesus Christ and the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. Additionally, the PCA held to the traditional position on the role of women in church offices.

In December 1973, delegates, representing some 260 congregations with a combined communicant membership of over 41,000 that had left the PCUS, gathered at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama, and organized the National Presbyterian Church, which later became the Presbyterian Church in America.

In 1982, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, joined the Presbyterian Church in America. The Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, had been formed in 1965 by a merger of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, General Synod.

The PCA has made a firm commitment on the doctrinal standards which had been significant in presbyterianism since 1645, namely the Westminster Confession of Faith and

Catechisms. These doctrinal standards express the distinctives of the Calvinistic or Reformed tradition.

Among the distinctive doctrines of the Westminster Standards and of Reformed tradition is the unique authority of the Bible. The reformers based all of their claims on “sola scriptura,” the Scriptures alone. This included the doctrine of their inspiration which is a special act of the Holy Spirit by which He guided the writers of the books of Scriptures (in their original autographs) so that their words should convey the thoughts He wished conveyed, bear a proper relation to the thoughts of other inspired books, and be kept free from error of fact, of doctrine, and of judgment—all of which were to be an infallible rule of faith and life. Historically, the concept of infallibility has included the idea of inerrancy.

Other distinctives are the doctrines of grace, which depict what God has done for mankind’s salvation:

(1) Total depravity of man. Man is completely incapable within himself to reach out towards God. Man is totally at enmity with God, cf. Romans 3:10-23.

(2) Unconditional election by the grace of God. There is absolutely no condition in any person for which God would save him. As a matter of fact, long before man was created, God chose or predestined some to everlasting life. He did this out of His mere good pleasure, cf. Ephesians 1:4 and 5.

(3) Particular atonement. God in His infinite mercy, in order to accomplish the planned redemption, sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, to die as a substitute for the sins of a large but specific number of people, cf. Romans 8:29 and 30.

(4) The irresistible grace of God. This is the effectual work of the Holy Spirit moving upon a particular person whom He has called, applying the work of redemption, cf. John 3:5 and 6.

(5) The perseverance of the saints. This is that gracious work of God’s sanctification whereby He enables a saved person to persevere to the end. Even though the process of sanctification is not complete in this life, from God’s perspective it is as good as accomplished, cf. Romans 8:30, 38, and 39, and Philippians 1:6.

The PCA maintains the historic polity of Presbyterian governance set forth in The Book of Church Order, namely rule by presbyters (or elders) and the graded assemblies or courts. These courts are the session, governing the local church; the presbytery, for regional matters; and the general assembly, at the national level. It has taken seriously the position of the parity of elders, making a distinction between the two classes of elders, teaching and ruling. It has self-consciously taken a more democratic position (rule from the grass roots up) on presbyterian governance in contrast to a more prelatical form (rule from the top assemblies down).

The PCA Ministry Buildings in Lawrenceville is the location from which most of the ministries of the denomination are coordinated. These ministries are carried on by four Program committees—Mission to the World, Mission to North America, Christian Education and Publication, Reformed University Ministries, and one service committee, the Administrative Committee, responsible for the administration of the General Assembly. Additionally, there are five agencies which also minister to the denomination: PCA Foundation, PCA Retirement & Benefits, Inc. (both located in Lawrenceville), Ridge Haven, (the PCA conference center located close to Rosman, North Carolina), Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Georgia, and Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, (the national educational institutions of the PCA).

The PCA is one of the faster growing denominations in the United States, with over 1700 churches and missions throughout the USA and Canada. There were over 335,000 communicant and non-communicant members as of December 2000.

The influence of the PCA extends far beyond the walls of the local church. Mission to the World has 519 career missionaries in almost 60 nations of the world, 169 two-year missionaries, and over 6500 short term missionaries. Because of the unique relationship between Mission to the World with over thirty mission organizations with whom some of our missionaries are working, some consider that the influence is far greater than our size might indicate. Indeed, PCA churches support an additional 690 career missionaries, covering over 130

nations. Further, with more than 100 chaplains in the military, Veterans Administration, prisons, and hospitals, and 45 college and university campus ministers, the Gospel is proclaimed to a rather large audience around the world not reached through usual outreach channels. Because of the emphasis on education, there are many members of the PCA who are teachers and professors at all levels, including a significant number of large universities and theological seminaries.

In this new century, the Presbyterian Church in America continues its commitment to evangelism world-wide and the building up of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(<http://www.pcanet.org/general/history.htm>)

ABOUT THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

(The following is an excerpt from the book about Atlanta prepared for the 1996 Summer Olympics. (Used with permission.)

ATLANTA: A Vision for the New Millennium
by Phyllis S. Fraley

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) contributes to the ethos of the Atlanta community by teaching and encouraging its members to integrate life and faith. Unlike many activist organizations that lobby local, state, and federal governments for the enactment of laws, neither the PCA nor its churches attempts to represent its members in public matters. The PCA does encourage its members to be active in political and civic organizations. Consequently, the denomination is well represented in prison ministries, adoption services, pregnancy crisis centers, disaster relief, and many other such organizations in the communities where the churches are located. The PCA does humbly petition the government, when appropriate, regarding the significant moral issues that trouble our communities and nation.

The Presbyterian Church in America also cooperates with other denominations and churches where there are common goals. One example is Quest Atlanta '96, in which 25 denominations and some 1,500 churches are working together. Quest Atlanta '96 is committed to unite the body of Christ to welcome the world during the Olympic Games in an effort to proclaim and demonstrate the love of God.

The PCA is one of the faster growing denominations in the United States, with over 1450 churches and missions throughout the USA and Canada. There were over 306,000

communicant and non-communicant members as of December 2000.

"Reformed" defines the doctrinal beliefs of the PCA, which holds that the purest expressions of scriptural doctrine are found in the Calvinistic creeds, particularly the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The PCA's representative form of church government is rooted in its name -- presbyterian. Local churches are governed by elders (presbyters) elected by the church members. This form of government extends through the regional presbyteries, which facilitate connectionalism, to the national General Assembly, which expresses PCA's connectionalism and the bond of union between/among all the churches.

Most of the work of the denomination is coordinated in the PCA Office Building in Lawrenceville. That work is carried out by four program committees -- Mission to the World, Mission to North America, Christian Education and Publications, and Reformed University Ministries. In addition, there is the Office of the Stated Clerk, which is responsible for the administration of the General Assembly; the PCA Foundation, which teaches more effective stewardship; and PCA Retirement & Benefits, Inc, which provides life, disability, retirement plan benefits and a relief fund for PCA pastors, lay church workers, and the staffs of PCA committees, agencies, and institutions.

The PCA moved to Atlanta in 1982 and bought its current building in Lawrenceville in 2001. Two-thirds of the PCA's churches and members are in the Southeast, and 25 churches are located in the Atlanta metro area.

National denominational institutions located outside PCA's headquarters include Ridge Haven, a conference center located close to Rosman, North Carolina; Covenant College, a liberal arts college with over 750 students, located at Lookout Mountain, Georgia; and Covenant Theological Seminary, in St. Louis, Missouri.

The PCA's influence extends far beyond the walls of the local church. Through Mission to the World, about 600 foreign missionaries are working in about 60 nations. Because of the

unique relationship between Mission to the World and over 30 mission agencies with which some of PCA's missionaries are working, many people consider PCA's influence to be far greater than its size might indicate. Further, with close to 160 chaplains in the military and in hospitals, the Gospel is proclaimed to a rather large audience around the world not reached through usual ecclesiastical channels. Because of the emphasis on education, many members of the PCA are teachers and professors at all levels of education, including large universities and quite a few theological seminaries.

Mission to North America serves PCA churches and presbyteries as they advance God's Kingdom in North America through the development of intentional evangelism and outreach ministries.

Christian Education and Publications' mission is to glorify God by serving the PCA in its commitment to creating disciples. It does this by teaching and training leaders and church members as well as by providing a biblically based Sunday school curriculum for all ages through its publishing house, Great Commission Publications. The Women in the Church is under the oversight and direction of the Christian Education and Publications Committee and provides seminars, retreats, and materials for women.

The Office of the Stated Clerk is under the oversight of the Administrative Committee, whose ministry is service. In addition to planning, coordinating, and arranging facilities and services for the annual meeting of the General Assembly, the ruling body made up of about 2,980 commissioners (ministers and ordained lay leaders), the Clerk's office serves as a liaison between the General Assembly and the presbyteries and sessions, as well as other denominational bodies. Other areas of service include assisting church pulpits committees and pastors in their search for churches and overseeing corporate civil matters, the PCA Historical Center in St. Louis, and the management and operation of the Atlanta headquarters.

(<http://www.pcanet.org/general/aboutpca.htm>)

THE VISION OF THE PCA

As one communion in the worldwide church, the Presbyterian Church in America exists to glorify God by extending the kingdom of Jesus Christ over all individual lives through all areas of society and in all nations and cultures. To accomplish this end the PCA aims to fill the world with churches that are continually growing in vital worship, in theological depth, in true fellowship, in assertive evangelism and in deeds of compassion.

The distinctiveness of the PCA lies in our stress on both reformation and revival. Without an emphasis on revival, "reformation" may become either a mimicking of political ideologies or sterile doctrinalism. Without an emphasis on reformation, "revival" may become a shallow pietism or mysticism. Only reformation and revival together can accomplish the Great Commission of our Lord.

We are committed to the Scriptures and the historic Westminster Standards based firmly on a biblical theology that answers the questions and issues of each culture and people to which we minister.

We are committed to worship that practices the presence and power of God within the church to the transformation of the surrounding culture through biblical application in population centers around the world.

We are committed to the winning of new converts and their incorporation into the church through the ministry of the Word and to significant ministry to the needy through deeds of mercy and service.

We are committed to the freedom of every member to minister through spiritual gifts and also to the responsibility to do so under spiritual authority and loving discipline.

We are committed to dynamic, prophetic confrontation on non-Christian thought forms and behavior and also to the demonstration of the truth through the practice of holiness and love in Christian fellowship.

We are committed to guarding and strengthening the biblical family and also to a ministry to the broken family forms such as the divorced, the widowed and the unwed parent.

We are committed to teaching and discipling men and women in the whole counsel of God and also to ministering to the needs of the whole person.

True to the Scriptures, the reformed faith, and obedient to the Great Commission of Jesus Christ.

(<http://www.pcanet.org/general/vision.htm>)

WHAT WE BELIEVE

Presbyterian Church in America

We believe the Bible is the written word of God, inspired by the Holy Spirit and without error in the original manuscripts. The Bible is the revelation of God's truth and is infallible and authoritative in all matters of faith and practice.

We believe in the Holy Trinity. There is one God, who exists eternally in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

We believe that all are sinners and totally unable to save themselves from God's displeasure, except by His mercy.

We believe that salvation is by God alone as He sovereignly chooses those He will save. We believe His choice is based on His grace, not on any human individual merit, or foreseen faith.

We believe that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who through His perfect life and sacrificial death atoned for the sins of all who will trust in Him, alone, for salvation.

We believe that God is gracious and faithful to His people not simply as individuals but as families in successive generations according to His Covenant promises.

We believe that the Holy Spirit indwells God's people and gives them the strength and wisdom to trust Christ and follow Him.

We believe that Jesus will return, bodily and visibly, to judge all mankind and to receive His people to Himself.

We believe that all aspects of our lives are to be lived to the glory of God under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

(<http://www.pcanet.org/general/beliefs.htm>)

Discover more about the Hospers Presbyterian
Church in America (PCA) on the World Wide Web

hosperspca.org

Learn more the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)

pcanet.org

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Also by Brian V. Janssen

Cursillo—Little Courses in Catharsis: A Critique of the Cursillo Movement. Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2010.
Sing to the Lord a New (Covenant) Song: Thinking About the Songs We Sing to God. Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2010.

(Forthcoming) *churchisfun.com? Renewing Our Vision for the Church*

Are you longing to know God?

Do you yearn to be forgiven for your sins and to live a life that is worthy, a life that is truly worth living?

In the Bible, God tells us that he longs for this as well. He sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, into the world so that we could be reconciled to him. Jesus fully paid the way so that we may be forgiven and restored to God by trusting him—trusting that Jesus has brought all of this about.

Jesus said he would build his church, his force for reconciliation always advancing on a mission of love, announcing this great news, and building up the new community of God's people.

Your longing for God will only find fulfillment in Christ's church. In the pages of this book you will discover the biblical blueprint for that church—



A New Church for LeMars