

Apologia for These Critiques

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Excerpt from
WHAT PAUL MIGHT SAY TODAY
Critiques in the Practical Theology of 21st Century Western Christendom

*his Work*I love both the Church and the church. Of course, I speak of the universal body of believers and the local assembly. It is my love and concern for this—the body of Christ—that prompts me to write these critiques. Although born again of the Spirit of God, we are, nevertheless, yet sinners, struggling daily with our Adamic nature, which we possess till death do us part. As we grow in the Lord this struggle gets easier; temptation becomes less severe; our character becomes more Christ like. But always, day by day, the competition is present at some level; occasionally, we allow our old nature to get the upper hand and we suffer.

Because we are all in the same condition, and because we meet regularly in local assemblies for instruction and fellowship it is only natural that both our victories and our failures affect those about us. Individual and congregational failures were present in the 1st Century churches as well. Considerable portions of the New Testament apostolic letters address specific erroneous or sinful issues within a given assembly. Things are no different today. Until our Lord returns, there will be problems within our personal lives and within our local assemblies. Therefore, a primary function of local church leadership is to tackle these problems head-on: to refute false teachings and offensive behavior, and to confront the perpetrators.

A number of erroneous ideals and practices have become very prominent in Western Christendom. Sadly, relatively few Church leaders are addressing them; even more disappointing, many prominent Church leaders are purveyors of certain erroneous ideals and practices. This work

is a series of critiques addressing these issues that have caused me great concern for many years.

Although I approach this from an evangelical perspective, these critiques reach across denominational barriers to address the breadth of Western Christendom. As such, what I take issue with is not the Systematic or Theology Proper of Orthodox Christianity, but our application. How we manage our daily lives, how we go about implementing our beliefs, the practical aspect of our faith; thus, our Practical Theology.

Several passages speak of the struggles the Church would encounter in the last days. Selfish leaders and teachers of erroneous doctrines, as well as legalism, hypocrisy and an air of self-sufficient egotism would abound. Thus, warnings were issued for those living in the last days lest they be fooled by the charisma of these false teachers and the persuasion of their apparent godliness.

Being in the last days, as I believe we are, these warnings were written to us. Therefore, I offer these critiques to heighten our awareness of the erroneous teachings and practices which have become so commonplace within Western Christendom. Cloaked as righteousness, these deceptive and destructive false teachings have slowly crept into our midst. Diverting our attention, they hinder our mission of evangelism and theological instruction.

Exposing these erroneous teachings will offend some readers. Others will not understand the need for such disparaging remarks. But many will immediately realize the importance. While the entirety

of Western Christendom is not likely to change because of these critiques; perhaps the practical theology of a few individuals might.

I implore the reader to understand in the following pages that I do not mean to sound as though Western Christianity has apostatized and left the faith, nor that I am an opponent of the Church. On the contrary, I am a devout believer in our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ, and in his Church, the elect—everyone in this current dispensation who places their trust in him. Indeed, the impetus for these critiques is my concern for the Church, especially the local church. At the same time, I realize the austere censure in certain chapters might give some readers pause. Good, pause is necessary if we desire to make a clear, objective analysis of what it is, exactly, we are doing.

The issues I address are not points of Systematic or Theology Proper—the deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Jesus, salvation by grace through faith, etc.—but matters of practical theology. As the late, great, theologian and preacher, Dr. J. Vernon McGee used to say, “Where the rubber meets the road.”

We have the proper theology, but when we unsheathe it to wield it about in battle, we often have trouble keeping it untarnished by our grimy little fingers. As sinners, it is our nature. Corruption is part of who we are. Although freed from its power, and even empowered by the Holy Spirit to overcome it, our sinful nature is with us till death do us part. As we yield to our Lord we grow more Christ like, but the Adamic nature never departs this body of corruption, with which we must struggle daily.

Because sin and error is present in our lives, it is also present in the local church. Therefore, a decided vigilance is necessary

to detect it, and a determined faithfulness is necessary to expose and purge it. This is a primary task of church leadership. Those leaders who shy from this assignment have withdrawn from their obligation to the church and from their employment for the Lord.

It was no different for local churches in the 1st Century. Indeed, certain New Testament letters were written specifically to address erroneous practices or ideologies that had arisen within a particular assembly. This work is merely a critical inspection of similar problematic issues present today. It is an inspection of our sword’s condition, addressing the smudges left by the misdirected goals and traditions of Western Christianity, smudges that diminish the brilliance of the sword by drawing attention to themselves. To remove them will take a grassroots movement, not unlike the great reformation itself. Yet, on the other hand, as we shall see, we know the Church in the last days would be as such. Therefore, I do not expect these erroneous teachings and practices to cease; however, perhaps some battlefield soldiers will be inspired to polish their little section of the sword.

The Background for This Work

It was 1988. I was nearly finished with a doctorate of ministry degree at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary. I was the pastor of a modest church in the Northwest, and I had just finished preaching through the book of First Timothy wherein the Apostle Paul outlined proper ecclesiology. The apostolic pattern of church life had been drawing me in for sometime, and now, once again, it was staring me in the face. I could not escape. I grew increasingly concerned and frustrated over the generally accepted agenda and leadership models of modern western churches. The more I researched, the more

I came to realize just how far astray we had drifted from the apostolic prototype.

I remembered another astute observation of the late Dr. J. Vernon McGee. When asked why he had left his denomination, in his decidedly slow southern drawl, he said something like, *“Well, I didn’t leave my denomination; I believe the same thing I did seventy-five years ago. Why . . . they up and left me!”* Of course, Dr. McGee’s situation was different from mine. His concern was with issues of Theology Proper; mine was with issues of practical theology. His denomination had changed its views; mine practiced the same thing it did when I started. But the more I learned of the early Church, the more concerned I became for our modern practices.

It disturbed me that the leadership I was expected to provide was steeped in programs, meetings, and traditions that had little to do with ministry and equipping the saints. Projects, such as the circulation of local or national political petitions, endless meetings with the deacon board in which we discussed such things as . . . Let’s see, we discussed. . . . Actually, I can’t remember what we discussed; but I remember it seemed very important, and I had to be there for several hours every other week. Then there were the regular sessions with the board of trustees to discuss who could use the church property. Sometimes we would weigh the merits of yet another expansion project. Oh yes, and then the monthly business meetings with the whole congregation, at which time members (some of them yet babes in Christ, others perhaps in need of church discipline) would cast votes, each carrying the same weight as those of the pastors, deacons, and trustees.

In all, my role seemed far removed from the leadership exemplified in the New Testament. Most disturbing was the fact

that by Western standards this was not an undesirable or a negligent church. In fact, it was considered a model church within its association. Other churches in the region looked to it for leadership. It was the typical middleclass, evangelical, western church. It had all the programs: an active youth group, a women’s Bible study class, a mid-week prayer meeting, a choir, deacons and trustees, business meetings, a women’s missionary society, AWANA, Sunday school for all ages, a nursery, a generous missions budget, even a gymnasium. The parishioners were committed to sound Christian doctrine and to the church. But something was wrong. Something was wrong with this normality.

Despite the activities and the parishioner’s commitment, something seemed out of focus with the dynamic faith epitomized in the New Testament and practiced by the early Church. I began to feel distant from, and even adverse to, the motif and activities that have become so commonplace to most of us. Many of my Christian brothers and sisters will read this treatise and have no clue as to what I am discussing. I envy their bliss and sometimes long for those days of innocence. Or, as the famed Bob Seger song says, “I wish I didn’t know now what I didn’t know then.”

The following years were frustrating, even emotionally traumatic. At first, I seemed unable to articulate or even clarify my concerns. It was like having someone’s name right on the tip of your tongue but being unable to say it. You know what it is, but your mind will not picture it. It will not cooperate. For the moment, all communication is put on hold as your mind and tongue struggle to establish the verbalization link. In time, I did clarify and articulate my concerns, which are largely addressed in this work. But I still cannot explain and articulate the pain this causes

in my heart. Although I agree with the core theological beliefs, I simply cannot abide the temporal and material concerns that so dominate our traditional, western, evangelical assemblies.

Through the years, I have encountered many others harboring similar concerns. They comprise a segment of the Christian population generally overlooked by the local church. Or, more precisely, a segment of the Christian population that actively avoids the traditional, local church setting. I have consoled and counseled many fellow believers, encouraging them to stay the course in their Christian walk, even if compelled to avoid the traditional setting. You might say I have served as a chaplain at large to former pastors, deacons, Sunday school teachers and church members in general—numerous folks who were raised in (or had devoted much of their lives to), the traditional local church only to abandon it. But they have not abandoned their faith. Although some meet regularly in homes with small groups, most are completely cut off, in despair, seldom communing with other believers. Yet all of them have one thing in common. They are disillusioned by the material pursuits, petty squabbles, legalism, or the short sighted socio-political dogma that has such a choke-hold on the local church.

After many years my good friend, a fellow pastor deeply rooted in the system of which I have concern, strongly admonished me. “You have a responsibility; you have made an analysis, now take some action.” He was right. It was time to do something more far-reaching about these concerns, which had burdened me for many years. This work is just that. It is an attempt, feeble as it may be, to articulate and address the practical ideologies of 21st Century Western Christendom that have run amuck.

I know of no name for this ideology. It has a polymorphic appearance with many faces blending to form a common center. This center I shall call Western Evangelical Orthodoxy. It is materialistic—revolving around buildings and ordered with a businessman’s mind set. In ways, it is somewhat Pharisaical with its demanding traditions and blanket condemnations. In other ways it seems almost mystical, with a compulsion for unrealistic prayers, iconic symbols, and orchestrated jubilation. Always, it is dogmatic—crusading for a cause, even if the cause is far from evangelism and its dogma born of exuberance rather than sound theology.

Over the last two decades, I have discussed these matters with various fellow believers; not just the aforementioned outcasts, but with those rooted in the system. The most common critical response is, “But the Church is imperfect, made up of people who are growing spiritually. You cannot find a perfect church!” Such a response fails even to understand what I am pursuing. I am well aware of the membership’s imperfections. Indeed, I am as imperfect as the next. My concerns have nothing to do with the faults of individual church members per se, but with the prevailing institutional objectives—fostered by many highly visible leaders—and the practical ideologies these objectives generate throughout Western Evangelical Orthodoxy. Transcending denominational lines, these ideologies are deeply rooted in our western culture.

The second most critical response is, “But things are changing. Churches all over the country are having small group Bible studies. Pastors are gathering for prayer. Men are coming together to confront their responsibilities as fathers and spiritual leaders, etc.” This I do not doubt. I applaud such progress, but these are not

the changes for which I strive. Changes of this nature are in the air from generation to generation. Eventually they are absorbed back into the mainstream. Eventually they will structure themselves just as the rest of the Western Church has structured itself.

These occasional, periodic movements are not unlike driving the frontage road instead of the highway. Both roads are going the same direction and lead to the same place; only one has more traffic and gets there faster. The infrastructure of the Western Church and the dogma that drives it remain untouched. Still, the best potential leaders must leave the local church to be trained for service elsewhere. Still, millions are wasted on lavish cathedrals. Still, lay leadership positions are filled by the popular and affluent. Still, the Church sees itself as a socio-political watchdog. Still, the twofold mission of the Church is thwarted.

Scripture tells us the last days, before Christ's return, would see perilous times, false teachers, false doctrines and erroneous practices would flourish. We are in the last days; thus, we must take heed lest we be deceived. As such, the following critiques are set forth to bring attention to these insidious false teachings and erroneous practices that seek to divert the Church in these last days of spiritual peril.

In this chapter, many of my fellow believers might be tempted to take offense. Please don't. Rather, read this analysis with an open mind, knowing that it is written in love, with the purist intentions. The picture it portrays is painted with a broad brush, depicting the overall impression of the landscape versus the details. As such, certain aspect of this picture might not be true of your particular congregation. For this be grateful. For those who might have skipped the

Apologia for this work (see page 9), I encourage you to read it before proceeding, lest you misunderstand from whence I speak.

The church, one body

Beyond the general charge to evangelize, the Church—both universal and local—is to function as a single body. Jesus is the head, the mind if you will. Church members are the organs, the limbs, the cells. This, the Apostle's metaphor, is most appropriate. The human body is a wonderful thing; so complex yet so efficient, specifically designed to pleasure and serve the thoughts and desires of its mind. It walks, runs, talks, sits, laughs, cries and eats as directed. Instinctively, its blood and fluids nourish, cleanse and protect itself; so that involuntary as well as voluntary acts of fulfillment and self preservation occur.

This is the ideal structure and purpose of the local church. Each member is to have a healthy relationship with both the head (Christ) and the fellow members of the body (the church). Both the individual believers and the church are to respond to the desires of Christ the Lord. When the mind in the human body is joyful, facial muscles become tense as the mouth and eyes betray the emotion. To quench a thirst the mind sends a message to the muscles in the arm and hand, they respond by lifting the tea cup. When the foot needs cleaning the hands perform the duty. When the body needs energy, the metabolic system begins working overtime to produce it. Similarly, the Lord expresses actions through one or many members of the church toward other members.

Of course, this analogy presupposes a health body. For if the body is sick, depending on the illness, certain members will not function correctly. If the femur is broken, the body cannot walk. If a flu virus

has invaded, the joints are sore, and there is temperature and nausea. When nauseated the stomach will spew its content rather than digest them. Soon dehydration sets in, causing further weakness and a buildup of acids within the body. So too, sin and sickness within the church, hinder its proper function.

When the human body is sick we tend to it, medicate it, let it rest and mend and do whatever is necessary to return it to health; for many illnesses, if left unattended, will continue to fester and worsen. They may even grow into life threatening diseases. Anyone who has been terribly ill knows that health is perhaps the greatest asset one can have. Health is far more important than are all our material goods, our money, our entertainment. Of what pleasure are any of these if we do not have the health to enjoy them? Yet, simply having good health is a joy in and of itself. Too often we take good health for granted. We forget to thank the Lord for this blessing, but when sick we straight away call upon Him and entreat others to do the same on our behalf.

Like the human body, the local church also experiences sickness from time to time. Someone in the membership has caused offense, is involved in a sinful practice, is harboring ill feelings toward another in the church, etc. Because we are yet sinners at various degrees of spiritual maturity, still learning to grow in Christ, any number of issues can and do arise. Yet seldom do other members, or even church leaders, tend to these conditions as they would their physical bodies. This then allows the illness to grow, to fester, until something very bad happens: membership fades, the church splits; there is a scandal in the leadership; whatever it is, it is never good. Such illnesses were the impetus for some of Paul's Pastoral Epistles. Always, he instructed the church to address these

issues, for if not dealt with swiftly they could become debilitating, even deadly. Today, the average local church is in great need of local physicians, members and leaders willing to address conditions festering within the body.

A church, a family

Another analogy for the church is that of a family. But here the terms, illustration, metaphors, and even example, are not strong enough. For the church is indeed a family—a spiritual family of brothers and sisters in Christ, held together by healthy familial ties such as loving, caring, nurturing, teaching, rebuking, encouraging, etc. all the attentive bonds that make a healthy family work.

A close-knit family is not a fraternity or a business. The church is nothing like either enterprise. Yet, we organize it like both. What self-respecting church business meeting is not run according to *Robert's Rules of Order*? So marshaled are many church business meetings, an outsider might think he were attending a shareholders' conference in which investors are voting to protect their stock. The nature of business is to make a profit in a competitive world. The church is to glorify God and make converts. Big business seeks investments in lucrative opportunities. The church seeks to convert souls to Christ and to instruct them in the faith. The purposes of the church can be well served without Robert's handbook and the useless meetings it generates. It is our desire to control the temporal things (the money, the buildings, the choir robes, the parking lot) that compels such meetings.

Nor is the church like a fraternity. A fraternity's singular purpose is to foster elite, an imagined *crème de la crème*. This is not the church. The local church is a haven for the socially downcast as well as for society's elite. Here, the two meet as

one, equal in nature and equal in future glory. The social roles (typically defined by one's personal wealth) so often played within the local church, are nothing short of abominable. It is a sickness in need of a physician's attention.

Polymorphic facets of trouble

Indeed, the typical local church of 21st Century Western Christendom has many troubling facets—sickness on many levels, composing a ubiquitous, polymorphic ideology largely comprised of worrisome issues in practical theology. In no particular order of importance (for they are all in need of attention), let me identify some of the more troubling facets.

Leadership in the 21st Century Church

The appointment and training of leaders was different in the early church from what it is today. From among those willing to commit, certain qualified men were chosen and nurtured for leadership. It was not a popularity contest, nor was a leader selected simply because of his social status. Each congregation had a core of qualified elders trained in biblical theology and ministry. We generally have one. We call him the pastor. Rather than growing this leader from within the church we examine the resumes of outsiders for hire. After a few years we often weary of him, or he of us, and the search begins anew.

A primary function of early church leadership was to guard against heresy and to equip the saints. Church leaders not only exposed and denounced false teachings they also made it their priority to teach sound doctrine to the flock. Modern church leadership generally does not do this. Leaders will refute false teachings in Theology Proper (One God, the Trinity, etc.), but they typically neglect those false teachings of practical theology that have

invaded their congregations. And actually spending time with the parishioners, to teach them doctrine and theology, is something few church leaders even think of, much less accomplish. They are too overwhelmed with sermon preparation, administrative duties, program preparations, expansion strategies, and building plans.

To illustrate this point I cite a survey I conducted while doing doctoral work in seminary. I had been concerned for sometime about the various leadership roles in our modern western evangelical churches. The title of my doctoral project was “The Pastoral Neglect to Provide Leading Laymen with a Basic Foundation in Theology.” To further research this topic I surveyed pastors, and the leading laymen of their choice within numerous churches from a certain conservative and evangelical association throughout the states of Washington and Oregon.

I expected to find relatively few pastors providing theological and ministerial training to their lay leadership. Likewise, I expected to find a fair percentage of the lay leaders to be less than qualified for their task. However, the results were more staggering than I could have ever imagined. I had peeked behind the facade of neckties, choirs, sermons, beautiful buildings, and spirals reaching to the sky. I felt as though I had ripped the mask off a deeply rooted and shameful ugliness. I had revealed an aspect of Western Evangelical Orthodoxy that is generally shrouded in pretense. I had uncovered an area about which most of us would rather plead ignorance or make excuses. Not willing to confront it face to face, analytically, and honestly, we choose to simply neglect it, and dutifully don our weekly Sunday vesture to mask the embarrassment.

What had I discovered? I found that although 97% of the leading layman regularly prepared and taught Bible classes, and 78% believed they were qualified to provide spiritual counsel, only 3% of their pastors provided them with hermeneutical training. Less than 20% provided some form of theological training, and only 7% of the pastors provided some kind of training in spiritual counseling.

Although they admitted to having very little training for these tasks, most of the lay leaders believed they were qualified for them. However, as I suspected, their ignorance betrayed itself at the end of the questionnaire. I asked them to answer three simple, but pertinent, theological questions. I didn't attempt to stump them by choosing particularly difficult topics. Rather, I chose subjects that have a special concern to anyone who teaches biblical classes or gives spiritual counsel. Put simply, I chose subjects that anyone doing what they did should know cold. First, "Why does God allow evil?" Second, "Define total depravity." And third, "In what way is man created in the image of God?"

I did not expect lengthy theological treatises or even biblical references. I merely wanted to see if these teachers had a general understanding of things they were teaching. The results were astounding. Only 24% were able to answer the question as to the image of God. A mere 16% correctly answered why God allows evil, and no one, not one, could define the meaning of total depravity. Overall these leading laymen, these spiritual advisors and pillars in their churches, had only 13.5% correct answers, and no one answered all three questions correctly.

Although not comprehensive or conclusive, this small research project had shed light on a great and shameful display of ignorance within the leadership of our local church bodies. Sadly, our churches

are largely filled with lay leaders who have little or no training for the task set before them. We might say they are the modern Nicodemus. How is it, they are teachers of the church and do not know these things?

In this case, they did not know these things because their pastors had not taught them. Yet, this is the responsibility of the trained leadership, to nurture and train would-be leaders in the faith that they, too, can effectively fight the enemy. This means theological training as well as training in ministry, character, and spirit.

The leadership of the Early Church

I was ordained by a Baptist church, attended a well known Baptist Seminary, served as the pastor of two churches with Baptist type church government (congregational rule), and I am convinced that neither this congregational form nor the papal form of church government was the apostolic model. The entire model of early church leadership is far removed from either of these extremes, as it is, also, from the various other modern forms of governance staggered somewhere in between.

The church is to be as a family in every respect, even in its leadership. In a family, parents make the decision and direct family activities; it is not the collective vote of the siblings. But these parents are not aloof either; not untouchable icons on a pedestal. They are active participants in the family: teaching, leading by instruction and example, helping the children to make correct choices and sound decisions, training them to mature, to become adults that they too might raise a family of their own.

In the apostolic model there was a select group of men who lead the church (we will call them elders). Actually there were three terms used in the Greek New Testament to identify them: pastor, bishop,

and presbyters or elder (ποιμήν, ἐπίσκοπος, and πρεσβύτερος). The titles were used interchangeably, borrowed from idioms of their day, each denoting a certain aspect of leadership. *Pastor* speaks to the role of a tender shepherd. *Bishop* signifies a business like function, *Elder* denotes a wise counselor. These leaders were a self-perpetuating, self-nominating, and self-disciplining body, which instructed and protected the flock. It was not an easy thing to become an elder. To qualify for the appointment one had to be a man of proven character and spirituality, a man above reproach both within and without the local church body. It was not a position to be taken lightly (*1 Tim. 3*).

Training leaders the old way

If modern church leadership emulated the practices of early church leadership there would be no need for seminaries. Everything essential for ministry and leadership can be, and should be, taught within the local body. However, as another portion of my doctoral survey revealed, current leaders who are trained in ministry and theology (the pastors) are too busy with program preparation, organization, sermon preparation, and plant management to train (or more precisely, even attempt to train) their lay leaders effectively in basic biblical theology and ministry. Consequently, the majority of responding pastors viewed their teaching responsibility as a low item in the order of necessary weekly tasks.

This was not so in the early church. Future leaders learned theology and ministry from within the context of the local church, from their elders. When the local church trains and reproduces leaders from within its ranks, giving them the necessary skills to effectively exegete, teach, and preach the Word of God, to effectively minister to the membership, the church is strengthened. There is no need

for the most promising young men to relocate for training, and then, only to serve elsewhere. With this model they remain in their present ministries. They and the church reap the benefit of their studies as they put into practice that which they have learned. The student is able to retain his present means of livelihood and the great expense of seminary is avoided.

“Who will teach them?” you might ask.

“That is simple,” I answer. “The pastors; after all, according to Paul that is their job.”

“But are they qualified?” should be your scripted response.

“If not,” I contend, “they should not be pastors.”

If a pastor’s only skill is to provide emotionally charged sermons, then he should be in sales, not in the ministry. An elder, a pastor, is to be a scholar of the Word who teaches and trains others. This is a mandate. Theology is not something found in musty libraries. It is not a dead subject for theologians and scholars to research and debate. Theology is life. Every Christian lives his particular theology whether it is scripturally correct or incorrect.

Training for ministry is two fold. It necessitates information processing (academics) and experiential learning (practical ministry). One does not thrive without the other. Without the scholastics we may fall prey to false teaching. Without the practical ministry we are impotent to serve. The two are best learned together within the context of the local church. Therefore, Paul charged Timothy to “*entrust these things to faithful men, who will be competent to teach others as well*” (*2 Tim. 2:2*). This is not the responsibility of some far off-seminary. It is the responsibility of the local church, its leadership, its pastors.

This was a pastor's role for the first few centuries. Although this role was abandoned long ago, the duty has not been negated. The biblical mandate has not expired. It is still the task of the elders, the pastors, to teach biblical theology and exemplify practical theology to prospective leaders, to instruct the flock in such matters, and to protect them from heresy.

The church, the building

The local church is a family in every respect. It is the physical manifestation of the spiritual family joined by the union of the Holy Spirit. A great misnomer affixed in the minds of modern Western Evangelical Orthodoxy is (at least subconsciously, for our verbiage betrays us) to equate the building, the edifice, the temple, with the local church. But the local church exists totally apart from the edifice with its steeple, pews, pulpit, stained glass, and cross.

So embedded has the edifice become in our western culture that most people (Christians and non-believers alike), think of it as something holy, even calling the main meeting room, the sanctuary. As if it is a place where God Himself dwells, a place to be revered and endued with some mystical honor. This sanctuary is perceived as the place where it is one's duty to sacrifice time and money. This is an especially popular concept in our culture. It lends itself to our fast and busy lifestyles; where one can simply give a few dollars, spend an hour singing a few songs, say a few prayers, sit through a sermon, and, having done these duties, disappear for the rest of the week. The holy deeds are done with no need to waste the time necessary to become personally and emotionally involved in the lives of other "worshippers."

Consequently, it is of no surprise that this holy building is at the center of much

trouble in many local assemblies. Fortunes can be spent to beautify it, to expand it, to control it, and to make it acoustically pleasing to the "spirit of worship." Yet every year any number of local churches becomes embroiled in bitter arguments over the use of their particular sanctuary and its peripheral structures. This often leads to a bitter split. Each faction has invested their time and money into this holy site. Maybe their fathers did as well, and nothing is going to stop them from standing up for their rights and their investment. "Let the membership dissolve if it must, but don't lay a hand on my church."

But Christianity is not Judaism. We do not have temporal sanctuaries and sacrifices. Our sanctuary is in our hearts and our sacrifice is love. These perceived material sanctuaries only complicate and distract us from spiritual growth.

These holy structures were not a problem the early churches had to face. Churches met in private homes, often in the homes of the leadership. In times of persecution they were known even to meet in the catacombs. Wherever they met the symbol of a "fish" was often etched nearby to signify their presence. The appropriateness of this symbol was twofold. Not only had Jesus called his disciples to be fishers of men, but the Greek term for fish, ἰχθῦς, served as an acrostic for the phrase Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτὴρ, *Jesus Christ God's Son Savior*.

Christians met with a particular church body because of its love for them, and because of the character, spirituality, leadership, and teaching ability of its elders. Their meetings were centered on fellowship and instruction, not a physical structure. There was no investment in an edifice and therefore, no holy sanctuary to

protect. Their only investment was in the souls of men and women.

The early Church got along just fine without formal structures for the first four centuries or so until the conversion of the Emperor Constantine. After his conversion, Imperial persecution ceased and suddenly, Christianity was in favor. In time, the holy temples of pagan worship became the holy temples of Christendom, and these holy sanctuaries have been the source of trouble ever since. If it sounds as though I am suggesting that we do away with local church structures, good, I am . . . sort of.

However, I am not so naïve as to expect or desire believers (even those who sympathize with my views), to up and leave their congregations to start a church in their home. I would never encourage splitting a church over the building; this would be tantamount to one of the very issues I am raising. One of the reasons for ridding ourselves of these structures is to stop the bickering and division that is often generated over them.

It is not so much getting rid of these structures as it is coming to grips with the reality that the structure is not the church. If only we were able to dissociate the two. However, I doubt that can ever really happen, so long as the current model stays in vogue. It is too ingrained into our psyche and the psyche of the entire western culture. But those who are planting new churches could do so without the aspiration to build such structures. Those who have found themselves without a church home because they could no longer tolerate the misplaced affection for the edifice and the celebrated performances which they endured week after week, seated next to friendly strangers in pretty clothes. These folks could return to the early Church model.

So while I realize established congregations are not going to sell their prized structures and opt to meet in their homes, at the same time, I truly believe local church bodies would be far better served if they met in small groups, in private homes, to fellowship and to study the faith, that is, to learn theology. As the group grows it cordially divides; the new group being directed by leaders that have been trained in theology and ministry, disciplined for this position by the current leadership. Each month the many small groups could congregate at some larger designated site to join for testimony, baptism, ordination, and evangelistic services. The site need not be an elaborate edifice. It could even change from time to time: under an oak tree in someone's field in the summer; maybe in someone's barn in the winter; a school gymnasium; the community center; anywhere large enough to hold them.

Such a model would accomplish several important things. Close familial bonds would form. Theologically informed believers would increase. Disputes over the material buildings would vanish. The fallacious concepts of the holy sanctuary, and the church being the white building with a steeple, would cease. The extra money, once used to feed the infrastructure of comfort could be used for missionary endeavors. Instead of appeasing their conscience by giving \$50 or \$200 to several missionaries they barely even know, the church could give full support to missionaries trained and sent out from within its own body. Imagine the dynamic between the missionaries and the congregation, the interest, the personal involvement, the desire to be a part of the work.

The material structures of the Western Church are largely an embarrassment to the Gospel. Yet, sadly, we are compelled to

keep building them, as if they, themselves, are church growth.

Church government

Congregationalism is a widespread form of local church government employed by Baptists and others. Most Pentecostal, independent and community churches also order themselves in this way. The congregational form of government is a democracy generally sporting a pastor or two and several figureheads called deacons and trustees. Major issues are determined by congregational vote, every member having one, so that, the vote of a new believer (who has yet even to learn many basic biblical truths), counts the same as that of a deacon, a trustee or a pastor.

The majority of a given congregation has little interest in making decisions for the church and, therefore, seldom attends one of the monthly business meetings where such issues are discussed. A typical scene, played time and again at a typical monthly business meeting of a typical local church with a typical congregational form of government, might be as such: It is Wednesday evening, 8:30 PM. The prayer meeting is over and business is about to begin. Forty-five of the church's two hundred and fifty members are present for the business meeting. It takes a two-thirds majority to pass a motion that has been seconded. Three of the voters are new babes in Christ. They should no more be voting than a ten year old should vote for a president. Five of the voters, if the truth were known, should be under church discipline—some perhaps excommunicated. They are rabble rousers, troublemakers, bent on pursuing a personal agenda. Another twenty-one voters are meek and mild souls without opinions on most of the issues to be discussed. They are easily swayed one way or the other. The rest of the voters are the deacons, the

trustees, the pastor, and their families. Throw in a copy of *Robert's Rules of Order* and without doubt God's will is a done deal.

The very concept of a democratic form of government is incongruous to the concept of leadership and governance. To my knowledge there has never been a successful democratic society on earth. For a family or a society to function correctly there must be leadership; ergo, there must be someone in charge. Leadership implies, even necessitates, authority. There has to be someone making decisions. There has to be somebody setting the course and taking responsibility. At some point, someone must call a spade a spade.

Decision making determined by the vote of the populace is weak, too easily corrupted as the ignorant and indifferent are manipulated by the crafty. The very concept of a democratic system is born of rebellion to, and mistrust in, authority. For this reason, in a democracy there is no authority, so "no one" is in charge. The argument (at least in a church setting) that people need to vote in order to keep the leadership in check is comical. The leadership is supposed to be the spiritually and theologically mature of the two. Leaders are supposed to be keeping the congregation in check, not the other way around. Yet, in the congregational form of government, the leadership is so mistrusted that the pastor generally doesn't even have a vote on the deacon board. Here, he sits in as an *ex-officio* (that's a nice way of saying outsider) to lend technical advice.

In truth, the sole purpose for the congregational form of government in the local church is to protect the investment—to protect the holy temple into which these folks have put their time, money, sweat, and tears. They built it and they are going to have their say about it. If there were no physical buildings to protect and control,

there would be no congregational form of government in the local church. Because the building is the focus, neither the Lord nor the congregation is.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the Papal Rule. A form of church government against which the congregational form was born in rebellion. This too, is a situation centered on possessions, many of them. However, in this form of government the people have no say at all. All power is given to one man. But man is a sinner and absolute power in the hands of any one man is doomed to failure. As history records, eventually it leads to tyranny. Neither of these two extremes, congregationalism or papal rule, was the apostolic model. They both fail miserably.

By far the apostolic model for church government is the best. I need not take much time to explain it. Paul did that perfectly in his letters to Timothy and Titus. It consists of a group of godly men who are qualified, gifted, and of irreproachable character. They are properly trained in theology and ministry. They are self-perpetuating and self-disciplining. Their purpose is to teach, train, and protect the flock.

Paul's model for church life was clearly the practice of the early local churches. It was followed for centuries until at last the holy edifice arrived. From that day forward began a downhill slide in church leadership. Soon the whole focus and purpose of leadership would change. From that day forward idolatry became a necessary part of church life: for some, a statue, an artifact, a painting or picture; for all, Catholic and Reformers alike, a mystical holy sanctuary.

I say humbug! Away with it! Let's encourage new congregations to set aside our twisted traditions born in rebellion and mistrust, to abandon the material temples

that serve primarily to distract, and to get back to the original, focused on doing it the way we were told to do it in the first place; the way the Apostles intended, the way the early church did it before corruption took hold.

Materialism

The opulence of Western Christendom is breathtaking. And I do not mean that in a good way. We have grown fat. This is not a call to a monastic style of poverty, but a call to balance and perspective. Many Christians in America are more concerned with prosperity than discipleship. This is materialism. It permeates our society and has infiltrated the Church. Indeed, it all but consumes it.

In our culture, a man's self-worth is conditioned upon his material success in life. Many leaders in the Christian community promote this image of wealth and material success. Television evangelists look and sound like Wall Street businessmen. Not long ago I saw one of the more prominent televangelists giving financial investment advice to his listeners. He fielded one question after another. One might have thought he was a representative of a powerful investment firm on Wall Street, rather than a leader of the Church.

I think of a conversation I once had with a young seminarian. I asked him if he was interested in mission work after seminary. His response was completely honest and without shame, without conviction. "No, my wife and I are both too materialistic. We like fine clothes and expensive cars. I wouldn't make enough money at that."

With leaders like this how can the conscience of Western Christianity be anything but seared with regard to its blatant materialism? And this materialism is not confined to the believers' personal lives. It is fostered and perfected within the

local church itself. Millions are spent to erect lavish, gaudy buildings of worship. These temples far surpass any claim of mere comfort. Yet we have Christian brothers and sisters in other countries who don't even know from where their next meal is going to come. We overlook them, placating our conscience now and then by sending them a few dollars when someone drums up a special relief fund. But try as we might, the lavish lifestyle of Western Christendom cannot be justified. We will have to answer to God for it.

Pharisaic legalism

Too often, what is taught on paper and what is practiced are two different things. On paper it is believed that everyone who receives Jesus Christ as their Savior is a Christian. In practice, only those who conform to a particular, favored dogma are considered truly spiritual; all others are phony, or at best spiritually immature. Various circles have their own special bent on things. For some it is baptism into their church. For others it is some mystical babble. For others, it is a certain day to worship. For others still, it is a tithe of their income. And yet for others, it is being a social nuisance, forever protesting and making a public outcry about some perceived injustice to someone. On paper, believers are believed to be free in Christ. In practice, those who participate in activities, of which we do not personally approve, are considered spiritually inferior. This is legalism. It is suffocating the Church.

Legalism attacks the integrity of Scripture. Legalistic dogmas, claimed to be scriptural by church leaders, cause many who have faith in the integrity of the church to doubt the integrity of Scripture. Church leaders say a certain activity is wrong, yet the conscience of the individual does not agree. Thus, the individual concludes that

the Bible must be mistaken or, perhaps, should not be interpreted literally, as the church leaders have supposedly done.

For example, I recall a middle-aged woman many years ago who challenged me on the authority of Scripture and the process of literal interpretation. She was raised in a Christian home, had been taught this doctrine and had always accepted it as fact. But lately she had begun to question it. Her fiancée, although a Christian, sometimes had a beer and enjoyed square dancing. She had participated in these activities with him and felt no guilt. However, her church, claiming biblical support, condemned such activities as evil. She was confused. She believed her church when it said the Bible teaches these specific activities were wrong. Therefore, she had concluded that the Bible itself must be wrong. Now I realize that she could have sought the answer for herself by searching the Scripture, but this is not the point. The point is that her church, and many others just like it, was teaching a personal dogma as Gospel truth, thereby discrediting the Gospel. It is exactly what the Pharisees were doing at the time of Christ.

This Pharisaic legalism misrepresents the faith. It is more than rigidity. It is the overt outward display of presumed holiness. It is strangling the Church. It is a pseudo-spirituality of spiritual infants. It looks pious, but as Paul said, it only satisfies the flesh (Col. 2:23). While it may impress others it does not impress God. Man is forever trying to make his faith ornate and visible. Jesus chastised the Pharisees for praying on the street corners, yet modern day Christians proudly pray over their meals in restaurants, eager to display their piety to everyone about them. Some construct idols. Some build temples. Some order codes of conduct. Others are forever marching and protesting a cause. It is all false. True faith is made ornate and

visible through love—love for God and love for one another. Man-made rules and regulations please no one but the one making them.

Traditions

Rigid tradition is another issue. We have programs for everything. But some programs, which once had a purpose, today only serve to frustrate the committed. They frustrate because they do not meet needs. Yet everyone is expected to participate in them. This is traditionalism. It is restricting the Church.

Perhaps the most dazzling tradition, that seems to edify but actually hinders the objective, is what we call the worship service. Unwittingly, those who mean well have taught us to think of worship as a jubilant time of praise and song. But in Scripture, worship is viewed as something more involved than simple jubilation. It is portrayed as that point at which an inconsequential man contemplates who he really is and who God is. There is but one response to this realization. He falls flat on his face, overwhelmed, in humble submission to the awesome, powerful, glorious God. It is a time of silence before the King. This is worship. After this experience his heart wants, perhaps even needs, to sing praises. This is good, expected, edifying. It is the aftermath, or maybe conclusion, to worship. Nevertheless, songs and praises themselves are not the sum of worship. It is a great misnomer and major theological error to presume so.

By calling our songs and praises worship we have effectively overlooked the most essential aspect of worship, the instinctive humble prostration before the Mighty God. So eclipsed is this concept that we no longer even have a term for it. And since we don't have a term for it, we don't speak of it, and thus we don't do it.

As a result our singing and our praises are weak. It is for this reason that we must hire an enthusiastic song leader to manufacture the "spirit of worship" for us. Every time I hear the phrase "worship service," I cringe in dismay.

Coupled with this worship service is the Sunday morning variety hour: a sideshow and sermonette. In some churches the sermon is little more than an energetic theatrical performance; in others, it is a dry monologue, seemingly designed to put people to sleep. Neither is very edifying. Valuable time, which should be used for training and teaching and fellowship, is often wasted on egotistical theatrics or insipid monologues which generally have to do with any number of contrived issues springing from passages too often taken out of context.

The Wednesday night prayer meeting is another example of tradition. For generations, a mid-week meeting in the sanctuary has been a mainstay for the local church. But the truth is that people don't want to come to it. Aside from the new converts, most see it as some kind of duty and sacrifice. I believe it is not the meeting itself they oppose, but the content. In general, it is yet another one man show for the congregation to sit and watch.

Why not have small groups meet within their respective neighborhoods. Give them opportunity to fellowship and commune with each other. Why not indeed? It would be sacrilegious. We cannot close the sanctuary. That would be a step toward liberalism. So regardless of the fact that relatively few people attend, the sanctuary doors remain open and small in-home prayer groups are discouraged, or at best they are not encouraged. They are not part of the program.

Over the centuries, the Western Church has accumulated multiple useless traditions: the weekly fashion show in

which members are dressed to the nines, the frequent passing of the offering plate, choir robes, ministerial robes, standing to pray, sitting, standing again to sing, sitting again, standing again to mingle and shake hands for two minutes, sitting again, routine Sunday and Wednesday evening gatherings to endure yet another sermon. One's conformity to these customs is viewed as adherence to the faith. But they are only traditions, made by man and practiced merely to satiate. Primarily, they serve to frustrate and confuse.

Mysticism

We are all aware of the mysticism of Roman Catholicism. But Western Evangelical Orthodoxy has a certain flair of mysticism about it as well. A prime example is what we call prayer. I do suspect that our typical group prayer practices are far different from Scripture's intent.

In Scripture we are admonished to "*ask and it will be given, seek and you will find.*" The promise is that prayer is answered. But seldom, if ever, are such frivolous group prayer requests granted. This should indicate that something is amiss. Something is out of order. Is the Bible mistaken? Is Jesus deceiving us? Of course not! If Jesus' promise is true (which I believe it is), then perhaps something is wrong with our prayers.

Could it be that we have misunderstood what prayer is? Fostered a distorted view of prayer? Listen to the requests at a typical Wednesday night prayer meeting. The leader stands to field one petition after another, which might be something along these lines: legislation for prayer in school, Johnny's co-worker's wife's uncle's bladder, the election of our desired politician, even a 'let us win' from the Christian athlete, ad infinitum. Someone volunteers to pray, and then

another and another. Our culture is so hung up on such meaningless plaction that we have little concept of what prayer really is. Yet we feel mystically compelled to participate. To call such activity, prayer, is akin to calling song, worship. It too, is a great misnomer that causes many to neglect the real thing.

How did we ever come to practice group prayer in this manner? We learned it from tradition. It has been passed down from one generation to the next as some mystical necessity. But it needs to be reevaluated. Perhaps reviewing scriptural examples would be of benefit. Certainly, a study of biblical prayers reveals something quite different in content than our current practice. Even the disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. I suggest that we need to make the same request.

Return to our roots

I believe the answer to our present dilemma is to return to the way it used to be. Many things are necessarily different now than in the days of the Apostolic Age. We are a different culture with vastly different customs and lifestyles. But some things need not have changed, should not have changed. To these things we must return.

To begin with, I suggest we return to the apostolic model of church government. We should choose and train a multiple of qualified men for leadership roles within the church. These men need to teach doctrine and promote familial life and fellowship within the church body. Then they need to teach and train others to take their places.

I suggest we be de-programmed; entertain a new, or rather, the original understanding of what the church is. Let me elaborate. The ultimate purpose of the local church is synonymous with God's ultimate purpose for creation: His glory.

The Church, both universal and local, brings glory to God by teaching truth and building relationships (Eph. 4:11-16). We organize these events through various activities and programs, but it is God's Word around which we rally, and dynamic, truth oriented relationships for which we assemble, not the programs or the building.

While we cannot divorce the ultimate purpose of the Church from its present activities and programs, neither can we confuse them. When the programs are misunderstood to be the purpose of the church, we are out of focus. Programs exist to facilitate the needs of the group. The group does not exist to facilitate the programs. Programs must come and go. They must remain in flux. Their purpose is simply to provide structure for the teaching of truth and the building of relationships.

Universally, all believers are united spiritually through their relationship with the Holy Spirit. However, interpersonal relationships in the local assembly bind believers together corporeally, as co-workers and fellow servants of the Lord. When the gifts of the Spirit are exercised, the local church is edified. Truth is taught and interpersonal relationships grow. Needs are met. People are satisfied. Spiritual growth takes place. Paul is referring to this when he says,

Speaking the truth in love . . . the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, makes increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love (Eph. 4:15-16).

I also suggest we limit our dogma to that which is biblical. Scripture specifies several sins with which most folks have enough trouble. Let's not create new lists to our own liking. Man made regulations reflect individual preferences. Your

preferences are not mine, and they are certainly not the worlds. Let us refrain from forcing righteousness upon a society that cannot receive it. Refrain from looking down our noses at those who do not comply with our personal standards.

It is true that Paul instructed us to evaluate one another's spiritual progress. We are to reprove the offender, restore the repentant, and encourage the discouraged. But these critical appraisals are to be based upon scriptural, not personal, criteria. And they are confined to believers. We have no business correcting the unbeliever. To him we are to present the Gospel of salvation, not a personal critique of his troubled life.

Give the Holy Spirit room to work. He speaks to every man's conscience. Let each believer establish his own personal preferences with the Holy Spirit's guidance. His perspective is pure; ours is clouded, discolored by personal bias. Let's not presume the job that is reserved for Him. He does not need your help or mine. He is perfectly capable. John sums it up like this, *"If our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God . . . those who obey His commands live in Him, and He in them"* (1 Jn. 3:21-24).

If we feel compelled to speak against something that disturbs us, let's not claim biblical support if none exists. Let's be honest. Let's not promote holiness—or rather, our own biased view of holiness—through deception.

Furthermore, let us look beyond our own selfish desires and remember the Psalmist's admonishment that material wealth does not redeem (Ps. 49:5-11). Nor does it give us personal identity. Nor, in the end, as Solomon conceded, does it satisfy (Ecc. 2:11). We need to look beyond new cars, boats, luxurious homes and IRA's, even beyond our opulent holy temples. We must set our sights on that

which is permanent, that which is spiritual, that which will yield eternal benefit.

Am I dreaming? Am I speaking of ideals impossible to attain? I hope not. As mentioned in the apology for this work, the removal of these smudges on the sword will take a grassroots movement not unlike the great reformation. Yet on the other hand, it was prophesied that the Church in the last days would be as such in these last days. Therefore, I do not expect these erroneous practices to cease; however, those individuals who are aware and concerned for them might be encouraged to polish their little section of the sword.

Finally, for those to whom what I have addressed in this chapter is a mystery, is unfamiliar territory, you are blessed, and may you remain so.