

Church Experience

[An Open Letter to Church Members]

Are you satisfied with what you are getting out of church? If you are like most people you aren't.

The problem is hard to put your finger on. Worship service isn't very exciting anymore. Even Sunday School is...well, sort of boring. You seem to remember the church really being on fire to reach the lost, or was that just you? Nowadays it...well...it just isn't the same anymore. Does it seem that you are attending church more out of a sense of duty, or to see your friends, or for the children's programs rather than for true spiritual reasons?

You have probably been told from the pulpit, or maybe from a media preacher, that these are the symptoms of a personal problem—that there is something wrong with your relationship with God! You have thought about that and sought God's face. But the fact remains that you still seek a close relationship with God, you still have a burden for the lost, and you still enjoy studying the Bible alone or with close Christian friends.

Perhaps the problem is you. Perhaps, but it doesn't seem that way. Rather, it seems that your church suffers from a power vacuum—a Spiritual power vacuum. Sure, there are some people in your church who seem to be spiritual giants, prayer warriors and others who really exhibit gifts of the Spirit. But, while the church in your experience is warm, friendly, and involved, it still seems to be missing that vital component of true Spiritual power.

Some of your friends have left the church. They say that they are looking for better children's programs, or a better selection of outreach opportunities, or any other of a long list of reasons. Maybe they are just tired of trying to make it work. Perhaps they just need a fresh start. Maybe you should leave too? Maybe it's time to find a different church—you know—one that is alive with Spirit-led Christians fulfilling the Great Commission? You know—somewhere where you'll be part of an army for God rather than part of the remnant for God.

Guess what? It doesn't help to change churches. It's the same everywhere. Oh sure, the doctrine may change and the programs may change, but in short order you will find that nothing else is different.

The problem isn't with your church. It's with nearly every church in America. Our congregations, leadership and outreach efforts have all become lethargic. Sure, there are spurts of enthusiasm by individuals from time to time, but they are soon discouraged by the sheer inertia of the majority of the church body and leadership.

How can this be happening in God's church? How can the Spirit be so lacking in the life of the church? The answer is Satan. For so long we have been told that Satan's army stands outside the doors of the church ready to entice you into sin so as to break your fellowship with God and make you ineffective in His service. Friend, that is part of the great deception that has been served to us.

Satan's army is not outside the church ready to pounce. They are inside the church and have been there for a long, long time. Every time that church door opens local members and visitors are not the only ones who come in. Satan's army of emissaries also attends church, but they are there for a whole different reason. They are there to whisper into the ears of God's children congregation and leadership alike.

What are they saying? They are telling us that the focus of our Christian life is on religious adherence rather than our spiritual connection to God. They speak elegantly about how important it is to:

- start that new building program,
- learn that doctrine,
- join that choir,
- maintain the church facilities,
- go on visitation,
- try to tithe more,
- join those committees,
- vote in new members,
- attend church regularly,
- elect new officers (and the list goes on and on).

They tell us that we must show our love for others, live a godly lifestyle, turn from sin, obey the commandments, get water baptized, profess your faith, fight for what is right, and this list also goes on and on.

So what's wrong with those things? Nothing particularly, except that we are being encouraged to do them in our own strength! *That's the deception!*

Friends, if you have truly placed your trust in God's ability to save you, then you are part of the bride of Christ and betrothed to Him. We should be about the Great Commission in the same manner as a fiancée plans and prepares for her approaching wedding. The day is nearly upon us! For anyone else that preparation would be hard work, but we are uplifted, blind to the difficulties and guided through these efforts by the loving kindness of our betrothed by a relationship that is stronger than any circumstance.

The details of a wedding would be drudgery to a bride-to-be that felt no love in the relationship, but to a couple deep in love those preparations take on a special meaning. The preparations then become a manifestation of their love and are a joyous experience in their own right. The only difference is the relationship, but what a difference!

Those demonic whispers are intended to make the preparations the focus of the relationship and not the love. We are being persuaded, very subtly and quite successfully, to shift our focus away from our relationship with God and focus, instead, on the details of the Christian life. We begin to substitute form for function. The services become formalized. The Sunday School becomes lackluster. It seems that nearly every facet of the church experience has taken on a 'form' whose 'function' (based on our relationship with God) has been lost in obscurity. Why? It is because those details become important only within a loving relationship with God.

Picture your relationship with God as a point you are navigating toward in a speed boat. You are focused on what is in front of you. Are you still aiming at God? Is there anything in your way? Think of your wake as your influence on others for Christ. You don't navigate by watching the wake behind you. No! Instead, your eyes are focused on the goal—your relationship. Let the wake wash over whom it will!

Have you ever looked at a wake from an airplane or on a search engine map's satellite view? The wake is clearly visible, but the boat making the wake is often too small to make out. That's the way

it's supposed to be. It's not about you—it never has been. What's important to you is your relationship with God. If that's right, then the wake—your impact for Christ—will be visible from great distances even if the cause of the wake is obscured from view.

Someone once said, “There is no meaning; there is no unity; there is no basis for relationship to be found in the exercise of the details.”

We must focus on our relationship!

"I know thy works, and thy labor, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil...And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast labored, and hast not fainted. Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works."

[Rev. 2:1-5]

Into the heart of Jesus deeper and deeper I go,
 Seeking to know the reason why He should love me so
 Why He should stoop to lift me up from the miry clay,
 Saving my soul, making me whole, tho I had wondered away.

Into the will of Jesus deeper and deeper I go,
 Praying for grace to follow, seeking His way to know;
 Bowing in full surrender low at His blessing feet,
 Bidding Him take, break me and make, till I am molded and meet.

Into the cross of Jesus deeper and deeper I go,
 Following thru the garden, facing the dreaded foe;
 Drinking the cup of sorrow sobbing with broken heart,
 "O Savior help! Dear Savior help! Grace for my weakness impart."

Into the joy of Jesus deeper and deeper I go,
 Rising, with soul enraptured, far from the world below;
 Joy in the place of sorrow, peace in the midst of pain,
 Jesus will give, Jesus will give He will uphold and sustain.

Into the love of Jesus deeper and deeper I go,
 Praising the One who brought me out of my sin and woe;
 And thru eternal ages gratefully I shall sing,
 "OH HOW HE LOVED! OH HOW HE LOVED! Jesus, my Lord and King!"

Deeper and Deeper (Oswald Smith)