

From The Pastor's Study

Absent From The Pew

I do a lot of writing; I write these little tidbits of pastoral rambling, I write sermons, I write short stories and have even written a book. I hope that in all of that I might some day do something that changes a life...no, I am more ambitious than that, I want to change lives. I want what I do to touch the lives of a lot of people, not to boost my ego, really, I mean that. I want to see God glorified, I want to see our nation return to God, I want to see Sanctuaries filled to overflowing, much as they were in the 50s.

In the fifty's Sunday meant people rising, getting in their "Sunday" best; there were men in suits and ladies in their fancy hats. There were classrooms filled with children and adults prior to worship studying God's Word. Then there was worship; the singing of old hymns, prayers and sermons, many times on the evils of the world, altar calls and baptisms. About half of America was in one church or another, some of those children were dragged into church under the threat of some body altering punishment if they misbehaved.

No, it wasn't perfect; some of those people were there because if they weren't they may be looked down upon by others in the community. Particularly in small towns no public servant, no school teacher, no business owner, no politician would dare not be in a pew when the preacher stepped into the pulpit. It was an expectation and few put up much resistance to them.

But it was a quieter time, a peaceful time. WWII and Korea were in our rear view mirrors and few people had even heard of Vietnam. It was a time of abundance, two income families were just coming into view and many had a second car in the driveway. Hippies had not yet arrived, that evil demon music, Rock n Roll came on the scene to the disgust of many over twenty-five. I remember the small church in Taft Texas were promising a straight shot to hell for listening to it.

Yes, it was a quieter period, but it wasn't all flowers, there were some thorns too. Many, if not most churches seemed friendly but some had taken a legalist stance when it came to scripture. There was no room for questions, no room for doubt, the preaching might have been right out of John the Baptist. The word "repent" became an attack and response to altar calls became a way to show you were one of the saved, one of the righteous and God forbid if anyone of the righteous should see you coming out of a bar or liquor store. But the churches were full.

As the children of that era grew to adulthood many moved away from the church and even some of the ones who stayed connected to the church swore their children would never be forced to attend church. That is when the church started losing people. In the 1960s and 70s the “free love” and hippy movement stayed away from the church, which should not be surprising. Men in suits and shiny shoes greeting jeans, sweatshirts and sandals wasn’t something that would go over well.

At a time when the church could have made a huge difference, they stumbled and as in a race when you stumble, you fall behind. In business it is called falling behind the power curve and is like climbing a hill that keeps falling farther behind, you never catch up. The churches held onto their dress code and their criticism of people they really didn’t know and certainly didn’t understand.

Some of the churches had people come in who you might call hippies. They were welcomed but most were told they needed to dress appropriately. I went to a church in Fresno. I wore my uniform because I didn’t have a suit. My wife wore dress slacks, we both were told we were not dressed properly; women were not to wear pants and my uniform represented killing. I didn’t return to a church for a very long time.

Attendance began falling off as members got older and younger people weren’t there to replace them. As membership fell off churches began to struggle and churches began to seek ways to draw people. Music changed, dress codes were relaxed, and other changes. Worship services in some churches have become concerts, pastors have become “rock stars”. Don’t get me wrong, I like the modern hymns and praise music but if that is the determining factor for going to church I think we need to adjust our priorities.

What has resulted is we now have mega churches with dynamic leaders, we have churches who remain very conservative but on the other congregations and denominations are “anything goes” gatherings. All of these actions have done little to affect attendance and has watered down the Gospel to the point that denominational guides have replaced scripture as the document to guide our faith.

I am not intelligent enough to know what the answer is. Perhaps we need to return to the document which God intended to guide our faith, the Bible. I don’t intend that we return to a legalistic religion. Jesus was pretty clear about the greatest commandment but He never said anything about ignoring the other guidelines set down in scripture. We aren’t called to be selective about what parts of the Bible we claim, the entire Bible was written for God’s people. If we ignore one part, why

not other parts; maybe one person feels murder is okay while another feels stealing is fine. Once we start ignoring parts of the Bible we might as well throw the Bible out completely and just do whatever we desire.

The most popular and quoted scripture is **John 3:16-18 (ESV)**

¹⁶ *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*

¹⁷ *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

¹⁸ *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

But we tend not to read, or pay attention to the last verse in John 3;

John 3:36 (ESV)

³⁶ *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*

This is where the rubber meets the road, it is a command to obey, the Christian life is one of obedience. “Trust and obey, for there is no other way”