

I Can No Longer Be Silent

The story is the same wherever I go.

I hear it over and over again. While the names and the specifics of their respective tales vary, a truth is revealed, all the same, about what is happening in churches all across America. I sit in small groups, go to outings, retreats, gathering and events... and there is always someone who tells it again.

They speak of a time when they didn't go to church at all, but somehow, some way, or because of some circumstance or bad situation, they visited one day. Perhaps it was the pressure of a spouse or guilt induced by the existence of children in the home. It may have started at a Christmas or an Easter service – something they could do without feeling obligated to go back.

For some it was a tolerable experience that died with the applause, but for many others, a subsequent trip caused them to listen a little closer to what was being said. After a few more visits, it became apparent there was something they needed to hear again; something that seemed to make sense in a way it never had. Maybe this Bible and Jesus thing might not be so bad after all.

Then one day they decide to jump off the bridge and join the club. They asked Jesus into their heart so they can go to heaven when they die and took a deep breath as they committed to start going back to church every week.

At first glance, this appears to be a success story, a cause for celebration... but there is a problem.

For some, the deal they thought they signed up for is not exactly what they thought it was going to be. Things did not get all that much easier the way they were told. In fact, life has gotten much harder and this all is starting to appear as though they were taken for a ride. The dyed-in-the-wool church attenders quickly respond by saying the enemy is unhappy to have lost them and they must be doing something right – another falsehood from the religious who have no clue.¹

What is a new Christian (or *any* Christian for that matter) supposed to do with that information? Their reality is, "I asked Jesus to come into my heart so I could go to heaven when I die... and now I get pounded? This is not what I signed up for."

Others will tell you that nothing really changed at all. Nothing changed *for* them... or about them. They prayed the prayer and there were lots of people to congratulate them, but for all intents and purposes, life just went on as it always had before they decided to... enter into a relationship with Jesus.

¹ How is it that church leaders (and other Christians of many years) still have no idea how to view, or navigate, the difficulties of their lives beyond blaming the enemy and settling for the idea that, endurance for the duration of an unsolicited attack is all there is? I promise, I'll come back to this later.

I heard a man tell his story just a few weeks ago. I want you to hear it from him.

Hi. My name is Brian. When I first came to believe I gave my life to Christ, I could not have been more wrong.

I started attending church when I was about 18 or so. When I was around 25, I truly thought I had asked the Lord into my life. I said the prayer, I walked down the aisle and professed it to the pastor. I even sat down with my fiancée and the head pastor of the church we were attending (before he married us), and said the prayer yet again. I really did think I was saved because that is what I was told every Sunday.

I heard the same message from several different churches: "Say this little prayer with me and you will have a relationship with Christ. He will, and has, forgiven you for all you have done."

So I would say the prayer (I mean, who wouldn't?) with more and more conviction every Sunday. I even got baptized - because that is what I was told to do.

Then I would leave church and go back to my life, but hey, it's not like I was a bad person. In fact, I was sure I was better than most "Christians" I grew up knowing and partying with throughout my life.

My "relationship" with Christ was not a relationship; it was me wanting everything for nothing because that is what I had been sold on in Church. I thought I could use Jesus like a Monopoly "Get out of Jail Free card." I thought I could do what I wanted with no repercussions because I said the prayer and was washed of my sins. Go get drunk... I'm fine. Check out women... all is forgiven. Use foul language... why not?

Luckily for me, my wife got me to attend a Sunday School class and we became friends with the leaders. I can honestly say I learned more about myself, and my walk with Christ, through that class (and the couple leading it) than I had from my pastors.

At the age of 29 (about 6 months after I started attending that Sunday School group), I went out partying with some friends on a Saturday night. I got completely hammered, playing several drinking games and taking shots. The next morning I woke up (horribly hung over for church) and discovered my brother had sent me a video of the previous night's activities.

There I was, running across my buddy's garage with a motorcycle helmet on while my friends took swings at me with baseball bats like I was a human baseball. Normally, I would have laughed at the situation, but this time I felt remorse. I felt like I had just let someone down.

Yes, if they found out, I would have been a huge disappointment to my wife and one year old daughter, but it was more than that. It went much deeper. This was a real "AH-HA" moment for me. I was letting down Christ. I made a promise to have a relationship with him and had utterly failed him.

I always thought a relationship with God happened like it does in the movies. You hit rock bottom and find Jesus, or you say the prayer, and a choir of angels begins to sing in your head. And maybe that's why I never knew what to tell people when they asked when or how I got saved... because I hadn't yet.

I wasted too much time not understanding that in order to be saved, all you have to do is ask; but if you want to have a relationship with Jesus, you also have to be willing to sacrifice your life. In the churches I attended, I was not preached to about self-sacrifice. They only talked about the blessings and the peachy life you will have if you ask Jesus into your life.

Nobody told me I have to sacrifice - not just a little, not some - but everything. I have learned I don't have to be perfect, that I will fall short, but I should strive to be a better disciple and ask for help along the way.

I didn't find Christ the way I believe a person should. It took a radical "AH-HA" moment for me to realize what I needed to do. I now truly have a relationship with the one, true God, and am truly blessed and humbled to have it.

I want you to hear another story. This is the story of a woman who, unlike Brian, spent her whole life going to church. But just like Brian, she speaks of wasted years in her life, moving about with an inaccurate understanding of what her connection to Jesus was, as opposed to what it should be:

Hello, my name is Lynn. I spent the first 18 years of my life as a child in a devout Catholic family. I went to church every Sunday. I stood when I was supposed to stand. I knelt when I supposed to kneel. I repeated every response and prayer exactly as I was supposed to. I went to Catholic high school and attended all the "holy days of obligation" masses that were required of me, as well as some that were not. I volunteered to feed the poor in Los Angeles and Tijuana and I even received awards for my Christian service.

I was every Catholic parents' dream.

I knew who Jesus was and even knew about His death and resurrection. I could regurgitate stories from the Bible and recite every Catholic prayer with confidence. I felt deep down inside that I had done my best to earn God's love. Every time I left church, I felt like I had done my duty for the week and earned my keep. Every service I went to, every kind deed I did and every prayer I prayed was only to fill a void in me that told me I was not enough – I had to continue to earn my Heavenly Father's love in order to get to heaven.

I had no idea that I could have a relationship with God. I had no idea that Christ really died for me and, no matter what I did or how hard I tried, there was nothing I could do to earn it... but I did have the option to accept it.

At the age of 24, I walked forward during an altar call in a Christian church and began what I thought was a Christian walk. For many years I did all the things I thought were expected of a Christian. I talked the talk and walked the walk. I read my Bible and prayed every day. Truthfully, that's all I knew to do. I really didn't understand much that I read in the Bible, but I tried my best. I thought that was all there was to Christianity. This went on for years.

A few years ago, I started to learn more about prayer and worship. I discovered that I could ask God to teach me how He created me to worship. I began to spend time in worship every day. I began by listening to worship songs and offering up their words to God as my own. These words led to my own, authentic words that I spoke to honor my Him. During these worship times I often felt like I was standing on holy ground in front of my Creator.

I began to pray to God in a whole new way. I began to ask God for His will to be done in my life (and others' lives) rather than asking for what I wanted. I spent time in silence, just waiting on what God had to say to me.

He spoke to me in a way that only He could.

Sometimes I would feel the prompting of the Holy Spirit to pray for something or someone. I started to live my life praying for God's will and living it in everything I did. I began to acknowledge that everything I had was His and it was all His to take whenever He wanted. No matter what, I wanted to follow Him.

My life took a drastic turn the day I experienced a brain hemorrhage.

After a few weeks of living in a fog and enduring nearly unbearable, intense pain, God spoke to me, again, in a way that only He could... in the only way I would understand. He reminded me that I promised to worship Him no matter what. So I began to worship (again) and prayed, asking for God's perfect will in my life. I gave everything I had to Him (well, almost all of it) and told Him if it all disappeared I would still follow Him.

But I knew I was holding back.

When it came to giving up my life – no longer living on planet earth - I could not willingly give it to Him. Who would care for my husband and children? Who would pay the bills? I just could not let go. Then God spoke to me, again, in a way that only He could and in the only way I would understand. He told me that He would not relent until He had all of me. It took me a while, but eventually I came to understand as the Holy Spirit coached me through worship and prayer, and I was able to give God all of me... my whole life.

During all those years (when I thought I was getting it right), I never knew I could have a relationship like this. I certainly never learned this in church. I never knew what it took to really follow Him. I never knew how awesome it could be to really connect with God and to hear Him. I never understood how the Holy Spirit could work in my life. I never knew how freeing it could be to live life according to God's will.

But I do now... and I wouldn't change my walk with Christ for anything.

V.O.H.T.S.

These are not unlike the stories I hear everywhere I go. It is the reality of what happens way too often in church. Fortunately for Brian and Lynn, their eyes have been opened and they have discovered the truth about what it really means to have a relationship with Jesus. But many others still out there have not, and the truth of their status with God is not what they think.

People pray the prayer and sign the card, join the club and believe they have acquired what has become the favorite catch phrase of many modern day churches... a relationship with Jesus.

These folks are what I call VOHTS – **Victims Of Half The Story.**

Even though they did what church told them to do – ask Jesus into their heart so they could go to heaven – they have (unwittingly) become spiritual opportunists. They never spend time submitting in worship (beyond standing and singing during Sunday morning service) or listening in prayer (because no one ever explained that listening and obeying are critical to this *relationship* they seek), but they expect that when saying, “In the name of Jesus (whenever troubles and trials come into their lives),” all the power that is supposed to be attached to that name should be at their disposal.

Sadly, it is no mystery that people are walking around hurting, angry, frustrated and confused. They were given only half the information necessary to
1) Understand the decision they were making and, 2) Establish the correct expectations of, and for, this relationship.

These aren't magic words for chasing off the bully when we can't figure it out on our own. These words, this power, is the privilege offered to those who actually live and function in a reciprocal relationship with the One whose name and power it is.

Expectations in Relationships

If you were to interview for a job and accept the position (agreeing to participate in the relationship) - but never show up for work - what do you suppose would be the response of the company president (who offered you the job, BTW) toward you when you showed up for the all-expense-paid cruise to the Bahamas he has gifted to all those who actually showed up for work every day and accomplished the objectives he set for them to reach? Would you have the nerve to show up and actually expect him to hand you a ticket and welcome you aboard?

Those who have been told they should ask Jesus into their heart so they can go to heaven are nothing more than gym members who never bother to show up for a workout. You cannot join a gym (but never go) and use the existence of your membership card to say you are in shape. You cannot purchase your way to the results. You have to invest the time, effort, energy, emotion and commitment.² The signing up for the membership does not a physique create, and signing up for Christianity (especially with faulty expectations from the beginning) does not a relationship make.

You can be introduced to the one you are to marry, the one with whom you are supposed to spend the rest of your remaining days, but if you never connect any more frequently than through an occasional phone call (where you do all the talking but never listen), a marriage you will never have.

Are you beginning to see the parallel, yet?

Lack of Obedience Leads to a Lack of Focus

In many churches today, it is all about the numbers – numbers in the seats, numbers of people that can be accounted for in small groups, number of churches planted, etc. It becomes tragic when a church gets fixated on how many people they have decided to convert.

Churches and pastors today need to be less focused on the number of people they pitch and more concerned about the quality of the relationship of those who say they want to follow Christ.

These distracted churches whole-heartedly believe they are following the Great Commission, but this is not the case. These leaders are convinced they are operating in obedience – and will have no trouble telling you how obedient they are – as they come up with a number and pray God into the equation.

It is the same with pastors and church boards who obligate the church to financial encumbrances and then manipulate the congregation into coughing up the funds to cover the obligation. You can call the offering whatever you want, label it however you like but the truth is, obedience can never be defined by this chronology. These leaders model behavior that creates false expectations and leaves the people they are to lead believing this is the kind of relationship God desires with His children.

The correct focus begins with the truthfulness of the requirements for participating in a true relationship with Jesus. Living obediently – responding to the stimulus (what God *actually* says) – is the only way to define, and maintain, the correct focus.

² No, I am not inferring that your works will earn you a spot in heaven. Rest assured, I'll come back to this a little later, too.

The Great Misrepresentation

The Great Commission is Christ's mandate to spread the gospel to all nations, but churches today are not committed to preaching the *whole gospel*; they are telling half the story so they can get people to sign up for the club.

Look at this passage in the book of John...

John 6:37-40 (HCSB)

³⁷ Everyone the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will never cast out.

³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do My will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

³⁹ This is the will of Him who sent Me: **that I should lose none of those He has given Me but should raise them up on the last day.**³

⁴⁰ For this is the will of My Father: that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

Look again at verse 39.

The objective of some churches is no longer following Jesus' directive to share the saving news of the gospel with every nation, but a contest to see who can pitch the most people, in the shortest time, with the happiest story and then advertise the numbers like their own salvation depends on it.

Churches are operating with a time-is-of-the-essence mentality that gives the impression they are afraid Jesus is going to overlook a few of the sheep He was put in charge to rescue.

This is not the Great Commission.

Jesus is responsible for ALL of those the Father gave Him to raise up on the last day. During His time on earth, Jesus was all about accomplishing the will of His Father. I don't know about you, but I'm bettin' the farm He isn't going to lose any His Father has given to Him.

Obedience to the Great Commission is leading people humbly and gratefully to the cross for forgiveness, making sure they understand what is expected of them in response to accepting the gift they don't deserve to receive (submit everything, follow at all costs). I suspect someone will recite verse 40, "... everyone who sees the Son, and believes, will have eternal life," in an attempt to convey there is nothing else that needs to be done... but this is not what it says. It does not say, "will," it says, "may."

It is my will, as a father, that all my kids show up for school and do well, go to college and become successful. But just because they show up does not mean my desires for them will become reality. They have choices to make and responsibilities to fulfill. They get to choose to engage, to *participate* in the things that will produce the results they (I) desire.

Everyone who sees the Son and believes – may – have eternal life... *IF* they are connected in relationship and choose to follow daily in obedience.

³ Emphasis mine

Churches who focus on identifying the number of people to reach have lost sight of the Great Commission.

We should not take the facts of the greatest rescue, redemption and offer for a relationship, then water it down to a five minute presentation (with just the benefits) so we can congratulate ourselves, announce bigger numbers on Sunday morning and then tack God onto the end by giving Him a clap offering.

Allow me to say this to you. If this is what you are doing in church, God doesn't want the credit for what you are doing and He is not pleased with being invited to your agenda.

You'd better wise up.

Go back and read Matthew 7:21-23.⁴ Lots of people think they are doing wonderful works in Jesus' name... but they fail to remember the end of verse 21, "... doeth the will of My Father in heaven." Doing what you consider wonderful (but outside of God's *leading*) is not playing your role in the relationship and isn't going to produce the end results you are expecting.

We should not be as concerned with *accounting* for the number of people we have gotten signed up as we are of being sure we have been *accountable* to share the whole story with those who arrive at our doors and cross our paths.

It doesn't matter how many people buy your half price tickets - if you tell them all the wrong date of the concert, you haven't done anyone a favor. All you have done is take advantage of their trust leaving them disappointed, empty-handed and skeptical about ever buying from anyone... ever again. By the time they discover the truth about their responsibility in the relationship you sold them, it will be too late.

Churches riding the missions bus, driven by numbers, are not helping to bring people into a true relationship, they are just creating more VOHTS.⁵ They are not performing the Great Commission, they are promoting the Great Misrepresentation.

Then they conveniently draw together a small collection of VOHTS and call them a church, insisting there is no need for a mature Christian to lead them - the Holy Spirit will fill them and instruct them the way He did at Pentecost.

Mentorship, Maturity & Small Groups

If I am reading the sign correctly – **No Mentors Needed** - I'd like to ask a few questions here, just for clarity.

If there is no need for mature Christians to lead, instruct, guide and encourage those who are new to the faith, why did Jesus choose twelve guys to pour into for three years? If there is no need for the mature to mentor the new, why did He do it? Why did people like Paul and Silas, Timothy, Peter and James spend the remainder

⁴ **Matthew 7:21-23 (KJV)**

²¹ Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? ²³ And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

⁵ **Victims Of Half The Story**

of their lives mentoring the churches they started? Why did they keep going back as often as possible, and write letters when they could not be there? Why didn't Jesus die to pay the price and then just have the Holy Spirit rain down on everyone, fill them up and watch them go (I'm thinking the Apostles could have worn out fewer pairs of sandals)? Why does the third chapter of I Timothy set out the requirements of *responsibility* and *spiritual maturity* for those who are to be leaders of the church and also for those who would help him (the deacons)?

Why?

Paul says it well in this passage:

1 Corinthians 3:1-3 (HCSB)

¹ Brothers, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as babies in Christ.

² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, because you were not yet ready for it. In fact, you are still not ready,

³ because you are still fleshly. For since there is envy and strife among you, are you not fleshly and living like unbelievers?

I cringe when I hear, "Even a 6th grader can do it!"

This is how some churches are recruiting people to lead small groups. I contend that a 6th grader is hardly capable of getting his shoes on the correct feet or demonstrating judgment sufficient for choosing outer wear more substantial than a hoodie while it is snowing... forget *leading* anyone.

There are moments when he is capable of sharing what he *thinks* he knows⁶ with a peer, or in a group of peers. He can host a group and be instrumental in inviting those who would come, but he is not capable of discipling or leading a group. You may call it semantics, but I say, if you have ever spent any time around 6th graders... 'nuf said.

This train doesn't come to a stop at 6th Avenue.

I feel compelled to expound a bit further on this, because there are different kinds of small groups and I don't want to give the impression I believe every small group must have a Bible college educated individual leading it.

There are small groups led by people who have studied the Bible and developed their own personal walk with Christ to a level where they can help others understand the scriptures. They can encourage and assist in the dissection and interpretation of passages through personal experience and the use of resources like commentaries and other analytical works.

These spiritually mature individuals challenge those who look to them and help with accountability, so those who are actively pursuing the relationship (actually *living out* a new paradigm) can grow and mature.

There is another type of small group that can be hosted by almost anyone. These are groups where a curriculum is offered in a video (or audio) format, presented by a mature Christian. Anyone can invite friends, neighbors and co-workers to join a study that is presented in this format because the material, and the explanation, are

⁶ What he has been taught, *IF* you can get him to stop flicking his friend with his pencil or making fart noises with his arm long enough to listen...

provided (typically it includes a leader's guide to help the host fill in the blanks and reiterate what was presented in the video). This option can be powerful and effective when the host takes the time to go over the material prior to the group and is prepared. These facilitators usually have a mentor to consult when something is not completely clear.

There is a new type of small group whose approach is becoming popular – one against which I cannot campaign strongly enough. Groups are being assembled containing only VOHTS. These folks are gathered and encouraged to ask Jesus into their hearts so they could go to heaven. After joining the club, they are told they have become a church. They are told to meet regularly and follow a format in which a passage of scripture is assigned for each meeting. One person is asked to read the passage and then everyone is encouraged to share what they *think* about that passage.

I recently (unknowingly) sat in one of these groups that had about four other men in it. The passage was read and then there was silence. I started looking around, thinking someone had asked me to pray but I didn't hear them. After a couple of minutes, the men around the table began guessing at what they thought the passage meant.

It was heart breaking.

There was nobody capable of accurately explaining the meaning of the passage. I decided to go to the group to be a part, not lead, but I could not just sit there and let them fumble around in the dark.

The designers of this movement insist that there is no need for pastor-types like me because we, "... talk too much." They believe the Holy Spirit will come down into these groups and instruct them the way He (the Holy Spirit) did during Pentecost.

This is ridiculous.

The Holy Spirit entered peoples' lives the way He did (during Pentecost) because they were the first members of Christianity; these were the individuals God would use to *begin* spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not the same thing He does when a person accepts salvation and begins an authentic relationship with Jesus today.

Scripture tells us that all the power of God comes to dwell in the life of a person when they submit, repent and accept the gift Jesus died (and was resurrected) to provide (Romans 8:9 & 11)⁷, but the effectiveness of that power in our lives is contingent upon our obedience and commitment to follow it.⁸

Today, God uses people, circumstances, prayer, personal worship time and His Word to reveal truth, through His Spirit, and speak into our lives. The people who received the Holy Spirit during Pentecost were affected in a way that would empower and equip them as the *first* to go out and share it with others. There was

⁷ **Romans 8:9,11 (HCSB)**

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God lives in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. ¹¹ And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, then He who raised Christ from the dead will also bring your mortal bodies to life through His Spirit who lives in you.

⁸ **Luke 6:46 (HCSB)**

⁴⁶ "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and don't do the things I say?"

nobody else to teach them. The Holy Spirit revealed the truth to them, equipped them with special talents and gifts and allowed them to understand.

It is unrealistic and irresponsible (not to mention arrogant) to believe our experience will be like that of those who received His power and knowledge during Pentecost. The information, wisdom and guidance a new relationship needs is available through people, circumstances, prayer, personal worship time, His Word and the experience (example) of those who are living submitted, and obedient, lives.

Oh, Look... a Chicken!

Promoting such a presumptuous expectation of the Holy Spirit leads to other false teaching. There are those who have taken this affectation of the Holy Spirit during Pentecost (and the peoples' subsequent ability to speak in another language) and teach that salvation is not authentic until one has been additionally baptized by the Holy Spirit... and this is only validated by that person's demonstration of it through jabbering in "tongues."

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is a result of an authentic relationship with Jesus, but such an event is not validated by spouting imperceptible nonsense. Those new believers who "spoke in tongues" during Pentecost were people who were granted the ability to clearly speak (and understand) a language they had not previously spoken or understood, so that all the Jews living in Jerusalem (devout men from every nation under heaven... Acts 2:5) who spoke languages from other regions and lands, would be able to hear and receive the gospel.

I'm not saying the Holy Spirit cannot impart complete knowledge and understanding into someone if He chooses – He is God and is capable of doing immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine. But I am saying that this is not the truth regarding the way people are going to mature in their relationship (today) any more than true, mature followers of Jesus should be expected to heal the sick or raise the dead.⁹

And... Now We're Back

Now, back to what I was saying about small groups.

Two of the groups I have mentioned require leaders or facilitators. When a group is formed with just new believers and the format is read-the-verses-and-guess-what-it-means, there is no honor or responsibility in that.

Telling the *whole gospel* includes providing an understanding of the terms of the relationship, explained by someone who has the experience of having traveled the

⁹ These were sign gifts given to the Apostles to validate the things they were teaching about the power of God (Mark 16:14-20)... and a topic of discussion for another time.

road. There is no chance of successfully coaching someone down a road you have not already traveled yourself.

Jesus cautioned against this mentor-less approach:

Luke 6:39 (HCSB)

³⁹ *He also told them a parable: "Can the blind guide the blind? Won't they both fall into a pit?"*

Maturity and Experience in Leadership

The same use of logic, insight and maturity should also be applied to those in authority within the church. The Bible is very clear about putting someone who is new to the faith in a position of authority because there is a great chance pride could become a problem in his life. I'm not saying that new Christians cannot serve, but the capacity in which they are to serve should be commensurate with their growth and maturity in the Word. Their relationship with Jesus will be obvious by the fruit, and the spiritual maturity, demonstrated through their actions.

Lack of Focus... Continued

Churches today won't do an altar call because they don't want to make people... uncomfortable. This highlights perfectly the difference between selling the membership and revealing the relationship - nobody wants to feel like they are the only one buying into the timeshare (so they are unlikely to be the first, or the only), but the sick and the dying will not allow the doctor (who can prevent them from bleeding to death) to walk away. They will promise whatever it takes to get what they know they cannot do for themselves... especially when it means survival.

Those who buy the membership risk embarrassment if they make a choice, but those who understand the need for the relationship have no pride left... and cannot imagine passing up the opportunity.

Give me an opportunity to explain the whole gospel to a person, meaning:

1. Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God,
2. Born, buried and resurrected to provide salvation

PLUS,

3. The requirements of picking up one's cross daily and following completely, for the remainder of their days... no matter what it costs.

Give me that opportunity and I'll show you a person who, if they understand and see their need for the gift, cannot be held in their seat. I also contend that this person, mentored and coached by a mature Christian (in a small group of others making the same journey), will NEVER suffer the delusion, confusion, helplessness or the apathy of a VOHTS.

Priorities

Something else is bothering me about the priorities of today's churches.

The Bible is clear regarding two items on which I wish to comment:

1) Acceptance of Jesus' gift of salvation (the assurance of spending eternity in God's presence *instead* of eternal separation) and following in obedience is required to have an authentic, reciprocal relationship with Jesus but, 2) Baptism is not required for this relationship (even though it is a person's opportunity to publicly express their decision to follow Christ).¹⁰

Given these facts, why is it churches today are not concerned with getting people to humbly submit and run after the gift of salvation (being willing to walk an aisle so they can be rescued), but will alter the entire service to celebrate baptisms? Why work to televise the delivering of an insurance check - after a house has burned down - but never dedicate a moment of coverage to recognizing the one who rescued the helpless owner from the house when it was engulfed in flames?

And why should it be acceptable to ask someone if they have made a commitment to Jesus - while sitting or standing in water - but it is too much to expect they would be willing to walk an aisle and do whatever it takes to receive the part that actually matters?

I'll tell you why.

It is because they sit (or stand) in water having joined the club, not agreed to the terms of the relationship. I do not understand why churches are so readily willing to cheapen, to minimize the exchange that must occur between sinful human and Holy God.

During baptisms, people smile and clap and nod their heads as another person professes they have asked Jesus into their heart so they can go to heaven when they die. I want to jump up and down, waving my arms and scream at the top of my lungs, "No, no, no! Don't settle for the membership when you can have the relationship! Wrong focus!"

It is no mystery that pastors of churches who operate this way have to deal with so much heartache and hardship among their people. What is even more unacceptable is how often those experiencing trials go off the deep end and struggle to understand why God is treating them this way.

Again... ridiculous.

¹⁰ No, I'm not implying people should disregard baptism. I am merely pointing out it is not required for salvation - for the relationship. But just to be clear, I do encourage everyone who has decided to accept salvation, and enter into a relationship with Jesus, to go public with their decision and allow others to know and celebrate with them.

God doesn't operate this way, and this is not how we should view trials in our lives. Those without an authentic relationship – those who ask Jesus to come into their heart so they can go to heaven when they die – are missing the information necessary to accept and navigate the difficult circumstances they will encounter. These are the circumstances through which God wants to coach them for the purpose of making them more mature and more useable for His kingdom. This is the interaction of a relationship. A membership has no interaction and no hope for understanding the purpose of, or successfully navigating the trials of life, and cannot imagine coming out the other side better for it. Only a coach can get a person through with such an expectation.

Congregations filled with people suffering hopelessly (and suspiciously) are major indicators of a pastor's failure to teach and lead the people that look to him. If his life reflects a pattern of reaction instead of submission, response and obedience, this is what the congregation will emulate.

God makes it clear in scripture that He desires to bless and protect those who are obedient to His voice. I'm not a prosperity doctrine proponent, but I do believe in, and experience, God's blessing and protection in my life when I am tunnel-vision focused on obeying the things He asks me to do.

Churches don't want to put people on the spot for fear they would be embarrassed to leave their seats, or worse, maybe they would leave... and not come back at all. Pastors and church boards figure that if they can just get a person signed up with the happy parts, they can impart to them the terms of the agreement at a later time (I know, how about through a small group with a leader who doesn't have to really have any maturity themselves...?).

Anything to keep those numbers from dipping.

Telling people half the story is not growing the kingdom of heaven - it is misleading people... to the tune of the exponential numbers they so proudly like to advertise. Their victims will exhale their last breath in the presence of the One who created them (the One they *thought* was going to welcome them into their mansions in neighborhoods of gold-paved streets) only to be dismissed. Their membership card will not pass as a reciprocal relationship and the offer letter for the job (the one they never showed up to do, the purpose they never fulfilled because they never learned how to worship or listen to what God had to say to them) won't allow them to participate in the reward being provided for all those who submitted, showed up and contributed to the success of the company by following the CEO's plan and directions.

Plan and directions...

Luke 6:46-49 (HCSB)

⁴⁶ *“Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and don’t do the things I say?”¹¹*

⁴⁷ *I will show you what someone is like **who comes to Me, hears My words, and acts on them:**¹²*

⁴⁸ *He is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. When the flood came, the river crashed against that house and couldn’t shake it, because it was well built.*

⁴⁹ *But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The river crashed against it, and immediately it collapsed. And the destruction of that house was great!”*

Our ability to receive His benefits and blessings – His promises – is contingent upon our submission (comes to Me), our listening (hears My words) and obedience (and acts on them... verse 47 above).

Reciprocation - God contributes His blessings and protection when He receives us, and our authentic worship. We receive the benefits of His grace, mercy and generosity when we contribute our authentic worship (total submission and honoring Him) and live in obedience.

Let me make one thing clear - there is no such thing as partial obedience.

There must be a relinquishing of all we have, and all He has allowed us to become, for whatever he asks. Obedience is the offering we make in gratitude for the paying of the debt we could never cover.

I keep using this word reciprocal and I’m sure someone out there (with folded arms and frowning face) is saying, “The Bible never uses the word reciprocal!” To reciprocate means for each of at least two parties to contribute to, and benefit from, the same connective association. In the case of an authentic relationship with Jesus, God made it very clear in Deuteronomy 8:1-20 what the job descriptions are for the respective roles. 1) He speaks, 2) You listen and obey, 3) He blesses and protects you, 4) Repeat.

The Real Facts of the Relationship

Churches today profess they are leading people into a relationship with Jesus by telling them that asking Jesus into their heart is all they have to do in order to have a relationship with Him, but all this does is create more VOHTS.

Telling the whole story is the only way to create true followers who can live by the assurance of the promises given in the Bible. Only through a genuine, reciprocal relationship can we confidently and boldly navigate the obstacle course that is life on a broken planet, among imperfect people... against an enemy that exists only to see us hopeless, helpless and destroyed.

We preach and teach that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, yet so many have chosen to skip over some of the most important verses within its pages. Pastors and evangelists love to use Romans 10:9-10 to show what must be done to be saved:

Romans 10:9-10 (HCSB)

⁹ *If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*

¹¹ Emphasis mine

¹² Emphasis mine

¹⁰ *One believes with the heart, resulting in righteousness, and one confesses with the mouth, resulting in salvation.*

Yes, I completely agree, but this is not all the Bible has to say. Look at what Matthew 10:37-39 has to say:

Matthew 10:37-39 (HCSB)

³⁷ *The person who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; the person who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.*

³⁸ *And whoever doesn't take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me.*

³⁹ *Anyone finding his life will lose it, and anyone losing his life because of Me will find it.*¹³

And Matthew 7:21...

Matthew 7:21-23 (HCSB)

²¹ *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but [only] the one who does the will of My Father in heaven."*¹⁴

²² *On that day many will say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?'*

²³ *Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you! Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!'*¹⁵

These passages make it clear that acknowledging our need for forgiveness and asking to be saved is all that is necessary to *receive* the gift, but it is not where the parameters of the *relationship* end. Look at Ephesians 2:8-9...

Ephesians 2:8-9 (HCSB)

⁸ *For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—⁹ not from works, so that no one can boast.*

Pastors and well meaning church-goers like to use this verse to close the sale, leaving lost souls with the impression that the request to be saved is all that is necessary; but the customer has been misled without all the information.

It does not require a post-graduate degree in theological interpretation to observe how those who witness with the references I have highlighted (Romans 10:9-10, Eph. 2:8-9) are dwelling only on what Paul said, with no acknowledgement of what Jesus had to say (Matt. 10:37-38, 7:21).¹⁶ I'm not inferring any fault in what Paul said, or in his credibility, but I do find it interesting that it is only Paul's words we hear from those who are more focused on the quantifying of their existence with numbers instead of the qualifying of hearts to ensure a true, reciprocal relationship is birthed... and maintained.

We are responsible to show due diligence to make sure a person is not only entering into the relationship (not just signing up for a membership), but is being equipped, through supervision and mentoring (toward humility, reverence and gratefulness), to enjoy the relationship Jesus paid so much to have with us and to become effective (through submission and obedience) for the kingdom of God.

¹³ Emphasis mine

¹⁴ Emphasis mine

¹⁵ Emphasis mine

¹⁶ I have yet to hear a presentation from a trac, or an evangi-cube, that includes any scripture pointing to following at all costs or giving up everything, taking up one's cross and following with everything, ever day.

Jesus makes it clear in the passages in Matthew that agreeing to accept the gift is not where the terms of the relationship end. I've said it before and I'll say it again... God's love is unconditional, but His forgiveness is not.

His unconditional love caused Him to make the necessary sacrifice when we least deserved it and most needed it. But while the gift cannot be earned or purchased (so its validity cannot be questioned or usurped) the *benefits* of the gift are not free. The cost of the *benefits* of the gift is the commitment to follow in obedience with every one of your remaining days – no matter what it costs (mothers, fathers, brothers, etc.). Here, again, is the reciprocation required of any *relationship*.

Proper Credit and Recognition

It is time the facts are delivered and this religious nonsense addressed. Stop telling people to ask Jesus into their hearts so they can go to heaven... it is not truth, and going to heaven is not the sole reason they should be seeking a connection or relationship.

Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father, the filter through whom the Father sees us and by whom we are made acceptable. The Holy Spirit is who we need to invite into our lives, to completely take over, to manage and lead us. He is the One who speaks to our hearts (when we are truly interested in hearing) and is the One who coaches us in authentic, submitted worship.

Isn't that a bit legalistic? Aren't all three parts of the Trinity, God? All three God... you bet. Legalistic? Only if giving credit where credit is due is uncomfortable or inconvenient for you.

Would you ever consider giving the credit, for what Jesus did on the cross, to anyone else? I hope not.

He alone paid the price with His perfect life to redeem man from sin and provide another option beyond eternal separation. He ascended into heaven, in the sight of those who knew and loved Him, right after He spoke about His replacement, The Comforter (the Holy Spirit -John 16:13), who would come to "... guide you into all truth."

The Holy Spirit is the One who guides us and answers us when we pray correctly (those times when we are more interested in hearing His voice than our own and more dedicated to honoring His requests than presenting ours). It is the Holy Spirit we need to invite into our hearts. It is the Holy Spirit who lives in us and seals us, who will bear witness for us, attesting that we had a relationship with Jesus (Eph. 4:30):

Ephesians 4:30 (TLB)

³⁰ *Don't cause the Holy Spirit sorrow by the way you live. Remember, he is the one who marks you to be present on that day when salvation from sin will be complete.*

Ephesians 4:30 (HCSB)

³⁰ *And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You were sealed by Him for the day of redemption.*

Ephesians 4:30 (MSG)

³⁰ *Don't grieve God. Don't break his heart. His Holy Spirit, moving and breathing in you, is the most intimate part of your life, making you fit for himself. Don't take such a gift for granted.*

We have to stop the creation of any more VOHTS!

It is time churches start telling (and how about living?) the whole story instead of leaving out half the information so they can add another number to the graph.

The Wrap

Do you see the difference between the membership and the relationship?

One costs you nothing – not pride, not self, nothing. Nothing is what you will experience along the way, and nothing is what you will receive when your days of accomplishing your own agenda are finished. The other, you voluntarily give away everything to have the connection and the ability to hear just so you can be obedient. It is humble, grateful and responsive. It is tangible and beneficial.

If you have discovered (or perhaps have known all along) that where you spend your Sundays is not making any difference in your life, come visit us at No Strongholds Ministries... where the whole truth is spoken and authentic worship is alive.

Come and discover how God created you to worship.

Come and learn in an environment designed to connect you in an authentic relationship with Jesus, to teach you to walk and navigate life through the mentorship of those who are living in obedience, to assist you in discovering your spiritual gifts and find out where you are supposed to use it all (with the remainder of your days) to bring glory to God, the Father.

Visit us online at www.NoStrongholdsMinistries.com or call 636.448.9466 for directions and service times.

I look forward to meeting you and worshipping together soon.

Patrick Kemper
Senior Pastor
No Strongholds Ministries