

Church, Worship, and Worshipers

Rev. Desmond Allen, PhD, MDiv

Aug 2, 2023

I suspect that most, if not all of orthodox evangelical Christianity would agree that the current state of Western Christendom is in peril. Herein, I shall define orthodox evangelical Christianity as the adherence to traditional, biblical doctrines derived from a hermeneutic governed by the plain meaning, in common language, of the original, inerrant, God inspired biblical text. As predicted in several passages concerning the last days before our Lord's return, apostasy has crept into the Church, and it is widespread. Paul warned,

Now the Spirit speaks expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to deceitful spirits, and doctrines of demons; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron (1Ti 4:1-2).

In the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, truce breakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away (1Ti 3:1-5).

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who shall secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their shameful ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with false words exploit you: . . . chiefly them that walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness, and despise authority. Presumptuous are they, self-willed, they are not afraid to speak evil of the glorious ones. . . . these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; . . . Spots they are and blemishes, reveling themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you; Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: a heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children: Who have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; . . . These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved forever. For when they speak great swelling words of vanity, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through much wantonness, those that have just escaped from them who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage. . . . it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them. But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, The dog has turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire.

Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: By which the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: . . . (2Pe 3:1-3:6).

In the beginning of Jesus' letters to seven churches in Asia-Minor (the order and messages of which clearly predicts the course of Church history) he is standing in their midst; but when he addresses last church, the wealthy and self-sufficient church of Laodicea (the last period of Church history) Jesus is standing outside, knocking on the door seeking entrance.

Because you say, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and know not that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that you may be rich; and white clothing, that you may be clothed, and that the shame of your nakedness does not appear; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hears my voice, and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will eat with him, and he with me (Rev 3:17-20).

In our current world, multiple once biblically sound major denominations now deny traditional biblical doctrines. Many even deny the singular efficacy of Jesus Christ as our sole means of salvation, thereby fulfilling the apostles' prophecy that they would "deny the Lord that bought them" (2Pe 2:1). Some even deny the need for salvation. Also, as predicted, many have accepted immorality and sexual perversion within their midst. These rebels have wandered so far from Christianity that one must ask: Why do they even want to call themselves Christian? Of course the answer is: They are "lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof" (2Ti 3:4). But it goes a step deeper: They are doing the bidding of their master, in an attempt to dilute and smear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; attempting to silence the godliness that brings conviction.

A startling 2022 survey¹ of those who identify as evangelical Christians revealed just how perverted modern has Christendom become.

- 48% believe God is capricious, that learns and adapts to circumstances.
- 65% reject the biblical teaching of original sin.
- 56% believe God accepts the worship of all religions. Six years earlier 2016, 48% held this view.
- 43% believe Jesus was a great teacher but was not God. Six year earlier in 2016, 30% held this view.

¹ Ligonier Ministries. "65% of Evangelicals Believe We're Born Innocent", The State of Theology, Oct 8,2022. <https://thestateoftheology.com/> accessed Aug 2, 2023).

- 28% believe the Bible’s condemnation of homosexuality doesn’t apply today. Six year earlier in 2016, 19% held this view.

On July 31, 2023, the Christian Post reported the grim news that the song, “Good Day”, performed by a drag queen, and the album, “Bible Belt Baby”, on which the song is recorded, had hit No. 1 on the iTunes Christian and Gospel chart.²

With this dismal state of the Church in these last days in mind, I would like to address three great weaknesses of modern Western Christian culture. So permeated are these frailties into the fabric of modern Christian culture, they even persist within orthodox evangelical Christianity. I speak of the worship service format, the venerable church building, and those gathered for worship.

Two of these weaknesses are misnomers—terms often used to signify something other than what Scripture speaks of: one is a noun, the other a verb—church and worship.

The Church

Although it is common knowledge that the local church consists of the assembled body of believers, the average Christian (much less the populous at large) continually refer to the steepled-building as the church, the house of God, and the pewed-fill-room where prayer, singing, celebration, and preaching takes place is called the sanctuary.

Our term, “church” is used to translate the Greek term, *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία), which is a compound form of “ek”, signifying “out”, and “klesia” (the root *kaléo*), “to call”; thus, those who are called out. The term predates Christianity, so that the historic, pre-Christian meaning spoke to “the regular assembly of the whole body of citizens in a free city-state”.³ Jesus was the first to use the term to speak of his followers. The apostle used the term frequently; in subsequent years, as Christianity rapidly spread throughout the world the term soon became synonymous with an assembly of Christian believers, the called out ones, the chosen, if you will.

In this respect, the term is used in two ways: First, to speak of a local assembly of believers—the church. Jesus used this term when addressing a brother who refuses to listen to reason concerning his trespasses, “if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church” (Mt 18:17). When addressing Apphia and Archippus in the letter of Philemon, Paul wrote, “to the church in your house” (Phm 2). And writing to Timothy he spoke of, “how you ought to behave yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1Ti 3:14-15).

Secondly, Church also speaks of the Church at large: such as the complete body of believers, comprised of all saints from Pentecost till Jesus returns to receive his bride. It is also used to signify a cohort of associated church bodies, or a denomination, or even to speak of the collective of churches worldwide. In these contexts we use the capitalized form, Church.

² Giatti, Ian. “Flamy Grant' becomes first drag performer to top Christian music charts on iTunes” Christian Post, Jul 31, 2023 (<https://www.christianpost.com/news/drag-performer-flamy-grant-becomes-first-to-top-christian-music.html> accessed Aug 2, 2023).

³ I.S.B.E.

Concerning the Church at large, Jesus told the apostle, “you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18). When Paul wrote to the Corinthians concerning spiritual gifts, he spoke of the Church in a much larger capacity than that of a mere local assembly when he explained that, “God has set some in the Church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helpers, administrators, various kinds of tongues” (1Co 12:28). And in Hebrews we read, “But you are come unto . . . the general assembly and Church of the firstborn, who are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect” (Heb 12:22-23).

Clearly the church is not the building, neither is the building the house of God. Neither is any room in such a building a sanctuary of holiness. Thinking of a building as the church and a room in that building as a sanctuary is a grave misnomer. It distorts and detracts from the true church, both the local church and the Church universal; and this misnomer is not without dire consequences. Of primary concern are: 1) This misleading usage leads believers and non-believers alike to think of such a building as a place of holiness and reverence; a place where man goes to meet with God. When, in truth, man can meet God anywhere; as Jesus said, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20). 2) It usurps the status of believers; not just the nomenclature, but the designation as to where the glory of God resides.

Although ancient Israel had the greatly revered Holy of Holies wherein the Ark of the Covenant and the power of God resided, Christianity has no such structure. However, due to the sacrificial death and victorious resurrection of Christ, since the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God resides within every believer’s heart. The term “saint” is from NT Greek term *ἅγιος* (*hágos*) means holy. Indeed, believers are saints, they are the holy place; both individually and collectively believers are the temple of God.

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, . . . (Php 4:20-23).

Know you not that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? . . . know you not that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have of God, and you are not your own? For you are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s (1Co 3:16; 6:19-20).

And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God; as God has said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people (2Co 6:16).

As for the origin “church buildings” and “sanctuaries”: The Early Church went hundreds of years without such facilities. Indeed, due to severe persecution from ten successive Roman emperors, local churches had to meet in private; sometimes even meeting in catacombs where the dead were buried. But this suddenly changed when Constantine the Great befriended Christianity. In short order, the Church assumed its new role as a ward of the state. Then, within a few hundred years the world would turn upside down as the Church (or at least a corrupt portion of it) would come to control the empire.

It all began just prior to Constantine's defeat of Maxentius, at the battle of The Milvian Bridge in 312, when Constantine claimed to have a vision. While looking into the sun he saw a cross of light with the Greek words: Ἐν τούτῳ νικά (en toutō nika), "In this sign conquer."

As Emperor, Constantine held the title, Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of the college of pontiffs for the ancient pagan Roman religion. Even after his professed conversion he continued to hold this title as well as continuing to perform its pagan duties. Because he refused Christian baptism until just prior to his death, the reality of his conversion has always been questioned. Many considered it merely a brilliant political ploy that sought and succeeded to unite the empire religiously and thereby extend his influence. Others believe his conversion was real and that he simply appeased the pagans for the same political reasons. Whether his conversion was real or not, we don't know; but one thing is certain, it changed the course of history. From that day forward Christendom and the empire were entwined; an entanglement that continues to this day with the remnants of the fallen empire.

Under Constantine's rule the empire became overtly encouraging toward the Church. Over the next few decades he instituted many imperial changes.

- In 311, by decree, Christians were granted a limited tolerance.
- The edict of Milan in 313 (signed by the co-Emperors Licinius and Constantine) granted all religions, including Christianity, full liberty to follow their faith as desired. Many have called these the Magna Carta of Christianity; for even their properties, which had been seized by the previous emperor, Diocletian, were restored.
- In 313 he declared Christian clergy exempt from taxation.
- In 314 he assembled the Council of Arles, which dealt with several matters of concern to the budding Imperial Church.
- In 321 he issued a decree for the observance of Sunday as a day of worship.
- Once Constantine became the sole emperor (having forced the surrender of Maxentius and Licinius in 324, and then their execution in 325), he strongly encouraged his subjects to become followers of the Christian faith.
- In 325 he assembled the Council of Nicea—the first General Council of the new Imperial Church.

Constantine provided large sums of money to support Christian clergy, the circulation of Christian Scriptures and the building of Christian cathedrals, which was a new thing for the hitherto persecuted believers. He sought Christians to fill his chief advisory posts and, finally, he made certain that his son was given a Christian education.

With the chief of the pagan priests so strongly patronizing and favoring Christianity, it was only natural that other pagan priests would embrace it as well, at least nominally. As is apparent from the corrupt direction the Imperial Church quickly pursued, the apparent conversion of many of these pagan priests was doubtlessly motivated merely for political gain, and it wreaked havoc within the Christian community.

Almost overnight, yesterday's pagan priests became "Christian priests". Like their supreme leader, the Pontifex Maximus, naturally they retained their priestly titles, which heretofore did not exist in Christianity. With them, also came their temples of worship to their pagan god, Dagon. Heretofore temples were not a reality in Christian communities. Suddenly the steepled-church and its sanctuary were born; and they have deceived and misdirected the world ever since. They have also been a burden of despair and a source of division for countless local church bodies over the last 1,500 plus years. From their birth in paganism, to their mistaken symbolism of holiness, to their source of internal strife over control, there is little positive to be said for these structures. But tradition prevails, so that even those who know the church is the people and not the building have a hard time releasing it from their grasp.

Constantine and the aftermath of his actions had a significant effect on the church. Except for Julian the Apostate (361-363), all subsequent emperors, at least ostensibly, embraced the Church. In 392, Theodosius the Great decreed that all heathen sacrifices were to be considered treason. Then in 529, when Justinian the First demanded the school of philosophy in Athens to be closed, outwardly it looked as though Christianity had vanquished paganism. In truth the new Imperial Church had merely absorbed it, tradition-by-tradition and rite-by-rite, as discussed in the letter to the church in Thyatira, the Church had bedded down with Jezebel.

This marked a decided change in the adversary's strategy: persecution was exchanged for the infiltration of wolves in sheep's clothing. Of course, several centuries later, after so many had rejected the Imperial Church, which was so besieged by wolves, persecution saw a rebirth. Submit to the Imperial Church or die. After a couple centuries of persecution failed to detract truth seekers, the infiltration of false doctrine was kicked into high gear.

Although the Church has always battled corruption and false doctrines, this latest infiltration has been relentless. It began with Unitarianism and the rejection of Jesus' deity in the 1700s, then Darwinism and the rejection of God as Creator in the 1800s, and finally the wide spread rise of Atheism and a subsequent attack on basic morality in the 1900s, then onto full blown Hedonism and the rejection of all that is moral or sacred in the 2000s. Today, modern Christendom is in dire straits.

Even as false doctrines have grown and proliferated over the last few hundred years, there has been a simultaneous growing dearth of theological knowledge among the saints of God; so that fewer and fewer believers have more than a cursory knowledge of the biblical doctrines and many fail even to grasp the basics of the faith.

Worship

The second misnomer is the popular usage of the term "worship"; and perhaps it has an even more devastating consequence than does the misuse of "church". Worship, in both the OT and NT has a very specific meaning which speaks to a very specific action. It is an act of reverence—bowing the head or body toward the ground, or even falling prostrate before the power and authority of one greater than oneself. Although it is used to revere men, angels, idols, false gods, and God, obviously our concern is how it applies to our worship of God.

While one might physically bow before another human without having the actual mindset of adoration and awe; the worship of God consists of something more than the mere physical bowing or prostration. It requires the conscious, humble, reverential attitude, “in your fear will I worship toward your holy temple” (Ps 5:7).

Worship is characterized as a prostration, a falling to the ground or as merely a bowing of the head in awe and reverence. “Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped” (Ex 34:8). The primary OT Hebrew term *shachah* (שָׁחָה), is used 94 times.

Similarly, there are three NT Greek terms for worship. The primary term *proskuneo* (προσκυνέω) occurs 59 times; and it is the term used by the Septuagint for the aforementioned Hebrew “shachah”. It conveys the same idea of kissing the hand or the ground, to bow toward or prostrate upon the ground.

Paul used this term when reprimanding the Corinthians for their chaotic assemblies.

But if all prophesy, and there come in one that believes not, or one unlearned, he is convicted of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth” (1Co 14:24-25).

A classic example of worship is provided in the heavenly scene where the twenty-four elders (representatives of the redeemed Church) prostrate themselves before the Lord;

the four and twenty elders fall down before him that is sitting on the throne, and worship him that lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power: for you have created all things, and for your pleasure they are and were created (Re 4:10-11).

Another, yet less frequent term *sebomai* (σέβομαι) from the root *sebas* (σέβας), to fear, is used in a more general way to speak of a life of devotion, religion, reverence. We see this concept to reference the Thessalonians who received the Gospel, “And some of them believed, and joined Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few” (Ac 17:4). Jesus also used this term to rebuke the Pharisees,

You hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, These people draw near unto me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men (Mt 15:7-9).

The third term *threskeia* (θρησκεία) is only used four times. The KJV version translates it as religion three times and once as worship. Similar to “sebomai”, it speaks more to a lifestyle of ceremonial reverence rather than the singular act of humble obeisance, or prostration as do the Hebrew term *shachah* and the Greek *proskuneo*.

Paul used it to defend himself before Agrippa; speaking of the Jews who knew him, he said, “if they would testify, that after the most strict sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee” (Ac 26:5). And James used it to clarify pure intent,

If any man among you seems to be religious, and bridles not his tongue, but deceives his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world (Jas 1:26-27).

In modern Christendom, worship is generally viewed as the activities that transpire in the perceived “sanctuary” during the “worship service” of prayer, song, celebration, and preaching. While very important activities, and even closely connected with worship, none of these, either singularly or collectively, constitute worship in the complete sense. Each, or all, can be an aftermath or even a precursor to the singular act of worship; and all can be done aside from formal worship.

For example, although we typically bow our heads in prayer, and some prayers are indeed acts of worship (in that their primary focus is upon God and his awesomeness as we observed with the twenty-four elders before the throne) many, if not most prayers are prayers of request or thanksgiving. Such prayers are very important, but both are very different from conscious humility of fear and adoration. So, while such prayers incorporate half of the concept or worship (the humble bowing of the head), they lack the conscious aspect of fear and adoration. It is true that we fear and adore God daily, all day, and even during our prayers; but the singular act of worship, purposefully focused upon God, expressed by fear and adoration, is something different. Our minds cannot multitask. We cannot focus on our requests or even enumerate our blessings while we are consciously focused upon God in fear and adoration and awe as we contemplate the omnipotence of our King and Creator. This singular event is the act of worship.

Yet another activity that is easily mistaken for worship is the act of praise. Arguably, praise is even closer to the singular act of worship than is the general prayer. Similar to prayer, some praise (that which is God focused) is indeed worship, again we observed see with the twenty-four elders before the throne. But the issue with the praise generally offered during the “worship service” is usually devoid of one half of the act of worship—the physical and humble act of bowing the head. Rather, we usually stand or even raise hands toward heaven, giving praise to the Lord.

There is nothing wrong with this form of praise, but it seems more an attitude of celebration rather than the humble conscious prostration of the heart expressed with the bowing of the head. Furthermore, it generally occurs during a song or in response to a statement from the pulpit. Again, this is fine; but it is something different than the singular act of worship, purposefully focused upon God, expressed by fear and adoration, complete with the physical bow or prostration. From such worship, the actions of standing and praising and raising hands and thankfulness and celebration might naturally occur as an aftermath, or perhaps even as a precursor to the act of humble worship. “Jehoshaphat bowed his head with his face to the ground: and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell before the LORD, worshiping the LORD” (2Ch 20:18).

As such (as indicated by the terms, *sebomai* and *threskeia*), there is a form of worship that constitutes a lifestyle of reverence for God; but (as indicated by the term

proskuneo) there is also a specific form of worship, a conscious singular action consisting of the purposeful, and willful humbling of body, mind and spirit to contemplate the awesomeness of God in fear and adoration. And this action should be a regular occurrence. We need not wait till Sunday meeting, and we certainly need not wait till we are in some perceived sanctuary.

So important is worship, that even those who reject the reality of God and refuse to worship him will be held responsible for the clear evidence right before their eyes. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows his handiwork” (Ps 19:1)

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God has shown it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and deity; so that they are without excuse: Because, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Ro 1:18-21).

Stuart Hine captured the essence of worship in one of the greatest hymns ever written. It has it all, the awe and wonder of our Creator and the humble bow of adoration. Although, in its poetic form the humble bow takes place when Christ returns, clearly the idea is present throughout the poem.

How Great Thou Art by Stuart Hine

Oh Lord, my God
When I, in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder
Thy power throughout the universe displayed

And when I think that God, His Son not sparing
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing
He bled and died to take away my sin

When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart
Then I shall bow, in humble adoration
And then proclaim, my God, how great Thou art

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee
How great Thou art, how great Thou art

The problem with mistaking the activities of a typical modern church service as acts of worship is that we undermine and displace either or both of the core aspects of the singular act of worship—the physical humble bowing of the head or even complete

prostration, and/or the willful and purposeful and conscious fear and adoration, awestruck at God's omnipotence, and his worthiness. It's as if in our minds we know the singular act of worship is most important, but in practice we merely reference it almost as an afterthought, as if a sidebar unworthy of mention in the main conversation of singing and celebrating and preaching.

In truth, our church services are too busy to be conducive to the singular act of worship. This is something for which time must be set aside; it cannot reside in an afterthought or even hover in the atmosphere as metaphysical presence. It is a specific, singular act that demands our full attention. It is especially difficult for the congregation to pursue quiet, purposeful and conscious humble adoration and the fearful contemplation of God, awestruck at his omnipotence, his love, his worthiness when listening to someone else pray a prayer of request or thanksgiving. We cannot multitask. Again, not that such prayers are wrong or uncalled for; indeed, they are welcomed and even necessary. But their very nature and content make them not conducive to the singular act of worship, in which we consciously focus upon God in fear and adoration, awestruck, considering the omnipotence and worthiness of our King and Creator.

By equating these other activities as worship we do ourselves a grave disservice; for this displaces and robs us of the experience and reality of true and complete worship. Worship is the spark that gives rise to all these other activities; it is the well from which they spring forth.

It is especially not conducive to worship when the congregational prayer seems to be more like a mini sermon. Most services feature numerous prayers often by various persons; perhaps we would be better served to begin each service with a prolonged time of silence in which the congregation would bow their heads in awe and purposefully contemplate and focus upon the splendor of God. No requests, no singing, no celebrating, no speaking; merely a thoughtful quiet time focused upon God and his worthiness. "Be still, and know that I am God: . . ." (Ps 46:10).

But being still is not an activity that comes easily to our busy culture filled with amusement and entertainment and activities and news and knowledge to distract us at our fingertips 24/7. Most of us scarcely know how to spend even a few minutes in silence; and silence in a group setting is akin to silence on the radio station. It is not tolerated, somebody must speak; they must say something even if it is a useless thought, but we cannot have dead air.

Those Gathered to Worship

Lastly, the issue of those gathered for worship. If you found the previous sections a bit of a challenge to your sense of tradition, you are likely going to find this section even more so. Although Jesus and the apostles spoke to individuals concerning salvation, and often preached to public gatherings, Jesus also met with his disciples in private. Similarly, until the time of Constantine, local church bodies met in private. Their assemblies were secluded and closed to the general public. Outsiders, non church members attended by invitation only. In these meetings, three primary objectives transpired: worship, the teaching of doctrine, and fellowship. Of course this did not displace evangelism, but primary evangelism was done outside the church. As Paul indicated, non-believers could sometimes be present (Co 14:24). But these meetings

were private and secluded so that an outsider could have only been there by invitation; no doubt these visitors would have expressed interest in the gospel because someone in the church had been witnessing to them.

The privacy of the church should come as no surprise. As mentioned above, the Greek term, *ekklesia*, speaks of the “called out ones, the chosen”. Church, by definition is composed of the chosen, those who have placed their faith in Jesus, redeemed by his sacrificial death and alive anew by his glorious resurrection. By definition, church excludes non-believers.

While it may appear that the modern approach of opening the doors and indiscriminately inviting the public at large to attend church is a good thing, it is contrary to the way the early Church gathered, and it is contrary to the very concept and definition of church. It is also contrary to the primary purpose of the assembly of saints—to worship, to learn doctrine, and to fellowship.

Furthermore, this indiscriminate opening of the doors to the general public has proven to produce dire effects. One of which is that it allows rebels and wolves in sheep’s clothing, false teachers sporting false doctrines; about which we have ample warning.

There shall be false teachers among you, who shall secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their shameful ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. And through covetousness shall they with false words exploit you: whose judgment of old now lingers not, and their destruction slumbers not (2Pe 2:1-3).

There are certain men crept in unawares, who were before, of old, ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into licentiousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ (Jude 4).

The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they draw to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto myths (2Ti 4:3-4).

Therefore Paul charged Timothy, “Preach the word; be diligent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine” (2Ti 4:2).

Yet another seemingly good but disruptive aspect to indiscriminately opening the doors to the public with the desire to appeal to the masses is that all too often the church service becomes nothing less than a production of celebration, musical performances, and a shallow three point feel-good sermon presented by persuasive motivational orators. Worship, in the complete sense, the teaching of biblical theology, and even fellowship are forsaken as the congregation merely sits back to enjoy the production.

A similar scenario with a slight twist is rather than a shallow three point feel-good sermon, nearly every sermon every week is focused on a basic evangelical message. Directed toward any possible non-believers who might be present, it is complete with an altar call. Yet again, Worship, in the complete sense, the teaching of biblical theology, and even fellowship are forsaken as the congregation merely sits back to enjoy the production. But while we are throwing out a hook for potential converts, the church, the

body of true believers suffers yet another fruitless meeting; in that (like the recipients of the book of Hebrews) they subsist merely on the milk of the Word. Hearing the salvation message over and over again, they are never fed the meat of the Word—biblical theology. The author of Hebrews chided his readers by saying,

We have many things to say, and hard to explain, seeing you are dull of hearing. For when for the time you ought to be teachers, you have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of solid food. For every one that uses milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto maturity; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment (Heb 5:10 – 6:2).

Certainly these foundational doctrines are extremely important, but we must move on to deeper things, to biblical concepts that further our spiritual growth and defend the faith. If the church does not learn sound biblical doctrine and learn to defend it, eventually, as it already has, false doctrines creep in and take root. The prevalence of shallow three point motivation sermons and/or repetitive basic evangelical sermons within modern orthodox evangelical Christendom has left the Church theologically challenged.

No doubt someone will object, but it's Sunday school's task to teach doctrine. I would answer: Our modern format is not how the Early Church conducted their meetings. The pastors taught doctrine, they did not deliver three point feel-good homilies, and Sunday school is a modern construct. Furthermore, if this is the job of Sunday school, it is failing. Not only do relatively few people attend Sunday school, by and large the teachers of Sunday school don't really know biblical theology and therefore are unable to teach it effectively. They don't know biblical theology because by and large their pastors do not teach it to them.

To illustrate this point I cite a survey I conducted while doing doctoral work in seminary. I had been concerned for some time 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 leading laymen of their choice within numerous churches from a certain conservative and evangelical association throughout the states of Oregon and Washington.

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 issue 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 laymen regularly prepared and taught Bible classes, only 3% of their pastors provided them with hermeneutical training, and less than 20% provided some form of theological training.

Although they admitted to having very little training in theological matters, most of the lay leaders believed they were qualified to teach it. However, as I suspected, their ignorance soon 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 Bible 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 didn't 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 respective 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 equivalent of a modern day 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 so they, too, can effectively fight the enemy. This means theological training as well as training in ministry, character, and spirit. Paul told Timothy,

Preach the word; be diligent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they draw to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto myths (2Ti 4:2-4).

Sadly, perhaps due to the neglect of the pastoral teaching of doctrine in favor of three point motivational homilies or evangelical sermons, these times of unsound doctrine are upon us.

The bottom line is that indiscriminately opening the doors to the public neglects the very definition of church, and disregards the primary purpose of the assembly of the

saints, which is to worship, to learn biblical theology, and to engage in meaningful fellowship.

Does this mean that outsiders or non-believers are not welcome? Of course not; but it seems best that such outsiders or non-believers should have a personal invitation from a church member. This was definitely the situation in the Early Church.

Paul makes it clear to the Corinthians that meetings should be geared toward enhancing the believer's knowledge of biblical doctrine and fostering deep relationships within the fellowship. If perhaps an unbeliever were present and heard these doctrines and prophecies (inspired teachings) he or she might be "convicted of all, he is judged of all: And thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth" (1Co 14:24-25). But as highlighted in the book of Hebrews, these doctrines cannot be learned if the primary topic of every sermon is an evangelical message laying down the foundation of salvation. And as warned by the apostle, we must ever be on guard for false teachers creeping into our midst.

Conclusion

In light of these thoughts, let me say I'm in favor of small, in-home churches focused on proper worship, teaching biblical theology, and strong fellowship with song and celebration and praise. Herein, theological lessons are taught rather than shallow three point feel-good motivational homilies.

This does not necessarily rule out large churches or even mega churches; but it would demand a new format. Perhaps one in which the passive non-participatory sermonic format is replaced by more of a Sunday school concept with smaller classrooms where time is given for quiet thoughtful worship, and sound biblical theology is taught by qualified teachers. After these sessions of worship and doctrine, all could come together in their grand meeting hall for song and celebration. One might ask, what does the pastor do if he's not presenting the hallmark three point sermons? Aside from teaching one of these advanced classes himself, throughout the week he could hold theological and ministerial classes for his leadership—a mini seminary if you will; thereby preparing these leaders to serve and defend the faith. Pretty much exactly what Paul instructed Timothy to do, "the things that you have heard of me among many witnesses, the same, commit to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (2Ti 2:2).

But I still prefer the small in-home church. It provides more intimate fellowship and better control of attendance so as to properly defend against false doctrine. It liberates the church proper (the saints) from the perceived church (the building) and its perceived sanctuary. It also rids the church of the great and unnecessary cost of maintaining a facility. By focusing on biblical theology, new qualified leaders will emerge who can purposefully split at the appropriate time to form another in-home church once the membership grows too large. Once a month, the several small churches that have developed over time could meet together for worship, song and celebration. They could invite those to whom they have been witnessing; and perhaps one of the pastors could give the coveted evangelical message complete with the altar call.