

# Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

## July 31 2021: Church Culture versus Christianity

This isn't just a whiney complaint about the Democrats cheating in the last election.

When Barack Obama was elected with solid Democrat majorities in 2008, a lot of us were wondering why they didn't advance their anti-American agenda at that time. With Joe Biden and razor-thin control of the House and a strong minority in the Senate, they are quite active in pushing an anti-American agenda now. But this isn't just a whiney complaint about Democrats pushing their agenda.



This didn't even start under President Trump, but it certainly took on more form. Riots by "Black Lives Matter" and "Antifa" reached a peak during the Trump years. The socialist (communist) and anti-American orientation of these "grassroots mostly-peaceful protesters" was not lost on anyone. Before that, it was "Occupy Wall Street" (and even "Occupy Tucson") with a strong socialist redistributionist orientation ("We are the 99%!"). But this isn't just a whiney complaint about street violence in U.S. cities.

It's when you look under the rug that the bigger picture takes shape. Union public-school teachers and leftist university professors in the U.S. have been indoctrinating the young people for years; it is only just recently that their intent to push Critical Race Theory and Transgenderism in spite of the objections of parents has become national news. In spite of the solidly leftist news media trying to cover for them. Cheered on by the solidly leftist entertainment industry. Tyrannical policies in cities and counties and even entire states are enacted over the protests of citizens, yet recall election drives either can't get sufficient traction or fail at the ballot box, and the populace (even without the election cheating) keep picking the same people for office, or people even farther to the left.

It's an unmistakable trend with multiple facets. Nor is it only in the United States; the great powers of Europe have turned their backs on their Christian heritage; "nature abhors a vacuum", and Islam is becoming more and more prevalent in their aching cultures. Red China is becoming more and more better positioned to succeed where the Soviet Union failed. Western civilization is dying, and the inhabitants of the West are doing their best to accelerate the demise.

Some rose-colored-glasses-wearing optimists might tell me at this point, "We've been here before and we made it through". But before, when facing the threats of Nazism in Europe and Soviet aggression worldwide and Chinese-driven communism in Southeast Asia, a pro-Western, pro-Liberty (and largely pro-Christian) cultural dominance held sway in the United States and Europe. That is emphatically not true anymore. Things will only keep getting worse, because there's nothing to make things get better. A handful of states in India

and Eastern Europe and Africa are *not* going to be able to hold back the tide. *There is no restorative force in the world.*

There's something else, too. In times past, when things got bad in "civilized" parts, folk could get on the boat and emigrate to a better place. Lady Liberty holding up the torch in New York Harbor, and all that. Or load up their family goods in the Conestoga and hit the Santa Fe Trail. However, in our days, the world is all filled in. The safe harbors, that handful of states mentioned in the previous paragraph, are not going to remain safe. There is no frontier anymore (Alaska, Northern Canada, and Antarctica aren't practical options). *There's nowhere left to run.*

Now, in addition to not being a whiney complaint about present circumstances, this is also not a declaration of despair and surrender. There are Americans who will fight the encroaching tyranny, and to the extent there's such a movement to join, I will fight, too, even if the fight is as hopeless as the ones faced by the Huguenots and the Hussites. Such a fight will not *by itself* or *in its own strength* be a sufficient restorative force to turn the tide on the cultural decay. I'm proposing that the current situation is not a cultural or even less a political problem, but a **spiritual** problem.

God is the source of spiritual truth and power. Well, as *sovereign*, God is also the source of cultural and political trends as well, and military, and environmental, and really, everything. He's the Author of the story of Earth and the Universe.

Therefore:

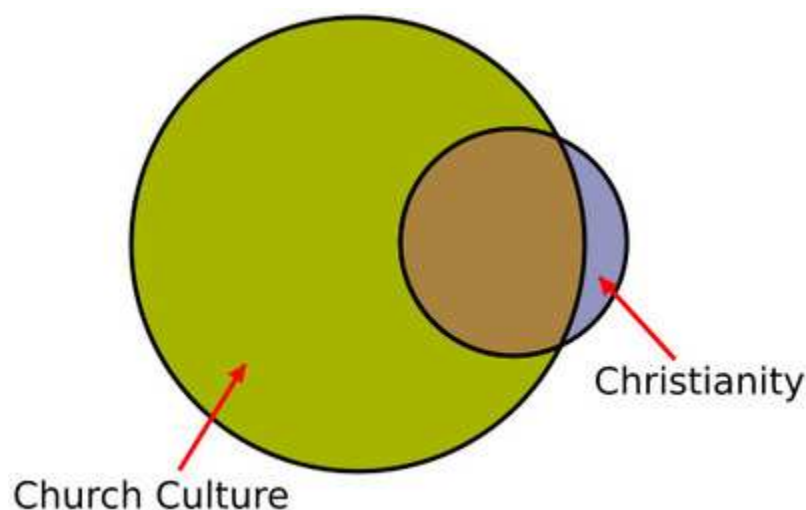
- Either God will at some point be or provide the restorative force, and the United States and Western Europe wakes up from our nightmare of irrationality, and there is an extension of world history and liberty and flourishing, or
- He won't, and this is the really-truly End Times, the last page of world history, and the Man of Sin is due on stage any moment.

Here's the focus of my thoughts - not whiney complaint, not despair or surrender, but this consideration: Either way, the Church has a role to play. Note the capital-C; the Church - the Body of Christ, the Assembly of regenerate people - has a role to play. I as a member of the Church have a role to play. And... the little-c church, the institutional organized local denominational or non-denominational church, has a role to play, which corporately may be for good or ill.

- The church will intentionally equip Christians to support the restorative force and be part of it in cultural, political, possibly military, and certainly spiritual terms, or
- The church will prepare Christians to face hostility, persecution, even destitution and imprisonment and torture and death, and provide means of fellowship and discipleship in the absence of tolerance - that is, go "underground" - or
- The church won't do anything useful, but keep plodding along in the tried-and-failed traditional pattern, leaving the job of whichever of the two previous points is appropriate to para-church organizations.

Sad to say, my vote is for the last option. Why is that? Well, first, the civilizational trends are so far advanced that if the institutional church was going to play any useful role at all, we would have seen a movement, and I've been looking fairly closely for any signs of movement, and have seen none. But secondly, I believe there is a root problem that short-circuits any inclination or movement in the church to be anything but broken and useless,

and it is this: The confusion between **Church Culture** and **Authentic Christianity**.



Christianity is the doctrine and practice as set forth by Jesus and the Apostles in the New Testament, and largely what has been deduced from Scripture by the early church councils and theologians such as the eastern church fathers, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and the Puritan divines. Church culture, on the other hand, is the tradition of "going to church" (that is, attending "worship" services), singing religious songs, listening to a religious lecture (sermon), observing whatever other aspects may be viewed as part of the liturgy (including the "greeting", taking up the offering, special music or drama (entertainment), the "invitation"), optionally going to a "Sunday School" "class" - in short, a great number of practices that are not explicitly specified in Scripture but have been added over the centuries, and in most cases are defended by "church people" from challenges by potential reformers by prooftexts from Scripture (often taken out of context or stretching the intention of the text).

Note that there is a large region of "church culture" that is outside of "Christianity". This would include the vast number of apostate churches, which reject the authority of Scripture and adopt heretical views of Jesus (including His non-historicity), and yet enjoy (mark the term "enjoy", associated with "entertainment") a Sunday-morning "worship" service. Non-Christian religions often adopt the features of "church culture" with Sunday Morning meetings featuring music and a lecture; I've been at a Mormon church (for a funeral), and it was exactly like that (the congregation singing hymns to Joseph Smith; how jarring!). The Unitarian Universalist church avoids "god-talk" and any mention of Jesus except as a "great moral teacher", but otherwise puts on a religious show like any Protestant church. There are even [churches for atheists](#) [1]. Thus, there is only a tenuous connection between "church culture" and Christianity.

There is a subset of "Christianity" that exists outside "church culture". I am very much aware of the 60 to 80% of young people that hang up on the church; per [Barna research](#) [2], most of these, the "nomad" and "exile" categories, retain their Christian beliefs but see no value in church attendance or involvement. I myself am in that subset; a few moment's perusal of this website and a review of my testimony and doctrinal positions should dissipate any notion that I am anything other than an elect, regenerate Christian - even though I reject "church culture" and will not be involved in it or endorse it, although for practical purposes I remain a member and will partipate in activities that are actually Scripturally beneficial or required (such as Communion and topical classes).

Then what about the bulk of "Christianity" that is identified with "church culture"? There's nothing necessarily incompatible with "church culture" and Christianity, and I don't really have a beef with Sunday morning services, or songs, or even a religious lecture, or all that much with offerings. I have a bit more of a disagreement with the "greeting time" and special music and the formal, canned (non-) prayers uttered during a service. I could appreciate Sunday School - if it were intentional. The problem comes when Christians become "church people", and the activities on Sunday morning become their main or only expressions of religious faith. I see this in a number of ways:

- The question of "what we should be doing" is never asked. Scripture might explicitly command that husbands "love" their wives and wives "respect" their husbands and children honor their parents and parents attend to the spiritual education of their own children, that the older men should teach the younger men how to be godly men and the older women should teach the younger women how to be godly women, and for prayer to be lifted up for apostles/missionaries and government rulers and our greatest concerns, but all that doesn't even come to mind. The focus is entirely on what happens on Sunday morning.
- The response to the challenge of "we're not doing what we are supposed to be doing" is the assurance that we are indeed teaching these things - in our sermons and Sunday School classes. There's a tendency to map whatever Scripture contains onto whatever we're doing in our church, whether or not the mapping is appropriate. If it isn't intentional, it isn't really happening. Furthermore, if the West is in a mess even partially because the disciples are failing to "observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20), then we aren't really teaching these things. It is not the case that X is being addressed in a church because there was a sermon about X in the past two years.
- "Church culture" is an evolution over hundreds of years out of "Christendom", the dominance of Christianity (in various incompatible flavors) in Europe and exported with the colonists to North America. There are certain features of "Christendom" that were cultural defaults, such as the structure of marriage. Churches didn't have to say anything about marriage, because it was the cultural default. "Christendom" is gone now, and the cultural defaults are being overthrown with growing rapidity, but "church culture" continues to operate as if they were still there. Outside of an occasional sermon about marriage, or the rare invitation of a para-church marriage-support ministry, there's not much treatment of certain topics of crucial import especially to young people. To a significant extent, there's not a lot of difference in the lifestyles of "church people" and those in the broader culture.
- In most cases, when someone becomes a new believer, the only guidance they get is "come to church on Sunday morning, develop a taste for these unfamiliar religious songs, and take notes during the sermon. And if you feel like it, we can place you in a Sunday School class (segregated by age), where we are studying II Timothy". In other words, a new believer isn't instructed in the faith, they're instructed in "church culture". Reminds me of what Jesus said to the Pharisees: "You encompass heaven and earth to make one proselyte, and when you have made him, you make him twice the son of hell that you are" (Matt. 23:15).
- After the service, visitors are approached by church people and asked, "Did you *enjoy*

the service?". Upon leaving the service, church people will shake the pastor's hand as he stands by the door (yes, another "church culture" practice) and tell him how much they *enjoyed* his sermon. And that compliment fills his heart with a warm feeling of accomplishment.

- Unrepentant sin doesn't grieve the hearts or split the church as much as a dispute over the style of music or the unsatisfactory delivery of sermons. (In fact, there's not usually any recognition of unrepentant sin, because church discipline a la Matt. 18:15-17 is not actually conducted, lest church members be offended and take their tithes elsewhere.)
- When a church is looking for a replacement pastor, the "search committee" of church people don't look at the record of candidates for mentoring new believers, or their success in instilling a Christian worldview in young people, or their abilities in counselling, or any of the more Biblical considerations. They sneak into a service in the pastor's current church and evaluate his sermon delivery style. They may even record it and share it with the other committee members. There might be other criteria, maybe theological position or any hint of scandal or the rate of numerical growth of the pastor's current church, but the *sermon* is far and away the main one.
- The one great sin that can get you removed from a Sunday School teaching position or deacon service or possibly even from church membership is Not Attending Church Services.

You know something's up when even unbelievers identify Christians with "church culture". My "earth mother" neighbor knows I am a Christian, and when I was mentioning to her that we were considering taking the offer from Raytheon to move to Huntsville, Alabama, she said, "you would do better there than I would, since they're all about church down there."

You know something's up when a local church is advertising on bus stops and billboards. It's not about Jesus. It's not about Ultimate Reality or your accountability to God for your rebellion. It's about "coming to church". Interestingly, para-church ministries do better in the advertising scene. A crisis pregnancy center will put up a billboard, "God made me special"; a church will run a radio spot, "Come and see how friendly we are".

About fifteen to twenty years ago, the big rage in the evangelical world was the Emerging Church. I was tracking the Emerging Church phenomenon fairly closely, because the idea was to question the way we do things and see if there is a better way. Now, in some cases, this questioning went too far and veered into heresy; I'm *still* having to tell clueless pastors and ministry leaders that "the 'Emergent Church' is not the same as the Emerging Church". But as I watched the phenomenon build and then dwindle, I realized it was still focused on the Sunday Morning activities, mostly replacing formal practices with emotive ones. The most interesting or successful Emerging Church I've investigated in Tucson, [The Village Church](#) [2], while they take *koinonia* much further than "normal" institutional churches, still have their Sunday Morning "worship" service with songs, a sermon, and a fairly fixed liturgy.

To finish this off, I'm not going to say that all churches completely lose their Christian identity in their "church culture". I haven't visited all churches. Some do a better job at being intentional than others. Certainly The Village Church tries. For a while, a major Southern Baptist church in our Association was holding topical classes during their Sunday School hour; I don't know how much of a planned curriculum or course of study there was,

but I took note of the effort. Most churches do some sort of community ministry, and that's fine as long as it's honestly a ministry and not just a vehicle for public relations (to attract potential new members) or evangelism (although I very much have a problem with churches offering food boxes to their neighborhoods with no means testing and no expectations - I don't believe that this is really the "good works" that God has called us to). All the same, the exceptions don't make the rule, and it comes down to my perception that if the church in general had been more intentionally Christian and less float-on-tradition "church culture", the West may not have come to the place we are now. And certainly, the church *must* become more intentionally Christian and less float-on-tradition "church culture" if it is going to play a role either in being a restorative force or preparing us all for the End Times.

## So, What Is To Be Done, Then?

I'm not necessarily calling for the abolishing of the Sunday Morning service. The objective is for the church to become intentional about making disciples, not discarding the traditions of the past five hundred years. However, there may need to be some adjustments to get the "church people" to realize that we're serious about Christianity; if too much of the status quo is left alone, people won't notice any difference. Probably some of the more "entertainment" aspects of the service need to be dropped - like the choir or the stage band or the organ. Probably some low-yield teaching practices, such as expositional preaching series through (especially obscure) Bible books, should be replaced with doctrinal sermons or messages about the church's strategy. Introducing some actually useful traditions might be helpful, such as responsive readings, or communal reciting of the Apostle's Creed, or a catechism, or reading more than a few verses of a Scripture passage (like perhaps an entire chapter). The Sunday Morning time is precious, the time and the impression should be carefully managed.

A lot of the cherished activities could be moved outside the "worship" service. That three-point expositional sermon series on II Timothy? Move it to Sunday night, to a class for those who want to hear it. The choir can rehearse for an honest-to-goodness concert, perhaps a Tuesday or Saturday evening, and this could be advertised as *a cultural event* in the community. The Sunday morning meeting time should be relabelled - I've heard some churches call it a "covenant renewal service". A sermon series on what *worship* really is (and it's *not* music or singing) might go a long ways to reorient the viewpoint of the fellowship.

"Sunday School" needs a complete overhaul. Fellowship and accountability groups are fine, and they're best being regional activities rather than centralized and (non-Scriptural) age-segregated affairs. Get rid of the denominational literature which is a defective crutch; if God has blessed the church with teachers, let them *teach* - make lesson plans that fit in a comprehensive course of study, research and prepare resources, assign homework, give tests, *determine grades* - if it is supposed to be *Christian education* then make it so, rather than "church-people entertainment".

In any event, the entire church needs to understand what their purpose is. It is *not* primarily about getting people saved. Evangelism is an important function, but it is not the most important, or Jesus would have said so instead of putting "teach them to observe" on the same level as "make disciples". The purpose of the church is about the Body of Christ, the fellowship of the saints, of equipping disciples for service, and encouraging one another to

"good works" (and what that means) and holding each other accountable for our purity.

This process has to be a top-down thing; I've already experienced what happens when a bottom-up thing is tried contrary to the will of the pastor, or even just without the active support of the pastor. The pastor and elders have to lead. If it were true that God had called me to be a prophet and a reformer, and there were any pastors who would be inclined to consider what I have to say, I would suggest the following general strategy:

- First, allocate Wednesday night or Sunday night for church-wide corporate prayer. Maybe a sermon series on prayer, how it's one of the top commands in Scripture, a most essential part of the Church's connection with the Lord, and how church priorities are going to change. Eventually, the church can cancel or reschedule AWANA and choir practice and "youth night" and anything else that conflicts with the church's renewed priority on corporate prayer. No "Bible study", no announcements, limit the sharing of prayer requests, especially the ones for sick people. Emphasize pleading with God for the direction of the church and for it to become more effective at what it's supposed to be doing.
- Next, start feeling out the staff, the elders, the deacons, the Sunday School directors, and any other influential members, for their openness to a discussion about what Christianity really is and what the church is supposed to be doing. (Probably the music minister isn't going to be on board with this, if there's any suggestion that the musical entertainment on Sunday Morning is actually not part of what the church is *supposed* to be doing.) If God is going to respond to your prayers, then the leadership (staff and otherwise) will hopefully come under conviction about this matter. If the church leadership never expresses any interest in doing what God actually wants, then you've got one of *those* churches, and you shouldn't push it any further and just work at maintaining that prayer commitment.
- If the leadership is behind you, then *gradual* action can start to retire activities deemed to not be core Christianity and implement activities intentionally designed to promote a Biblical or Christian worldview. I would suspect that the older people, more soaked in "church culture" and having those expectations crystallized in their hearts would be more opposed to change than the younger people who understand the need for change. Be prepared for disappointment; those older people - and especially the "tares" (Matt. 13:24-30, the unbelievers who are only there for the "church culture") - may leave and reduce the available funds. I would hope that God would bless the effort to be more intentional with the addition of like-minded believers attracted to a church that wants to be serious, and especially new believers that can then be properly trained in the Christian Worldview.

Reflecting on this last point makes me wonder about how likely an established church can successfully transition from "church culture" to intentional Christianity. When FSBC Tucson was exploring becoming a "Purpose-Driven Church", the literature warned about this. After all, Saddleback Church itself started in a small group amid much prayer and discussion. The Village Church (and other successful Emerging Churches wherever they may be) all started as new projects with a small group of believers who supported doing something authentic and innovative and intentional, rather than the transformation of an existing establishment-style "church culture" church. However, there are a *lot* more establishment-style "church culture" churches, and if God will respond to prayer and transform His church in the West to be fitted to serve a useful role in His sovereign plans



for our civilization, then it is not too much to expect that this kind of transformation is not only possible, but the attempt to do so is an expression of faith and obedience.

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1. [www.economist.com/erasmus/2018/05/16/the-elusive-phenomenon-of-churches-without-god](http://www.economist.com/erasmus/2018/05/16/the-elusive-phenomenon-of-churches-without-god)
2. [www.barna.com/research/five-myths-about-young-adult-church-dropouts](http://www.barna.com/research/five-myths-about-young-adult-church-dropouts)
3. [www.villagersonline.com](http://www.villagersonline.com)

## August 02 2021: Is "Worship" Music Really Worship?



From the time I was born to the time I had my "epiphany" as a former volunteer lay youth pastor, I was a good little "church person". In fact, I was "church people" before I underwent my conversion experience at age 6. My parents brought me to church services, I went to children's Sunday School, I was segregated from my proper role models by the "youth group" and later by "college worship". Eventually I would take sermon notes and archive them (I might even

have some of those notes stashed uselessly around here somewhere). And I sang the religious songs. My favorite as a child was "Fairest Lord Jesus". Later on it was "A Mighty Fortress" and "Beneath the Cross of Jesus". As a young father, I would sing hymns to my infants as I labored to put them to sleem in the evenings. Later on, when the church had taken on an energetic and visionary youth pastor and I was playing along in a supporting role, the church instituted "Youth Night", and the "youth choir" got on stage and "led the congregation" in the choruses we sang in our segregated youth Sunday School "class". I even played my trombone in the church orchestra. Later on in my youth pastor role, I played the piano in our "contemporary worship" band on those Sundays that the older folk let us "do our thing". I even dutifully tuned (with some enjoyment) to the Christian music radio stations. I subscribed to the quarterly selection of Christian music CDs and distributed them to the young people in my "youth group", and used some of them for the singing time in my own segregated "youth Sunday School class". I would go with the "youth group" to concerts of popular Contemporary Christian Musicians when they came to town. When it came to "worship" music, I was good little "church people". I was all in, fully on-board.

The facade began to crack one evening service when I was still serving at the "big church". The college group band and the college group "worship" leader was directing the contemporary choruses. I was in the youth group and still a somewhat younger man (in my 30s), so I was into it. Then at some point, they latched onto some three or four word phrase, and the band repeated the accompaniment slowly while the congregation sang the phrase Over.

And over.  
And over.  
And over.  
And over.  
And over.



And over.

And over again.

This was past weird. I looked around and the band and the leader and everyone in the congregation and even some of the musicians had their eyes closed, some of them had their hands raised, and all of them had this blissful expression on their faces. Now, I had studied other religions by this time, and I knew about the Hindu meditation practice of repeating the Sacred Syllable OM, and this was done (by the analysis of non-Hindu Western psychologists) to induce a state of altered consciousness. As I looked around at the faces of the "church people" with the droning music filling the auditorium, it struck me - these people are being worked into a state of altered consciousness. *This is NOT worship!*

This was the first time that I was aware of the possibility that music wasn't really worship. Now, I had already been through the usual "church culture" squabble in which the older people object to the "worship choruses" as being loud, shallow, world-appeasing, and *not worship*, and the younger people denounced the hymns and piano and organ accompaniment as being slow, out-of-date, incomprehensible, stiff, formal, and *not worship*. This battle would eventually be resolved by splitting the church into two - the "traditional" (old people) church that meets at 8:30 and the "contemporary" (young people) church that meets at 11:00. The segregation that had already been in place in Sunday School was now extended to the "worship" service, and the only point shared by the two otherwise entirely separate churches was the pastor and his sermon. At the time, this war of the music styles did not register with me because I was still "church people", and my paradigm did not harbor any question that the church music wasn't "worship".

Then I underwent my (doubtlessly providential) "epiphany" at the little church with the "60-80% of young people hanging up on church" phenomenon unrolling before my eyes. I realized that I and these departing young people had been poorly served by the church culture in which we had been raised. The question "if all this ineffective sermonizing and Sunday School teaching has been an unquestioned paradigm, what else might be wrong?" occurred to me in force. As I drifted around visiting churches and increasing my stock of impressions about the contemporary Western church, I fell in with the Reformed Baptist group. These people had a reason for everything they did. I studied their [London Confession of 1689 \[1\]](#) with them in their Sunday School, and appreciated the concept of "The Regulative Principle of Worship" and "Christian Liberty".

"[Christian Liberty](#)" states that nobody has any right to place an obligation on me as a Christian beyond the demands of love [2]. This grows out of Paul's teaching in Romans 14, in which the stronger brother should not injure the conscience of the weaker brother. The danger is that the weaker brother can use his claim to having his conscience injured to place restrictions on the lifestyle of the stronger brother. Kind of a "priority inversion" effect. The concept of "Christian Liberty" is intended to forestall this effect.

I view the "[Regulative Principle of Worship](#)" as a combination of "Christian Liberty" (a believer cannot place unscriptural obligations on another) and the reaction against the unscriptural accretions of the Roman Catholic church that surfaced during the Protestant Reformation. The principle holds that a church may not adopt a practice for the service or liturgy that is not explicitly required by Scripture [3].

Well, that's cool, I thought, but what about this singing business? I had already become aware (for some time now) that there were churches that sang only Psalms, some that did not permit accompaniment of musical instruments like pianos, some that excluded only

certain instruments like the organ, and some that didn't sing at all. So if there was this much variety over something that should be explicit in Scripture... I asked the Reformed Baptist pastor about this, and he cited Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16. Umm... these are the only two *single verses* that say anything about singing or music in the New Testament; both of them are pretty much the same as being instruction or advice for a Christian lifestyle, *not about the "worship" service*. (I think the Regulative Principle of Worship has a weak spot in that the New Testament doesn't actually have that much to say about any weekly "service".) I have a nagging feeling about this...

As I've mentioned elsewhere, I lived under the teaching of a pastor who took the Southern Baptist tradition of teetotalling very seriously. Drinking alcohol was a *sin*, here's all these Scriptural passages to prove it, and obviously Jesus didn't sin so He drank grape juice, not alcoholic wine, and here's the distinction between "new wine" and "old wine". It didn't take much looking at the actual verses to realize they were being taken out of context or stretched or an entire non-Biblical or even anti-Biblical framework was being imposed on Scripture to come up with "drinking alcohol is a sin". Furthermore, the entire teetotalling business didn't exist before the 19th Century. I was not inclined to drink alcohol then any more than I am now, so I was not motivated to be looking for a "loophole"; rather, I realized that Scripture was being abused in order to justify some cherished tradition. I saw this same effect in play in the writings of American theologians (sympathetic to Southern Baptists) in the years before the Civil War justifying and defending the practice of slavery. I see this same activity in the elaborate structure that Presbyterians and their ilk use to defend the practice of infant baptism, something that Baptists have never accepted as authentically Scriptural. This pleading to two verses in Paul's epistles to justify the practice of congregational singing sure looks to me as the same sort of thing.

More recently, I've come across passages like Amos 5:21-24 and Isaiah 1:11-16 in which God rejects the formal religious activities of Israel, such as the temple service and the festivals, and He specifically mentions music in Amos 5:23. The "worship" service isn't worship. *The music isn't worship*. The obedience and the justice and the care of the poor and widows and orphans and all this is the *worship* that pleases God. In fact, in Micah 6:8, God tells us through the prophet what He is looking for as worship:

He has told you, oh man, what is good, and what does the  
LORD require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and  
to walk humbly with your God.

Nothing about singing. I've been meeting with a friend who is really involved in the big church at which I am a nominal member; in fact, he is a deacon there. He thinks I am wrong to not be attending church services, and he is aware that I regard "church culture" as being ineffective if not actually deleterious to Christian belief and life. One time I was expressing my negative opinion and he blew up. "I'm sick and tired of you saying that my singing is not worship. How dare you claim that the music in church is not worship?" I should mention that he is also in the "Praise Team", the group on the stage leading the music for the "contemporary" segment of the church. So I don't say anything now, and there is a tense detente between us, another consequence of the unscriptural or even anti-Scriptural "church culture" of which he is an ardent advocate.

Well, I think I've got good grounds for believing that music is *not* worship. I'd say under other circumstances he would be right that I *should* be attending church services (as an

aside, I might ask if the "should attend church services" would apply to authentic believers in the 15th Century, before the Reformation, when the *only* church option was the thoroughly corrupted and idolatrous Roman Catholic Church). I'd say that "church culture" religious services and the music component of them fall under the judgment of Amos 5 and Isaiah 1 until the church reforms and prioritizes a few things that would actually be *worship* over the non-worship "worship" service:

### Make Disciples (Instill a Christian Worldview)

- Make church-wide corporate prayer a priority - we are commanded to pray; we are *not* commanded to have "worship" services.
- Teach the people about the Bible, its origin, structure, reliability, inerrancy, and content, and provide them the resources to "feed themselves". Biblical illiteracy is a problem inside the church as well as outside, and the people should not be expecting some teacher or pastor to spoon-feed them.
- Make the theological structure of the church clear to the people, and the reasons for holding it as true. Reformed/Calvinist churches do this reasonably well; Arminian-inclined churches don't do this explicitly; it's just "baked into" their default way of teaching, the denominational literature, etc. "No Creed But The Bible" is no help at all to anyone, besides being untrue and actually deceptive (there's *always* an interpretive framework).
- Teach apologetics in a comprehensive, age-appropriate, and strategic manner. Reinforce the people's ability and confidence, especially for the young people, to "give an account for the hope that is in you" (I Peter 3:15).
- Take a stand on Genesis, and provide resources for confidence that God created the universe the way He said He did and not per the dominant atheist origin myth. A Worldview includes an understanding of where we came from; this is too important to be left hanging (which is really just deferring to the broader culture).
- Continuously reinforce the understanding that Christian marriage includes a husband who self-sacrificially provides material, emotional, and spiritual support for his wife.
- Continuously reinforce the understanding that Christian marriage includes a wife who self-effacingly respects and submits to the spiritual leadership of her husband.
- Teach children, and expect their compliance, that they are to obey their parents and submit to their authority when they are young (living at home) and to honor, communicate with, and care for their parents when they are older (living independently).
- Expect parents to provide intellectual and spiritual training for their young children (living at home), and train and equip them to do it. Don't enable them to abdicate this responsibility by providing segregated church-based education by "experts" or staff pastors.
- Set up an environment in which the older men are teaching the younger men how to be Christian men, including their responsibilities in marriage as providers. Don't think "Men's Prayer Breakfasts" and "Men's Ministries" are an effective fulfillment of this requirement.
- Set up an environment in which the older women are teaching the younger women how to be Christian women, including their responsibilities in marriage such as home-making (that's Scripture, not bigotry). Don't think "Women's Bible Studies" or "Womens' Ministries" are an effective fulfillment of this requirement.
- And other practical things uncovered by a careful and responsible review of the commands and instructions in the New Testament

## Practice Christian Love (Equip the people to *do* something)

Disciples are people who *know* and *do*. Teaching the disciples what to believe and how to think about the world and their place in it is a necessary component. Providing them opportunities to train and then do acts of service to others is the other necessary component. I see this done in two ways:

- Ministries within the local, institutional church. That is, roles of service in the function of the church. Unquestionably, deacons are *doers* - although there needs to be care with what the actual function of the deacon is supposed to be. Cell-group pastors are ministers. Nursery workers are ministers (have to be careful with the whole nursery practice that it doesn't become yet another enabler for parents looking for opportunities to escape their child-rearing responsibilities). Certainly teachers are ministers (as long as they aren't merely the conductors for the broken "church culture" Sunday School model). Janitors and A/V people are ministers.

To the extent that they are associated with the church, foreign or domestic missionaries are ministers in the church. This one is kind of creeping into the next category, since for the most part, missionaries don't serve *in* the local church.

If the church has any ministries to the community, such as a food bank or disaster relief or Crisis Pregnancy Center or (my favorite) a Christian School, the church members involved in these activities are ministers. This is a dangerous place to be in; I've seen church groups undertake "ministries" such as feeding homeless people without or in spite of the advice of para-church ministries that are experienced with dealing with the homeless, either as a means of evangelism or worse, an attempt to feel good about themselves. This is *not* ministry.

- These are all fine, but honestly, a local, institutional church is resource-constrained. The Church is bigger than the church. The para-church ministries are part of the Body of Christ, and an opportunity for individual Christians to employ their gifts and talents in service to the Kingdom. The church might want to help the homeless - but the local Gospel Rescue Mission is going to have better resources, more experience, and effective training. The church might want to help sexual abuse victims - but any number of sexual trafficking ministries that are focused on the task would do it better. This is going to be true in just about any activity to seek justice and aid the widows, orphans, and the poor that we are expected to do.

There is a tendency or a trend for a church to participate in some para-church ministry as a group. I've seen some cases of the pastor arranging for a large group of members to serve at the Gospel Rescue Mission. I don't think this is such a good idea. In some instances, it is a good-faith effort to serve, but not everyone in the group is likely to be called to this kind of ministry, and the church is not well-served by "conscripted-by-guilt" or "once-size-fits-all". In other instances, this is a (somewhat cynical) effort to promote "church culture" by bussing the Mission residents to the Sunday morning service.

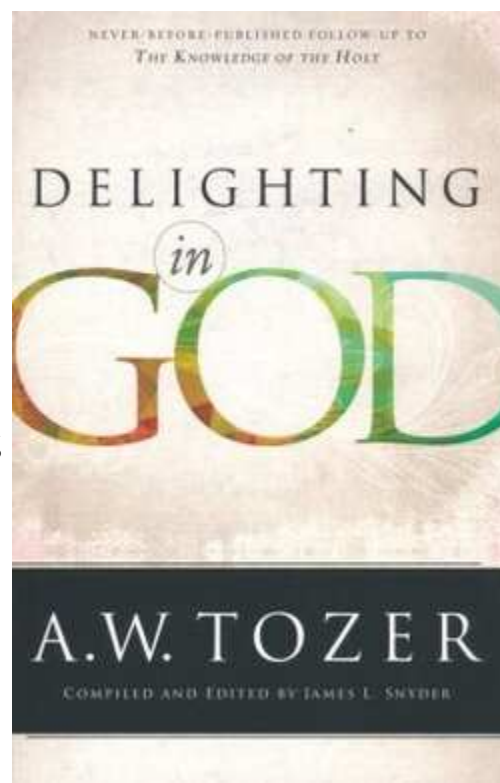
I think it would be much, much better for the pastor (or better, a volunteer who can commit the time and effort to research) to maintain a set of contacts, a "Rolo-Dex", to connect members with para-church organizations. Instead of the "spiritual gifts

inventory" that some churches do, they can do a "ministry preference" questionnaire. Members are encouraged to *do* as well as *know*, and can be encouraged, even expected, to take advantage of the questionnaire and the "Rolo-Dex". In Tucson, there is occasionally a "ministry fair"; there's even a [Tucson Ministry Alliance](#) [4], a para-church organization or a collaboration of local churches to do exactly this sort of thing.

I think that a local church that finds itself in possession of a large building that sits almost entirely empty and unused for most of the week has an excellent opportunity of participating in ministries and providing the members some visibility into these ministries by making the building available for use by ministries during the week. There's a big church mid-town that provides facilities for a crisis pregnancy center. The creation science organization I participate in holds its meetings in church buildings.

I've been listening to an audiobook recording of A.W. Tozer's [Delighting in God](#) [5]. Tozer makes the point, which I think is valid, that *knowing* God is more than a rational, intellectual matter. He agrees that we need to know the true things about God in order to know God, so there's a place for theology and Bible understanding, but it isn't sufficient. I'm fine with that as far as it goes, but Tozer wants to add something else, something apparently subjective and internal in order to *know* God. He starts to lose me when he says things like "you can't know the Spirit dwells in you by quoting promises from Scripture". I hope I'm misunderstanding him, but Scripture *is* how we know things like this. I like the Reformed concept of the [Three Levels of Faith](#) [6] in this regard: Notitia (the propositions about God's promises), Assensus (accepting that these propositions are true), and Fiducia (putting your trust in the promises). The Notitia and Assensus are the intellectual components of faith, and like James

says (James 2:19), even the demons are at that level. It is the Fiducia that is the volitional, non-intellectual level that carries the ball over the goal line. But there is no subjective intuition or *feeling* or other source of knowledge. Now, I would say that I have had my personal interactions with the Eternal, Transcendent, Infinite God, and I will praise and adore Him as I stand on the mountain or under the stars or the forest leaves. I would say that these interactions are accomplished through His Spirit (the Third Person of the Trinity) that now resides internally with me. However, I would stop short of saying I *know* God through these experiences. There's an emotional, irrational, subjective aspect to these kind of experiences, and it's dangerous to put the internally subjective in superiority to the externally objective Word of God. At any rate, at the end of each chapter in the book, and frequently mid-chapter, Tozer recites a hymn, and he is often saying how much he appreciates the old hymns and how necessary they are. Well, based on my own experiences with altered states of consciousness and emotionally-charged outbursts against the statement that "music is not worship", I am concerned that Tozer, like so many others, is moved emotionally by his hymns and his internal experiences and interprets this as



"knowing" God. I'm not so sure.

At the end of the story, in the absence of unambiguous and broadly accepted Scriptural support for believing otherwise, I'm pretty sure that "worship" music is not really worship. I don't necessarily disagree with the practice as long as it doesn't move into the borderline occult or becomes the basis for any degree of church split, but the actual work of **making disciples** must be done effectively *first*, or the music is just another part of ineffective and counter-productive "church culture".

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1. [www.1689.com/confession.html](http://www.1689.com/confession.html)
2. [www.ligonier.org/blog/4-principles-exercise-christian-liberty](http://www.ligonier.org/blog/4-principles-exercise-christian-liberty)
3. [www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/regulative-principle-worship](http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/regulative-principle-worship)
4. [www.tucsonministryalliance.org](http://www.tucsonministryalliance.org)
5. [christianaudio.com/delighting-in-god-a-w-tozer-audiobook-download](http://christianaudio.com/delighting-in-god-a-w-tozer-audiobook-download)
6. [rianniello.blogspot.com/2011/05/notitia-assensus-and-fiducia.html](http://rianniello.blogspot.com/2011/05/notitia-assensus-and-fiducia.html)

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## August 15 2021: An Analysis of the Sermon

A consideration of "Church Culture versus Christianity" would start with a rehash of my already-extant opinions or objections to the formal activities of the institutional church, but I'd like to think I can bring this subject up to date in view of the recent course of my thought. The main feature of the "worship" service in the Protestant institutional local church is the preacher's sermon, and therefore I should address it in the context of "church culture".



I've already written about preaching about seven years back; its lack of scriptural justification (see the archive including ["What is Preaching and is it Necessary?"](#) [1], starting on page 16) and the results of my conferring with my local Reformed Baptist pastor (see the archive including ["Preaching from a Preacher's Point of View"](#) [2], starting on page 4). Let me start by saying that many Christians, especially if they've stepped away from formal involvement in any local institutional church, will supplement their spiritual diet with media from para-church organizations and on-line resources. Since I seem to be moving in a Reformed or Calvinism direction, most/all of this media is oriented to Reformed authorities, such as [Ligonier Ministries](#) [3] and [The Gospel Coalition](#) [4], and to a lesser extent [9Marks](#) [5] and [White Horse Inn](#) [6]. Unsurprisingly, most of the writers for these sources are Reformed pastors, and they are all committed to the concept of the necessity for believers to be actively involved in the institutional local church, the non-negotiable centrality of the sermon, and other aspects that I regard as "church culture". The Power of a Paradigm! But again, unsurprising; these pastors found their calling in churches that emphasized "church culture" and the sermon, they already had their self-concept of a pastor as defending and promoting "church culture" and developing and delivering sermons, they



went to seminary to be taught by professors who (being pastors themselves) emphasized "church culture" and preaching sermons, emerged to find positions in churches that had high expectations for the preservation of their "church culture" and to get quality sermons, and entered a fellowship of other pastors who likewise cherish "church culture" and regard the sermon as the most important part of their job. It's pretty monolithic, and it takes an outsider to question the Paradigm.

With Reformed pastors, it's even harder. While a (Arminian) Southern Baptist or Nazarene or (mildly charismatic) Assemblies of God pastor might think his sermon is important and valuable and necessary and effective (more to say about this later), they might be hard put to say "why". In the Reformed tradition, the Sacraments (Communion and Baptism) are "means of grace", instruments by which God transmits an intangible benefit to His people. The sermon is also a "means of grace", because it is the Word of God - and somehow more effective as such when it is spoken and heard rather than merely read. I've read and heard Reformed pastors speaking about the sermon and the Word of God in almost magical terms. In fact, I mentioned my *bete noir* - the departure of 60% to 80% of young people from the church - to my local Reformed Baptist pastor, and he dismissed it as "young people just need to hear more good sermons". How do you deal with a paradigm as iron-clad as that? You don't need intentional disciple-making, you don't need to consider how well you are fulfilling the Great Commission; all you need is to deliver a sufficient quantity of magical sermons!

I don't know what I had been thinking or reading at some point in the recent past, but after I had gone to bed, I couldn't sleep due to all the thoughts circulating in my head, with new avenues and aspects presenting themselves while I was trying to get my brain to shut down. Finally I got up and went to the living room, turned the light on, picked up a pen and a sheet of scratch paper, and wrote down these thoughts. The following is the analysis of the institution of the sermon resulting from my early-morning distress.

## Subject

The first and most obvious and important aspect of a public address or lecture, which includes sermons, is that it has a *subject*, or *content*. From what I've seen in a variety of churches, there seems to be three, maybe four general categories for the content of sermons:

- **Expositional** - basically, a Bible study. This seems to be the most popular form in orthodox Protestant churches today. The "9Marks" club for Reformed pastors is always posting articles like "Seven Reasons You Should Preach Through Zephaniah". I don't see how anyone could think a church-wide Bible study of half an hour each week can do much, but there you go.
- **Application** - an attempt to communicate some facet of a proper Christian lifestyle, or perhaps in leftist-minded churches, to inspire to some political or social activism.
- **Topical** - expound on some point of doctrine or some current social or cultural issue. I don't know that I've sat under many of these kind of sermons, but it seems to have been a popular form for the Puritan divines.
- **Evangelistic** - the sermon is focused squarely on the Gospel, and calls for a personal commitment. "Revival" sermons are almost entirely of this sort. Often, the Gospel gets worked into some of the other styles of sermons, as a minor or secondary theme or even a tacked-on (and often strained) "I've got to cover all the bases" sort of thing. I appreciate what I encountered in a Reformed setting in which the liturgy (customary order of service) includes a Gospel address, sort of a mini-sermon separate from the main sermon, something of around five to ten minutes dedicated unambiguously to

the Gospel and the Plan of Salvation and Christ's Atonement for universal human sin.

## Composition

Most of my exposure to sermons has been in Southern Baptist and non-denominational churches, and there's considerable variety even among these. The sermons I've heard in Reformed or "high-church" (a mostly-orthodox PCUSA church) settings is shorter on the anecdote and humor parts, but they still show up. In general, when a pastor develops his sermon, he includes a number of features:

- The Text - typically at least five verses, sometimes as many as twenty. When the preacher is doing a "Bible Book Series", these verses are the next unified section in the book of interest; this is why "Bible Book Series" can run for months. Usually, other Scripture outside the primary text are called up to support or reinforce the point currently being made.
- The Commentary - after reading the text, the sermon picks it apart by interpreting or explaining the verses. I suppose there is some value in getting the perspective of the pastor that he gained in his own studies or perhaps carried out of seminary versus reading through the commentary of Jamieson, Fausset & Brown or Matthew Henry or some more recent equivalent. In the "expositional" style of sermon, the Text and the Commentary are the predominant features.
- The Application - the pastor declares how the teaching should affect the beliefs and lifestyles of the congregants. If the text is more historical, there may be little to no application; if it is doctrinal, most of the non-textual rhetoric will be application. Obviously, in "application" style sermons, the Text and the Application will be the predominant features, and depending on how orthodox the church is, the Text part may be little to nonexistent (there are sermons in apostate churches, too, which may include some Scriptural text even if they don't have any grounds to give them any authenticity or authority).
- Humor - The pastor will tell one or more relevant jokes, or put a humorous twist on some commentary or application statement, including bad puns, apparently to put the audience at ease. I don't know why pastors do this, if they were taught this way or this is just their rhetorical style. Not all pastors do. I can't envision Ambrose or Jonathan Edwards putting any humor in their sermons, maybe Spurgeon or Calvin but probably not - seems to be a more "modern" feature.
- Anecdotes - The pastor will narrate some personal experience (or sometimes the experience of a family member, to their embarrassment) or a bit of recent news to illustrate a point or provide an object lesson. Again, I haven't read many sermons by preachers of an earlier age, but I just can't see Ambrose or Edwards doing this unless the bit of news was the subject of the sermon, to declare how the congregation ought to think about a contemporary phenomenon.

## Intention

Obviously, the primary reason a pastor develops and delivers a sermon is because he's being paid to do it. He wouldn't keep his job if the quality dropped off, or the quantity - I've heard complaints by "church people" if they think their pastor relies too much on guest speakers. But beyond the merely utilitarian, why does a pastor preach? What is the purpose of the sermon?

- Life-Change - I've read (yes, in a Reformed context) that a sermon is more for Life-Change than Information. I'm sure this is the theoretical high point for all pastors, and

how much the theory attains reality is a question to be treated in a bit. "Application" style sermons fit the "Life-Change" mold better than "expositional" style sermons; it's hard to imagine how even a Reformed "magical" sermon on the Genealogies would have much potential of "Life-Change".

- Information - The transmission of Biblical understanding. The One Valid Historical Reason I will give the sermon is that, in the day, especially in the Early Church (for which we have scant records, and little to no explicit mention of sermons in at least the secular histories, e.g., [Pliny the Younger](#) [7]), when writings were hard to come by and literacy wasn't particularly high, it was necessary for the pastor to instruct his flock in the Scriptures. I suppose this was true in the early part of the Reformation as well. However, as time progressed and the availability of literature and the ability to use it proliferated, the necessity of "feeding the flock" should have diminished and the "teaching the flock to feed themselves" should have increased. Besides, how likely is the uptake of Scriptural information going to be in a thirty-minute sermon once a week?
- Entertainment - I'm sure no pastor is going to consciously admit to preaching as a form of entertainment for "church people", but I'm convinced it is. We have to keep the dues-paying members happy. I'm not sure how else a pastor can derive a feeling of accomplishment when an attender shakes his hand after the service and exclaims with relish how much "she enjoyed his sermon".

To the extent that a "seeker friendly" service is intended to draw those unbelieving seekers in, a pastor might consciously craft his sermon to be entertaining, and not merely to "church people". This appears to be the intent behind the sermons delivered at Saddleback; however, the "worship" service at Saddleback is aimed at evangelizing the "seekers", not growing the believers (for which there are other more intentional venues), a nuance lost on the traditionalist pastors who criticize and denounce Rick Warren and Saddleback church for "degrading" the sermon. Whether you agree with it or not, the Saddleback vision for the "service" falls outside of my criticism of "church culture" (although using the trappings of "church culture" to evangelize unbelievers is still problematic for me).

- Emotional Manipulation - I've been in too many youth camp and youth rally services in which the guest speaker makes an appeal to the emotions of the young people. I've been in more than a few "tent revival" style evangelistical services in which the same technique was used. You might say, "but those don't count; those are special events, not Sunday morning church services", but I have seen the same sort of appeal-to-fear in Sunday morning sermons, at least for those hyper-evangelistical sorts of soul-winning pastors. The spirit of Charles Finney lives on in the pulpits. It's hard to read the famous Jonathan Edwards "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" and not see it as an emotional appeal. I suppose Peter's speech on Pentecost could be seen in some aspects as emotional manipulation: "And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, 'Be saved from this perverse generation' (Acts 2:40), but then Acts is descriptive history, not prescriptive doctrine.

## Persistence

The concept of "sermon notes" has been around for some time. Almost certainly in modern times, since in those days for which I allow the One Valid Historical Reason, they didn't have notebooks and ballpoint pens any more than they had their own copy of the Scriptures and the ability to read and write. When I was a good little "club member", I took sermon notes. I probably still have some of them. I never reviewed them, certainly not intentionally.

In more recent times, the widespread practice of including a "fill in the blank" sheet in the bulletin for sermon notes has been adopted. There is no advice or expectation or instruction to keep the notes, put them in a binder, and review them periodically. I guess the idea is that, such and such a percentage of information is retained if you hear it, and the percentage goes up significantly if you also write it. Although the amount of writing involved in filling in three to six blanks on a half-sheet of paper is pretty trivial compared to taking actual notes (as in a class, as I was doing). Especially when the pastor feels the need to pause in his sermon and announce "the word for the second blank is...". Or maybe this is as much as a pastor cares to impose upon the congregants for which he is responsible for their spiritual growth.

The pastor has a vested interest in the persistence or effectiveness of the teaching. As an engineer, I know that an accurate assessment of the success of your efforts must be based on measurements. If I am responsible for a project to meet its requirements, I cannot do this without testing. Our managers cannot determine the health of a project without watching the hours and money expended relative to schedule milestones. Neither engineers nor managers base their opinion about the state of their responsibilities on what they *feel* about it; that is, a subjective basis. In the same way, a pastor who will render an account to God for his responsibility to "feed the flock" and "make disciples" and "teach them to obey" should not go by their "gut", but adopt some sort of objective metric. I am convinced that if pastors evaluated the persistent effectiveness of their sermons by an objective evaluation of the lifestyles (assuming "Life-Change" is the most important intent of sermons) or their state of knowledge, they would start looking for ways to modify, supplement, or replace the institution of the sermon in their churches.

## Theology

Preaching sermons isn't just "the Bible". Teaching in a church or independent Bible studies isn't just "the Bible". If it were just "the Bible", then merely reading the Bible would be sufficient. If a passage in Scripture has an obvious meaning (or even an obvious identity as a cohesive passage), then the Text can merely be read and the half-hour of commentary can be bypassed. This is obviously not the case; therefore, there is *always* an interpretive structure, a theology, whether it is explicitly acknowledged or implicitly injected.

- Every tradition will have its own basic theological stance, whether Arminianism (as most evangelical churches will be), Calvinism, various Anabaptist-derived traditions, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Coptic, Nestorian, etc.
- Possibly the pastor has developed his own interpretive structure, such as "Robert-Smithism".
- Perhaps there is a postmodern "this is what the text means to us today" (and next year, in a different sermon, it may mean something different).
- Possibly there is a spiritualistic or mystical "this is what God/The Spirit has spoken to me this week" - how much this may describe Pentecostal or full-bore Charismatic sects, I could not say.

The unavoidable theological system should be acknowledged and taught. From what I've seen, the Reformed people are fairly conscientious about this. The Arminian folk, which includes the typical Southern Baptist church, not so much; the [Baptist Faith and Message \[8\]](#) and the two-page "Statement of Belief" that most churches, especially the non-denominational ones, post on their websites are so thin and shallow as to accommodate a broad range of more extensive frameworks. As a recent example, a man (formerly a pastor himself) was teaching the "Limited Atonement" concept in his Sunday School class, and the

pastor took him aside and admonished him that he couldn't teach that in this church, even though neither the "Baptist Faith and Message" nor the church's "Statement of Belief" said anything about the nature of the Atonement or its extent. There was an implicit theology active in the church, but it didn't appear until it was challenged. The Christians in the congregation, especially the young people, deserve better than that.

A final word on the theology or interpretive structure inherent in sermons: Those pastors who go to seminary to train for their calling study [hermeneutics](#) [9], or the methods of interpreting Bible texts. It could be that a seminary teaches hermeneutics with an infusion of its denominational theology, or it could be that hermeneutics as a "science" is largely free from theological slant. In any event, if the pastor is going to use his hermeneutical training to construct his sermons, from the perspective of "teaching the flock to feed themselves", it would be valuable to teach his flock hermeneutics. To pass on what he was taught. It always amazes me that pastors are taught many things in seminary and the default concept seems to be that these subjects are for pastors, not laypeople. I find this ridiculous. Pastors should teach (at an age-appropriate level, and probably in Sunday School or Church Training classes rather than from the pulpit) the useful arts they themselves received.

## Church Culture

What I put forth above represents my analysis and critique of the institution of the sermon so universal in Protestant churches. I had already written upon the Scriptural support for the institution of the sermon, and found it wanting. This little series treats the problem of "church culture", so how does the sermon fit into church culture?

There are only three sources for a practice in the community of believers - Scriptural commandment, human tradition, and human innovation. We can mark the last one right off; the use of drums and electric guitars in the "worship" service may be an innovation in the past 60 or so years, but the sermon has been around since the early centuries of the church. I find that the support for a command to deliver Sunday morning sermons in Scripture is weak, in spite of the claims of preachers, seminarians, and theologians to find such support, much the same way they find Scriptural support for other undoubtedly traditional practices such as infant baptism and teetotaling and a universal individual imperative for evangelism. I conclude that the practice of the sermon is therefore traditional. The question that remains is, is it a helpful or at least innocuous tradition or is it even harmful?

Jesus condemned the Pharisees for, among many other things, "in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9). When a tradition serves a purpose for the Kingdom, it might have a practical value, as long as it never gets mistaken for a divine command. Such a purpose may have been in play in a pre-literate age, from the early church up to the Reformation and the introduction of automated printing. However, traditions have a disturbing and perhaps inevitable inclination to be so mistaken for a commandment, and displace the practice of what *actually is* a commandment. This is what I observe, Christians thinking (rather, being instructed) that they fulfill the command of God to "go to church" and listen to a sermon, and they do *not* practice what Scripture actually commands, such as training their own children in the doctrines of the Faith, and preparing themselves to "always be ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you" (I Peter 3:15), and many or most other expectations of a Christian lifestyle and worldview.

I think this danger is especially acute for the pastors of these churches, who will be held to account to their Master, not for the faithfulness of producing a "quality" (whatever that

means) sermon every week, but for "feeding the sheep" (John 21:16) and to "make disciples... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt. 28:17). When pastors think they have satisfied their duty by delivering a sermon, but do not determine how well their congregants have actually adopted a Christian Worldview or have increased their understanding of Scripture or are living an authentic Christian lifestyle (and I have witnessed many pastors who are confident that these things are so when it is manifestly apparent that they are *not* - pastors are just as susceptible to self-delusion as business managers, perhaps more so), are they putting themselves at risk for judgment? When pastors and Christian teachers and thought-leaders instruct believers (new and old) that they need to be regularly attending church services, with the primary benefit being the hearing of religious lectures, or worse, teach that the institution of the sermon is a command of God, how much are they following the example of the Scribes and Pharisees?

The proof of the "church culture" question is in the pudding:

- Apostate mainline "churches", non-Christian "churches" (e.g., Mormon), and even atheist "churches" have sermons delivered in their Sunday morning services
- Christian influence and Biblical literacy is in precipitous decline in the West in spite of the last hundred years of faithful delivery of sermons by church pastors
- 60 to 80% of young people are leaving the church, and many of them abandoning their Christian faith (and no, it is *NOT* because "they just haven't heard enough good sermons")
- The statistical similarity in lifestyle and outlook (rate of divorce, view of homosexuality and transgenderism, embrace of secular political positions, etc.) between "church people" and non-"church people" is increasing

I'm sure you could add to the list of indicators.

I keep hoping and praying for a Revival or a new Reformation, even another Great Awakening. I know these things are sovereign acts of God. But if I don't see the concern for these things among God's people rising to the level of dissatisfaction with "church culture" as we have known it in the West for the past hundred years, especially to the point of the Body of Christ (the *real* Church) preferring prayer meetings to "worship" services, I fear my hopes are in vain. I am not necessarily opposed to the practice of a sermon on Sunday mornings, but if the sermons are not an appeal to the church members for a new direction, a vision for change, and are willingly accepted as such, but remain mere entertainment for "church people", then I can't approve the practice or endorse the practice by my attendance on them.

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## August 29 2021: Sunday School Could Be Better



The third major leg of the problematic "church culture" platform is the institution of Sunday School. Now, as I was growing up and my Air Force family moved around, we would visit a lot of churches and I (wearing my clip-on tie) would get stuck in the children's Sunday School class while my parents went to the adult Sunday School class.

Afterward, they would collect me so we could sit in the "worship" service and sing our religious songs and listen (well, they would listen; I would doodle on the bulletin) to the religious lecture, and then we would do our plastic smiles and shake hands and make small-talk after the service was done, en route to the car and Sunday dinner at a cafeteria or small restaurant. Thoroughly middle-class America Sunday morning "church culture". We always looked for Southern Baptist churches, and after settling into our new "church home", every Sunday morning I would be in children's Sunday School. In California and Virginia I was in the youth Sunday School. After finally returning to Tucson and living with my Aunt Sue and attending (I was still operating on my cultural default; that 60% to 80% stuff didn't hit me personally... or at least not then) First Southern Baptist, I was in the college Sunday School. After graduation, I started working in the youth group and teaching Sunday School. After I was married to Jerri, we attended the young adults Sunday School, and I taught occasionally. When a variety of conflicts drove us out of First Southern, we would visit various Baptist, Assemblies of God, Nazarene, Brethren, and non-denominational churches and always sit in their young adults Sunday School class. After we finally settled at another Southern Baptist church, I started attending and later led the young adults Sunday School class, then became the de facto volunteer lay youth pastor and led youth Sunday School. After my "epiphany", for quite a while, I would drift from church to church, looking at their literature, sitting through their "worship" services, and usually sitting in their middle-age adult Sunday School classes. This historical sketch is to validate my credentials as someone who has broad first-hand experience with the institution of Sunday School. It's all personal, it's mostly (but not entirely) Southern Baptist, but it isn't a detailed "scientific" study, either. I can only generalize from what I experienced myself and what other Christians tell me about their experiences.

The general pattern is this: Sunday School, as practiced in contemporary Protestant churches, consists of four items;

- Age Segregation - Children are removed from their parents and put under adults (often but not always parents of young children themselves) who have been trained (not really) and equipped (as in, given children's Sunday School literature) to work

with younger children. Teens are removed from their parents and put under adults (ditto) and the youth pastor. Adults are put in classes with their age peers. Usually there is finer gradation, such as separating bands of school grades (e.g., 1-3rd grade and 4-6th grade, middle school separate from high school) and the age of adults (Singles, Young-Marrieds, Seniors, None-of-the-Above (i.e., Middle-age)). Within the system, this makes sense, as children in theory would not benefit from the instructional level appropriate for adults. Occasionally, there is a segregation in view of life-setting, such as separating college-attending adults from non-college-attending but not-married Singles. I've never seen a "married with young children" class distinct from a "married with teen children" class distinct from "married with college-attending children" class.

- Entertainment - in children's classes, this involves craft projects, such as gluing macaroni to paper plates or making scribbly crayon drawings (intended to impress your parents, for them to hang on the refrigerator door). In youth classes, this involves silly games like relay races or eating chocolate syrup out of a baby diaper or the youth pastor making a fool of himself. In adult classes, this normally involves just more of the light social non-spiritual chitter-chatter that passes for "fellowship" in "church culture", and is often split along sex boundaries with the men talking golf or football or politics and the women discussing whatever they discuss. At all levels, there is often (but not always) "refreshments", most often a breakfast-like spread of doughnuts and orange juice. Also at all levels, there is often (but not always) sing-along music; children singing simple, energetic religious songs; youth singing contemporary Christian music songs and choruses accompanied by recorded music or a live band of their peers; and adults singing "worship" choruses or hymns accompanied by someone strumming a guitar or playing an out-of-tune piano.
- The Lesson - in almost all cases, the lesson is drawn from some predigested source, either a denominational literature division (in Southern Baptist circles, this is [Lifeway Christian Resources](#) in Nashville [1]) or from some third-party or para-church literature distributor. This literature includes a teacher's guide, student guides, and some extent of supporting literature (posters, worksheets, craft supplies) of varying quality. The lesson is structured like a sermon, with a little bit of Scripture text and a lot of commentary or life-application. Like exposition-style sermon series, the lessons are linked in a Bible book. Whether by instruction in the teacher's guide or by inculcation of long experience in "Sunday School culture", the teacher solicits student feedback. In children's classes, this solicitation is often in terms of a question with an obvious answer from a small set of possible responses, leading to the phenomenon of the "Sunday School Answer": The student is usually not wrong in answering "Jesus", and I've observed (and experienced) the mental processing to determine whether "Jesus" is actually an appropriate answer to the teacher's question. In youth classes, sometimes the same "Sunday School Answer" type of question is called for, and the young people will either cynically play along or remain silent, forcing the teacher to answer his own question. Other times the question is an opportunity for the young people to respond with a snarky answer, or an inside joke that their peers catch, or a pop-culture related answer that confuses the teacher. In adult classes, the solicitation is sometimes in the form of a question about the material but often it is more of a "What do you think?", inviting them to offer their own thoughts. This always annoyed me, in part because unless the student had actually studied the material before (and even adult students rarely or never do) or are spiritually mature themselves (and understand the material already, and the lesson is spurious for them), the teacher faces responding to wrong answers in some affirming manner.

- Prayer - in almost every case, especially in adult classes, the session ends with prayer. Sometimes in children's classes, this prayer is a teacher-led Lord's Prayer or very generic formal prayer (as in, the style of public school prayers before 1960). Usually, however, the prayer time starts with accepting requests (usually about sick relatives) and then one or a number of students offer the prayer after being called upon by the teacher. I believe in children's classes, this prayer time is intended to be more instructional or to the formation of prayer habits in the children. This changes in time to more of an expectation or hope that the prayers will have some effectiveness. Occasionally, in adult classes and even some youth classes, a prayer list will be maintained and maybe even distributed.

Looking back at all this, it seems to me that the actual purpose of the "lesson" is entertainment. Except for the children, most of the students have already heard the material before. Often the "lesson" is of historical or controversial interest, such as the "Missionary Journeys of Paul" and the Revelation. The feedback-response loop is just to keep the students involved, not (as in a math or science class) to determine if knowledge transfer is actually occurring. There is no expectation on the students (in youth class, we quit letting the students take the "quarterly" handbooks home because we knew that they wouldn't get used at home and they wouldn't be brought back from home), no individual practice ("homework"), no assessment of their state of knowledge ("tests"), and no conditions upon their age-dependent "graduation" - and no evidence that they achieved anything ("certificate" or "diploma"). Worse to me, the actual content of the "lesson" is so shallow as to be essentially useless. After about a year of using the youth-appropriate Lifeway literature in my Sunday School class, I was so disgusted with it that I just quit using it and "rolled my own". I don't know if those teens ever benefited from the personal effort I put into study and lesson preparation; I'd like to think I did a good job, but even if it were so, it would be a brief glimmer of light before the students sank back into the tasteless mud of denominational-standard Sunday School literature.

Furthermore, I have reason to suspect the lesson content of actually doing harm. In their [Already Gone](#) book [2], Ken Ham and Britt Beemer make the case that teaching children "cutesy" Bible stories, like the Ark with giraffe heads sticking out of it, actually implants the idea that these stories are just that - fiction, myths. And that furthermore, teens are not given the answers and the defense equipment they need to face doubts and hostile challenges. I could add to this my observation that parents are not actually taught, not in any useful or applicable way, how to raise their children. Young people are not taught where sex came from, or what marriage is for or how it is supposed to work, or how husbands are supposed to love their wives and wives are supposed to respect their husbands. They might get a brief exposure to this in their "pre-marital counselling", but certainly nothing in Sunday School. Nothing to counter the barrage of false and destructive concepts they are receiving every day in the culture. And that's just the life-application part; *nobody* is learning the reliability and inerrancy of the Bible or any other apologetic subject.

Note that the age segregation, however much it might be theoretically justified for age-appropriate instruction, actually expects and enables Christian parents to abdicate their Biblical mandate to instruct their own children in the faith. They are encouraged to entrust the spiritual development of their children to the "experts" in the children and youth Sunday School departments. Thus, in addition to being non-Scriptural and potentially harmful, the "church cultural" Sunday School actually works *against* the commands of Scripture. I've heard it said that "Christian parents are acting responsibly for their children's education by delegating to trusted teachers", but this is a theoretical point that doesn't work in reality. In

yet another aspect of the institutional church being more influenced by the broader culture than being an influencer of it, the model of public school (children being raised by expert educators in virtual isolation from the parents) has been adopted by the church. In theory, parents *could* be more proactive in following up on their children's education in public schools, but in practice this is limited to vague answers to casual questions ("what did you do in school today, Johnny?"), possibly helping with math homework, a quarterly grade report card, and an annual parent-teacher conference. In Sunday School, there isn't even *that*, and parents are entirely ignorant of their children's spiritual education. There's no delegation going on here, this is abandonment.

This is not to declare that everybody is doing Sunday School like this. When I was attending the Reformed Baptist place in Tucson, the pastor would lead *the* Sunday School class for all ages, and we went through the "London Confession of 1689" together, and then a Reformed systematic theology. At a major Southern Baptist church here, at least several years ago (not any more), at least a few topical Sunday School classes were being taught - classes where the object was to actually master a subject, not merely be entertained for an hour. And some churches, particularly non-denominational ones, don't have a Sunday School at all. But these are exceptions to the "church culture" rule; when a church has a "traditional" Sunday School program, in my experience, it looks a lot like the above.

So, this is what "church culture" Sunday School (in general) is now, and why I think it is broken. There is no "Sunday School" commanded in Scripture; rather, there are plenty of "teach the believers" commandments which Sunday School manifestly does not do. So if it is not Scriptural, when did it enter "church culture"? [Sunday School started out](#) [3] as actual *school* held on *Sunday* for children working in the factories during the Industrial Revolution. Sunday was the only day they had off (the culture was still "Christendom", so there were still Sabbath laws). The object was basic literacy. Since the standard text in Western Civilization at that time was the Bible, the Bible was the textbook for learning to read. Writing, civics, morality and hygiene were also cultural norms, and thus were subjects for Sunday School. Over the years, the churches coopted the Sunday School movement and made it more explicitly religious. As child labor laws and public education came into the picture, the basic educational role of Sunday School was eclipsed. As time went on, other applications were added to Sunday School, such as evangelism and church growth. Tucson Baptist Temple was (is, by another name) a large Baptist (not Southern) church in Tucson that became huge in the 1960s by its [aggressive Sunday School bus ministry](#) [4]. The big white Tucson Baptist Temple buses were still rolling around town on Sunday mornings in the late 1980s. To this day, the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board recognizes the value of Sunday School in evangelism. "Outreach" was always associated with Sunday School - teachers and officers were expected to participate in church "Outreach" to follow up on visitors. In most cases, the (weak) Nashville Sunday School lesson stuck to its plan, but sometimes there was a tacked-on Gospel clause at the end. More rarely, an entire lesson might be committed to evangelism.

If this is what Sunday School was in the past and how it entered evangelical "church culture" and degenerated to what it is now, what was there before the Industrial Revolution, before Sunday School? I can't say what there might have been in terms of intentional religious education after the early church and through the centuries of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox ascendancy, but certainly there was *catechesis*. [In the early church](#) [5] (and perhaps some more serious-minded churches now), persons who had responded to the Gospel and professed belief in Christ and were therefore candidates for baptism were provided a course of doctrine - *catechesis* - to assure they understood what they were

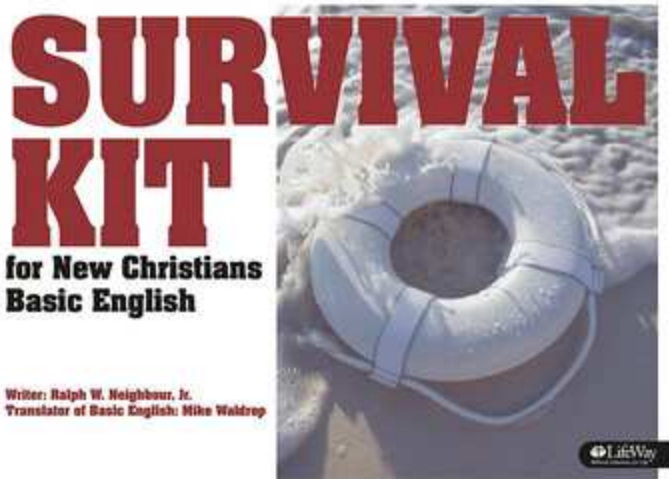
signing up for. These "almost Christians" were known as *catechumens*. I understand that additionally their lifestyles were examined for evidence of true conversion. As infant baptism became more prevalent, the catechesis followed baptism as the child grew old enough to be taught, and I understand that at some point, as a "rite of passage" in "church culture" (again, not commanded by Scripture, but only a tradition of men - a more useful tradition in this case), the young person would be examined, perhaps to respond to catechism questions with the correct responses. This is *confirmation*, and appears to be practised to this day in paedobaptist denominations; at least, "confirmation classes" are a common feature of such churches.

After the Protestant Reformation, several catechisms were drafted, and a few of them are still in use, such as the [Heidelberg Catechism](#) [6] and the [Westminster Shorter Catechism](#) [7]. Baptists don't tend to use catechisms anymore, [but they used to](#) [8], and such Baptist catechisms include the [Baptist Catechism of 1693](#) [9] (updated in 2004) and the popular [Keach's Catechism](#) [10]. It would probably come as a shock to many Baptists, but Charles Spurgeon, the "Prince of Preachers", was a Reformed Baptist, and he endorsed the Keach Catechism. I see that the Keach Catechism is used by the contemporary [Silicon Valley Reformed Baptist Church](#) [11]. While I was attending services at Tucson Reformed Baptist Church, they started a children's catechism class, and this was likely also Keach's Catechism. A more recent catechism developed by a number of influential pastors is the [New City Catechism](#) [12]; I bought a few of these and looked it over; it seems pretty good, so I was confident in passing them out to my own adult children.

Even (Arminian) Southern Baptist churches recognize the need for some sort of basic information for new believers. Lifeway publishes the [Survival Kit](#) [13], which is available in the form of a study course (teacher's handbook, student booklets). When First Southern was still conducting "Training Union" (archaic; more recently "Church Training"), at one point I was leading a Survival Kit "class" to a group consisting of some young people who had recently professed Christ. Like everything else about the contemporary church, it was so thin and superficial that it was almost worthless, and once again I was contemplating "rolling my

own", but the four-week course was over before I could really act on my inclination. Unlike catechism or "confirmation" classes, the Survival Kit course was not a regular offering.

I'd have to expand on "Church Training" a bit. Unlike Sunday School, which was Bible study (lite) and Trojan-horse evangelism and the denomination-preferred Church Growth strategy, "Church Training" was (mildly) intentional and topical. True to its name, the topics served the interests of the church, such as training for Sunday School teachers and officers, and missions emphasis. In times past, young people would study Southern Baptist missions in program called "Royal Ambassadors" and "Girls' Auxiliary" (archaic; later





"Girls in Action"), which were ongoing activities for children up through the teen years (although most "Royal Ambassadors" dropped out, and the teen girls graduated into "Acteens"). However, it seems that "church culture" doesn't really countenance any sort of intentionality, however weak, and eventually "Church Training" died of the lack of interest in Sunday evening activities. My parents told me that in a more rural setting, people would come to the church on Sunday to make a day of it, but as more people commuted via automobile, having discharged the "church culture" obligation and/or entertainment on Sunday morning, it was tough for the clergy to motivate enough people to return in the evening to make it worthwhile. It is quite rare anymore, as far as I've seen, for any church to conduct Sunday evening activities, and when there is any such, it tends to be a less-formal "church culture" activity like Sunday morning "worship" service, with religious songs and yet another religious lecture.

I might also mention that, while it isn't exactly catechism or a formal religious education course, in more recent times the [Alpha course](#) [14] has appeared. It started in England (which is some point of hope for me, for while the state-recognized Anglican church is practically apostate and effectively moribund, there are still orthodox and driven pastors and Christian thought leaders to put together something like Alpha) and spread all over the world. I never went through it (I wish I had), but I get the impression that it is reasonably orthodox and thoughtfully ecumenical (although there is a separate Roman Catholic version). It was perhaps a bit of a fad that peaked around, oh, fifteen or twenty years ago. For a while, you could drive down the street and expect to see an Alpha sandwich-board advertisement outside a church building. Not so much anymore; however, Alpha is still publishing and widely distributing the materials. It's possible that I never personally encountered Alpha because Southern Baptist churches strongly tend to not use anything not produced by Lifeway.

There are two other evangelical phenomena for religious education for children that I ought to mention. The first is Vacation Bible School. This is a one to two-week event held during the three-month public-school summer break for a few hours a day. The actual intention is for non-believing parents in the community to see the posters and the banners (and occasionally door-hangers and mail-out flyers) and take advantage of an opportunity to entertain their otherwise-idle children. As a consequence, VBS suffers from the defects of Sunday School, only magnified - "cutesy" Bible stories (that are suspect for "innoculating" children against actual Biblical truth), religious songs, crafts, physical activities, and heaps of age-targeted evangelism. At the end of the VBS time, the parents are invited to a service so they can experience that parental pride-and-joy of watching their little dears gather on the stage to sing their newly-learned songs. Of course, there is an evangelism-style sermon, and afterwards the families can take all the glued-macaroni and scribbled-crayon crafts home to hang on the refrigerator. When I was a good little "church person" myself, I helped in VBS, but now, I don't know whether it isn't actually worse than nothing at all. What's even more interesting to me is that Answers in Genesis, home of Ken Ham and the leader in monitoring and assessing the "60 to 80% of young people leaving the church" phenomenon, produce [their own VBS materials](#) [15], ostensibly designed to avoid the fictionalizing effect of traditional Sunday School and VBS approaches. I would expect that the AiG VBS bundle would appeal to non-denominational churches that don't have a "baked-in" commitment. I would expect Southern Baptist churches would never even consider an alternative to Lifeway-produced VBS materials, and this would probably likewise be true of other major denominations.

The other recent institution is [Awana Clubs](#) [16]. Awana (which is allegedly an acronym for



"Approved Workmen Are Not Afraid", vis. 2 Tim. 2:15), is an age-graded spectrum of groups for children from pre-school to high school, each with their own moniker ("Cubbies", "Sparks", "Trek", etc.) and theme song and workbooks. From what I saw (as my own children were involved in Awana), the idea was to memorize Scripture passages and recite them from memory to an adult worker who would mark off the workbook and award points that could be traded for goodies in the Awana Store. The idea was "I will hide Your word in my heart..." (Psalm 119:11) and "Train up a child in the way he should go..." (Prov. 22:6). There are also evangelistic lessons as well. Apparently, at the older youth levels, the lessons get more into Worldview and Apologetics subjects; however, I didn't see that there was much interest in Awana by youth pastors, so it sort of petered out after elementary school age levels. This is a pity, as I see Awana as a superior replacement for Sunday School... but here again, Awana *isn't* Sunday School, it is *outside* "church culture", so while it is tolerable on Sunday evening or Wednesday night, it would *never* be permitted to replace traditional Sunday School.

This concludes an overview of the nature and defects of Sunday School, its history and entrance as a non-Scriptural tradition into "church culture", and some contemporary alternatives or supplements in terms of Christian education. Now the question must be asked, is the institution of Sunday School irredeemably adverse, or can it be corrected and improved?

To start with, there must be a recognition of need and willingness. As noted previously, any change in the behavior of a church must be a top-down affair, driven by the one man who is responsible for "teach them to observe" (Matt. 28:20) and accountable to his Lord for doing his best to accomplish it. If the pastor is assured (even if self-deceived) that all is right with his congregation, that the members of his church are increasing in Christian understanding and lifestyle and expression of a Christian Worldview (against all trends in Western Civilization), then he's not going to be willing to alter anything about the "church culture" prevalent in his own organization. On the other hand, if he is willing to work toward Reformation, but he is unable to convince the leading, most influential members, let alone the "rank and file", of the need for Reformation, then he's in one of *those* churches. But if the pastor is of a mind to challenge non-Biblical, counterproductive "church culture", particularly the model of Christian education or Sunday School, and the people are willing to follow the lead, then there are some things that can be considered.

A Reformation of Christian Education would have two principles:

- Intentionality - an objective purpose, with measurable outcomes
- Consistency with Scripture - any program of Christian education must accomplish what Scripture demands and not conflict or supercede with anything else that God commands in His Scriptures

Now, in times past, and yet in some hold-out places (especially in some (not all) Christian schools), there was a good deal of intentionality in education at all age levels. There was a set of objectives for all grade levels in elementary and secondary schools, in part established by state and local school boards and the federal Department of Education, and in part informed by professors of education and their research. Schools, even school districts, designated curricula in discrete topics such as science, mathematics, history, literature, civics, etc., and individual teachers drafted teaching plans or syllabi accordingly. Students were presented with the information (there was no "synthesis" in classrooms), verbal and written exercises (in-class participation, quizzes, homework) was conducted, tests were taken to assess individual understanding, and grades were assigned. At the end of

the course, students were promoted to the next level in the overall curriculum or demoted to repeat the course or even to remedial work.

This describes the education system in place in the United States and the Western nations in my generation and before, and is arguably the driving force for our civilizational success and the ascendancy of America to moral, technical, and economic influence to the rest of the world (however much this ascendancy has been corrupted and squandered in recent decades). It is also unquestionably *intentional*. Now, I'm not saying that everything in this elaborate (and ponderous) scheme must be implemented in a Christian education program in the local church, but I'd say it would serve as a model or goal. Besides, if the schoolmarm in the one-room schoolhouse with five to thirty young people across a wide spectrum of ages (as in many places on the frontier and even/especially Arizona Territory) can manage to provide an education for up to sixth grade, which can be profitably used by the students in later life, it really isn't too much for even a small church to adopt the basic components of the scheme.

Here are some aspects to consider in structuring a church Christian Education program;

- The job is too big for the pastor. The pastor has many responsibilities (which may or may not include preparing a weekly sermon), and as any good manager, he must *delegate*. Most medium to large (at least Southern Baptist) churches would have a staff position of Minister of Education. This seems to have disappeared. Whether it was one individual so responsible or a committee or set of elders, he/she/they would establish the curricula and teaching strategies, and monitor the success in some objective way (a standardized test like the SAT or some such comes to mind, but that may be asking too much). In any event, the Minister of Education or the committee or whatever the responsible council might be *must not* be autonomous; the pastor is the one who is ultimately responsible, so the pastor must be apprised of the details of the program and kept informed of the measured outcomes.
- Stop using denominational literature. Its defects are too obvious. If the teachers in the church are going to be spiritually gifted to teach, then *let them teach*. I can't see how it is too much to expect a teacher, given a subject with entry assumptions and exit criteria and a course interval, to draft and execute a teaching plan.
- This is *not* "Bible study". Christians are not ready to study the Bible until they understand what the Bible is. A subject area in a Christian education program might be "Bible": its origin, reliability, inerrancy, structure, the location and contents of each book, etc. I'll note that in my younger days, there would be "Bible drills", and the participants/students would race to locate and read a verse. In my youth classes, students couldn't find verses without using the index.
- The course of instruction would be topical. Just like secular school has courses in math, science, English, etc., a Christian education program would have courses in discrete topics, perhaps including Bible (as mentioned above), church history, theology, apologetics, creation science, hermeneutics, and so on, as outlined by the pastor, Minister of Education or equivalent, and as suggested/requested by the church body. There ought to be a subject area like "how to raise your children" and "how to love your wife" and other such Biblical commands that require ongoing and focused treatment, more than a Sunday School lesson or a sermon once in a blue moon. There might even be electives such as evangelism, care for the homeless, and other topics that those so gifted would find applicable but are not of general mandate. More than Bible study, but the Bible (and the church's objectively-declared interpretive framework) would be the foundation for everything.

- Not for children. To observe Consistency with Scripture, the first and preferred means of instruction for children are their parents. Therefore, parents should be trained and expected to instruct their own children. This really shouldn't be a hurdle - if the pastor is "supposed" to deliver a sermon (presumably for the purposes of instruction and/or life-change) to the entire membership of all ages, why should there be a problem with education? A good approach may be to create age-appropriate materials in a class for parents with young or teen children to use in their homes.

I can imagine some cases where adults should be taught in person without their children present, so what should be done with the children? I might imagine designated adults being responsible for taking children and/or teens on ministry projects to the homebound seniors or hospitalized members or suitable (para-church sponsored) volunteer opportunities. A children's choir or even a teen band/chorus might find invitations to senior care homes or community outreach events. However:

1. These are not and should not ever be regarded as "classes", since being separated from their parents for instructional purposes should be permitted only rarely and carefully.
2. These must not be for the parents and relatives to enjoy the performances of their little dears. If they are ministry projects, they should be for real.
3. These are short-term affairs for the relief of parents; the *default* expectation is for children to be with their parents in the classes and to be exposed to the subject material even if they will undergo more personal and age-appropriate instruction afterwards at home.

- Be careful with teens. Another cultural default that the church has swallowed but did not exist a generation ago is the notion of "adolescence". Children up to a certain age are certainly under the instruction of their parents, but in earlier times, a young person in their mid to late teen years was considered an adult, if not quite independent, and were expected to function as such. There might even be a "rite of passage" to recognize them, such as the "confirmation" in some padeo-baptist churches. The Jewish community has a "Bar Mitzvah" or a "Bat Mitzva" (for girls; "Bar" being "son of" and "Bat" being "daughter of"). The [Family-Integrated Church \[17\]](#) that my brother attended (and which I visited) had a "Bar Barakah" for his older sons and a "Bat Barakah" for his daughters when they turned 13, obviously modelled after "Bar/Bat Mitzvah". The broader culture has a problem with "delayed adolescence", in which young people, especially young men, escape from societal expectations out to their mid to late twenties. This is clearly unhealthy, and the church should not enable or excuse it, even counteract it. There's no reason teens can't keep up with general Christian education topics.

There's a final point I'd like to make about Christian Education resources. At one time, nearly all medium to large churches, and a good number of small churches, had a church library. Along with the Minister of Education position, the institution of the church library seems to have vanished. I've seen some large churches (especially non-denominational ones) that have a bookstore, where members can purchase books (and usually fiction or self-help books at that), but not a *library* that stocks a good spectrum of standard works for reference and short-term checkout. In addition to or supplemental to an intentional Sunday School program, the library can provide the resources (and maybe even the assistance of a part-time volunteer librarian staff familiar with the inventory and the nature of the volumes) for class research projects and independent study. There could even be a "recommended reading list". I'm sure the pastor could recommend or specify a number of works from his own study to place in the library... or even relocate some or most of his own personal

library on a non-checkout basis.

The current implementation of Sunday School, and its significance in the last hundred years of "church culture", is ineffective or even harmful. We may not have to go all the way to a full-blown "grades and graduation" *school*, but we can do a lot better than we have now, in terms both of intentionality and consistency with the commands of Scripture.

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1. [www.lifeway.com/en/shop/bible-studies/sunday-school](http://www.lifeway.com/en/shop/bible-studies/sunday-school)
  2. [answersingenesis.org/church/which-two-thirds-are-already-gone](http://answersingenesis.org/church/which-two-thirds-are-already-gone)
  3. [ministry-to-children.com/history-of-sunday-school](http://ministry-to-children.com/history-of-sunday-school)
  4. [www.tucsonbaptist.com/our-story](http://www.tucsonbaptist.com/our-story)
  5. [www.newadvent.org/cathen/03430b.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03430b.htm)
  6. [students.wts.edu/resources/creeds/heidelberg.html](http://students.wts.edu/resources/creeds/heidelberg.html)
  7. [www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/shorter-catechism](http://www.apuritansmind.com/westminster-standards/shorter-catechism)
  8. [www.9marks.org/article/are-catechisms-a-baptist-thing](http://www.9marks.org/article/are-catechisms-a-baptist-thing)
  9. [www.solid-ground-books.com/detail\\_2130.asp](http://www.solid-ground-books.com/detail_2130.asp)
  10. [www.reformedreader.org/ccs/keachcat.htm](http://www.reformedreader.org/ccs/keachcat.htm)
  11. [svrbc.org/catechism](http://svrbc.org/catechism)
  12. [newcitycatechism.com](http://newcitycatechism.com)
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  14. [www.alpha.org/about](http://www.alpha.org/about)
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## August 30 2021: What Fellowship Really Looks Like



There is one more issue relevant to the "church culture" topic that I'd like to explore at this time: Fellowship.

Disciples are people who *know* and who *do*. But also, and perhaps fundamentally and more importantly, disciples are people who hang around other disciples. The (big-C) Church, the Body of Christ, the Fellowship of the Redeemed, is supposed

to be One, or in unity with one another and God, for this is Christ's own prayer for us in John 17:21. However, it is not merely a social unity or commonality; rather, it is focused or centered on God Himself and our service to Him.

My deacon friend who objected to my denigration of his "worship" singing, who knows that I am disassociating myself from the "church people", asked me if I wasn't getting the fellowship from the people at church, where was I getting it? He quoted Hebrews 10:25 - "Not forsaking our own assembling together". This is a common tactic by pastors and Christian doctrinal leaders, to quote Hebrews 10:25 as a commandment to "go to church", so I'm not surprised when my "church culture" soaked friend follows their lead, but I get a bit tired of it. If verse 25, the first half, says that we should congregate, the second half and the previous verse says *why*:

And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

If there was "stimulating to love and good deeds" and "encouraging one another" in the Faith, then there would be some basis for applying this principle to attendance at church services. I argue that there is little to none.

When [Veritas Forum](#) [1] was active at the University of Arizona, I was on the committee, which consisted of campus ministers, a few students and a faculty member/sponsor, and a number of interested community members like myself. We were all Christians, of course, and we worked together to select and solicit some Christian scholar to visit and make an address, and arranged travel and lodging and advertising and the details of the on-campus venue. We were encouraging each other to our common goal, and experiencing the love of each other and the unity as we sought to extend God's kingdom.

When I attend [AzOSA](#) meetings [2], I am gathered with like-minded Christians to marvel at God's creation and how He reveals His nature and power in the material world we live in, and to equip ourselves to defend the real, the Christian, story of the origin of the world and to expose the falseness of the atheist origin story, the story of the "Big Bang", the rise of life from non-life, and "goo to you" evolution. As a member of the society (were I more active), I would be exploring and proposing other efforts to promote AzOSA in area churches. The meeting attenders, and the association members, are unified in their worship of God (note:

not music) and efforts to extend the Kingdom.

When I attend [4Tucson](#) [3] events, and meet with officers of the organization, we are unified in love and fraternity to apply Biblical strategies to social problems in our beloved city, and to extend the Kingdom of God here where we live.

I could say the same sort of things about my involvement with [Gospel Rescue Mission](#) [4] and [Hands of Hope](#) crisis pregnancy center [5] and [Teen Challenge](#) [6]. Even though it is mostly as a financial and prayer supporter, when there are fundraising events and celebrations of the successes we have seen, I am gathered with many other like-minded Christians to encourage each other and the organization staff and clients to the common mission of extending the Kingdom in these functional areas.

Now... I'll note that these examples of Christians meeting together to encourage each other to love and the good works of these activities... they're all para-church ministries. Real Christians in fellowship in Christian ministries. Why do I say this does not happen in the institutional church?

**Social Interaction in the Service:** During the "worship" service, everyone is sitting side-by-side focused on the stage. No interaction at all. Sometimes in some churches there is a "greeting time", sort of a forced social interaction, where people are supposed to get up, apply their plastic smiles, shake hands with their immediate neighbors, and utter some phrase of greeting or welcome. The "greeting time" is supposed to impress upon visitors what a friendly place this is, but most visitors (myself included) would rather not be subjected to the fake friendliness. Either way, there is no encouraging to love and good works going on here.

Some pastors and "church people" might object and say that the encouraging and stimulating to love and good works comes from the pastor's sermon and the content of the hymns and choruses. First off, I say "baloney"; this may be true in a technical sense but it is not true in a practical sense. Whatever people may have heard in the sermon, and more so in songs, is quickly forgotten. Secondly, this is not the "each other" per the Hebrews passage. The hallmark of compliance is Christian conversations with each other.

**Social Interaction outside the Service:** To some extent before the service starts and to a much greater extent after the service ends, the congregants mill around greeting each other and engaging in conversation. If the church is really friendly (versus the fake "greeting time"), a visitor will be surrounded by church members and engaged in conversation and more authentic smiles. Likely invitations to come to Sunday School with them. In rare cases, invitations to Sunday dinner at some restaurant after the church events. However, in my experience, all these conversations are entirely secular - subjects include the weather, current political controversies, inquiries about work or job, boasting or commiseration about children, and so on. *Not* about spiritual things, the glory of God, or extending the Kingdom. *Not* about good works, unless occasionally the "good works" involves plans to visit Mabel who hasn't been to services for the last month, or old Tom who is in the hospital again.

I think the root of this phenomenon is bound up in the nature of "church culture" itself. There isn't anything inherently Christian about "church culture". "Church culture" is safe; Christian discussions can be intimidating. For instance, as a visitor to many churches, at the more friendly ones I may be asked by a smiling member, "Did you *enjoy* the service?" (there's that *entertainment* again) but rarely if I know Jesus myself. A major component of



the social chatter will be "church culture" topics: the quality of the sermon, a critique about the music, comments about the furnishings or decoration or even temperature of the auditorium. This is "safe" conversation between "church people".

**Social Interaction in Sunday School:** Before and after Sunday School begins, the person-to-person conversation is essentially the same as outside the service - light social chit-chat. During the class time, the teachers and students will converse over the lesson content. Often this will take tangents into the actual lives and experiences of the participants, and thus can be deeper and more meaningful than the "safe" social conversations. To the extent that the lesson content is Biblical and God-focused, there is real God-honoring discussion during the lesson time. Of course, any "encouraging to good works" is unlikely to happen because there is no more retention or accountability for behavior to the Sunday School lesson than there is to the preacher's sermon. Sometimes the Sunday School class or department will plan a "ministry" event; again, these plans are overwhelmingly "church culture" - visiting absent or hospitalized members, helping with the upcoming Halloween "trunk or treat", their part in the Christmas pageant, stuffing Thanksgiving boxes, and so forth.

**Social Interaction at Church Social Events:** When First Southern Baptist was pretending to transform to a "Purpose-Driven Church", the members considered the "Fellowship" purpose. "We have Sunday School classes and Wednesday evening church dinners and Labor Day picnics. Check!". The universal assignment of "fellowship" in "church culture" is eating together. Same remark as "after the service" - light social chit-chat. *Not* love and encouragement. *Not* stimulating to good works.

**Social Interaction at Church Ministry Activities:** This is probably as close to "stimulating to good works" as it comes. Let's set aside the Halloween and Christmas and Easter and "Block Parties" and other similar events that are calculated to draw more people into the church, ostensibly for evangelistic purposes. This is "church culture". "Church Outreach" is similar; yes, there's the potential for real evangelism, but the ultimate intent is to draw outsiders into "church culture" (this might be part of my problem with personal evangelism or "soul-winning" - if someone *does* accept Christ, what do I do with them? Advise them to find a "local Bible-believing church"? That's just more "church culture". Disciple them myself? Hmmm...). We need to be careful with church ministries to feed the homeless men in the neighborhood park, and distribute food boxes to folk without any means testing; are these more mere promotion of "church culture"; efforts to get people to start attending church services regularly and be exposed to the putative benefits of religious music and lectures? Or worse, are these activities with only shallow good intentions, to make the participants feel good about themselves? Maybe getting up a team for a short-term mission trip is "stimulating to good works". I've been on church work crews to go to poor Mexican suburbs of Nogales, just across the border, and I've got real concerns about the actual value of that activity. I haven't been on any short-term foreign mission trips myself, but I've read how short-term mission trips can be [problematic](#) [7].

And then there are children and youth events. I can't say that much about children's events other than minor experience with outreach events like First Southern's "Kite Day" which is supposedly evangelistic (and I already have problems with evangelism to children and not to their parents). And Halloween festivals. These sort of attractional "bridge events" are just more "church culture", to get people interested in attending church services. I've got a fair bit of experience with youth events, like city-wide rallies and summer youth camps and music concerts. These are 95% entertainment and marginal effective evangelism. The young people themselves don't participate in these out of any spiritual notion of "good works", and the adult workers and youth pastors who do so are fooling themselves.

In all cases, while there is obviously planning for these Ministry Activities motivated by the desire to do "good works", and the questionable notion that these activities will be extending God's kingdom, the conversation between participants is characteristically more of the light secular friendly chit-chat as the "outside the service" scenario.

One final note about the "church culture" aspect on "fellowship": Given that "church culture" is not inherently Christian, and apostate and even cultic and atheist churches have church services and Sunday Schools and "ministry" projects, how would the conversations between their members in all the above settings differ from the conversations between members of a more authentically and orthodox Christian church? In fact, given that "church culture" even in an authentically and orthodox Christian church is not inherently Christian, and there are unbelieving "tares" (Matt. 13:24-30) present, how could conversations between "church people" be characterized by anything other than light social chit-chat and commentary about their mutual "church culture" experience?

I conclude that there is very little "stimulate one another to love and good works" and "encouraging one another" happening in "church culture", and therefore the admonishment of Hebrews 10:25 does not apply. One is much more likely to find authentic Christian fellowship in a para-church environment than in a thorough-going "church culture" environment.

Now, there is a movement of fairly recent Western origin in which churches adopt the pattern of the "Small Group". In its best form, this is a community-based entity (that is, the members live in the vicinity, and don't commute to the meetings from across town) that is focused on living the Christian life together. I see this most frequently in youth-oriented churches such as [Second Mile](#) [8] (which is actually in my neighborhood, within walking distance!) and [University City Church](#) [9] in Downtown Tucson and [Mountain View Community Church](#) [10] in Fort Collins, Colorado, where my daughters attend. There are some non-youth established "church culture" churches that try to cash in on this movement by rebadging their Sunday School classes as "small groups"; this is mere cynical window-dressing. There are other of these churches that supplement or even replace their Sunday School classes by moving them to homes on weeknights but retaining everything else like the shabby literature and structure (age segregation, entertainment, lesson, prayer). "Thanks for playing"; First Southern Baptist tried this briefly, but it was apparently too much of a stretch from "church culture" to continue. It seems there is a spectrum of "small group" that ranges from the "remote Sunday School class" model to more of a proper "cell church" model. By "cell church", I would intend something that:

- Has a pastor, not just a teacher. The object isn't primarily instruction but community. The pastor would (hopefully) not deliver sermons to the small group; at most short homilies. Mostly, he would do the pastoral care functions (in-home visits, monitoring members' level of Scriptural and theological understanding and living out a Christian Worldview, supplying resources, doing counselling as appropriate) that the main pastor would do except the church is just too big. And he's committed serious time to sermon prep. Essentially, the small group pastors are deputized by the main pastor. Probably the small group pastor would not perform baptisms and would obviously not be licensed for weddings and funerals.
- It's community, not attractional. Members live in the vicinity. The pastor lives in the vicinity. Believers - and non-believers - who are informed of the small group and/or invited to meetings live in the vicinity. Maybe the meeting place "floats" from home to home of the members that live in the vicinity. People outside the vicinity are

discouraged from involvement, but rather are referred to a small group in their own vicinity. Church members would be prohibited from driving across town to attend meetings of some charismatic small group pastor.

- It's not just a weekly meeting. Small group members who live in the vicinity and are therefore neighbors would be encouraged, even expected, to interact with each other throughout the week. Hanging over the garden wall chatting. Going to the grocery store together. Sharing hobbies, babysitting, providing short-term emergency financial assistance. *Koinonia*.
- Not Sunday School, not Bible Study. Not the sort of improved topical Christian Education described above, although such classes could be held in home settings with the "no commuting" rule set aside. No sermon from the pastor. There might be Bible studies, but the default should be real spiritual conversations. Perhaps the group (with the pastor's advice) would view a theological or Creation Science video and discuss it. Or a movie (maybe a Christian movie, if any such of redeemable quality could be found) and discuss it. Probably not just movies for general entertainment (although maybe watching such movies together at some time other than the regular meeting would be an acceptable mutual activity). Maybe going through the [Experiencing God \[11\]](#) or [Truth Project \[12\]](#) together.
- Accountability. The members live and move within eyesight of each other. The inhibitions are reduced. If the pastor is driving real spiritual conversations, and modelling it himself, the sharing will be deeper than on Sunday mornings with people seen only for an hour or two a week.
- Not age segregated. Single adults living on their own or with roommates or housemates in the vicinity could come. Teens living with non-member (and non-believing) parents could come (might be tough for young children to come without their parents). Families would bring all their children, including infants. The small group would have to decide what to do about nursery, but the default ought to be, bring the little person to the meetings - we're all family together.
- Optimally sized. How many people can fit in a living room on folding chairs? Or around the dining table and auxiliary card tables? If it gets too big, time to spin off a sister small group. Church startups are organic; no need to rent the high-school lunch room and drag a lot of A/V equipment and set up chairs every weekend. Also, no problem sharing between small groups. "Church culture" churches don't really cooperate, not even when they're in a denominational association. Small groups can certainly cooperate. *Koinonia!*

The ultimate small group model I have in mind would be the so-called [Clapham Sect \[13\]](#) of the late 18th Century in England, in which the members of the group were also members of Holy Trinity Church at Clapham Common. They were so committed to each other that they actually moved or build houses so they could be in close proximity. The group is famous for producing William Wilberforce, but they engaged in a variety of cultural reforms (and maybe regrettably some socialist things as well). They were authentically Christian, they "stimulated one another to love and good deeds", they "encouraged one another", they shared their lives and their goods. *Koinonia!*

To me, the fully-functional small group or cell church would be the basic operating unit of the full-up church. I wonder if a pastor couldn't start some cell churches on his own, "on the sly". If a pastor recognizes the problem of "church culture" but can't get any traction with the membership, I don't see that anything stops him from identifying some neighborhood in town in which some number of members live who have been verified to be authentically Christian and not enslaved to "church culture", enlisting or deputizing a suitable man

among them who is willing or declares a calling for pastoral-care work, and just setting up a cell church "off the books". Sort of a petri-dish experiment. The worst that can happen is to learn from the attempt. If successful, and it grows, eventually the pastor just "coddles" the hard-noses that cannot let go of their "church culture" until they die out or move away (this sounds a lot like a nefarious stratagem from the "Purpose-Driven Church" book).

But ultimately, if God intends to destroy the West and the Church must go underground to survive, it won't be the big "church culture" outfits that do this - it will be the more-or-less independent cell churches. The best thing that the (little-c) church could do in preparation for such a hostile climate is to lose no time in setting up a parallel cell-church network that can survive and continue operating after the central "big church" is shut down. It totally depends on the extent to which a pastor and a sufficient segment of the membership are willing to take action to start attenuating "church culture", versus how much they are all content to continue "whistling past the graveyard".

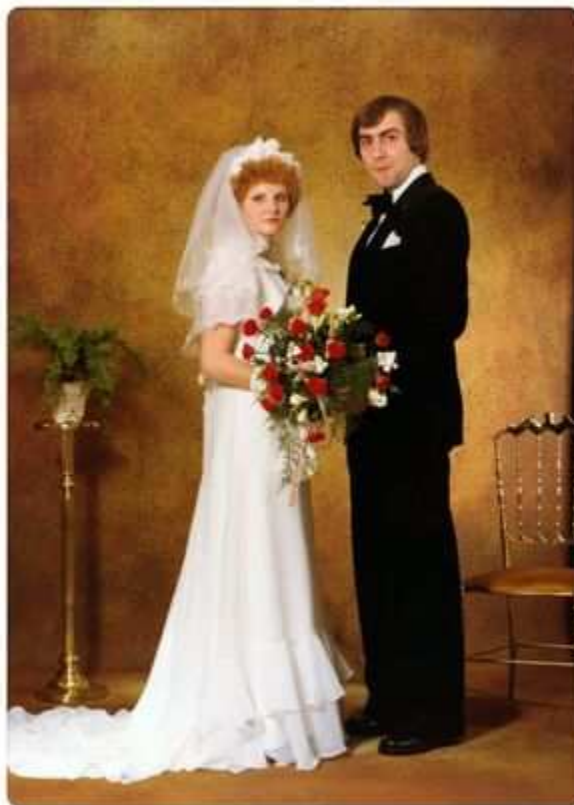
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## November 29 2021: Dating and Marriage in Church Culture

Scripture has a lot to say about *marriage*, since marriage is a part of the created order, not only because "God made them male and female" (Gen. 1:27) but for the reason He created us male and female and instituted marriage as a pattern or symbol or object lesson for the relationship of Christ and the Church (per Eph. 5:29-32). To the extent that the local institutional church under the unwitting direction of its responsible pastor neglects this doctrine and the practical implications for the Christian fellowship, particularly the young people, "church culture" is indeed culpable for its worst characteristic of replacing the doctrines of God with the traditions of men (per Matt. 15:9). It is this neglect or abandonment of a critical part of God's creation intent that is involved here. However, it is not only the institution of marriage itself that is at stake, but also the entire wedding industry, and how young people go about finding marriage partners.



We are familiar with the ancient patterns displayed for us in the Old Testament, the dowries and arranged marriages and polygamy up to the time of Moses, and the laws governing such that even Jesus taught were given "for the hardness of your hearts" (Matt. 19:8), God's condescension to their pagan inheritance and not His actual intent. After the Christian Church (big-C) launched and eclipsed the pagan culture and corrected many of its worst errors, the patterns of *Christendom* emerged and became the cultural default of the West. The pattern of Christendom regarding marriage included such things as:

- Sex roles were established and unchallenged. For the most part, women were wives and mothers and homemakers, and littler girls played with dolls and toy houses. Men were husbands and fathers, fighting to protect and hunting to provide, and little boys played mock wars and battles with improvised swords and guns. However, in the spirit of Proverbs 31, women contributed to the financial prospects of the family, working in the fields as necessary, selling eggs and textile arts, keeping the books, managing the hired help, and so on.
- Marriage was a sacred institution, even a sacrament, and was permanent. The vows were considered socially and legally binding. The motive was for economic advancement and the production of children, not primarily "love".
- Women stayed with their parents until they were married. The young men attracted by the beauty and/or character of the young women courted them, or moved their own families to approach the families of the women in view of an arrangement. The woman's father was the "gatekeeper", and vetted the suitors. This implied a familiarity with the character and prospects of the young men, which in turn implies a *community*. In some cases, at least at the higher social strata, or in some ethnic

cultures, there was the possibility of matches arranged from childhood.

- Weddings were community celebrations. The guests at the wedding were family and community members, present to certify the authenticity of the marriage ("the banns") and to commit to supporting the new family and hold them accountable. The wedding was held in the church building because the church was the focus of the community. Gifts might be given as needed by the couple to set up their home. The "honeymoon" was not a default feature.
- Couples were expected to produce children. Childlessness was a stigma, the consequence of unfortunate infertility, rather than a lifestyle choice.

In the sixteenth century, at the time of the Protestant Reformation and the launch of the Lutheran and Reformed churches, Christendom was still very much the cultural default or common experience in the West. The Reformers were concerned about the doctrines of authority and salvation and church structure. They didn't have to sweat marriage and the selection of marriage partners or the teaching of the young in these matters, as the larger culture already had these matters settled. The conflicts of the next two or three centuries were about religious doctrine, not cultural practices which essentially everyone held in common. Eventually, in Western Europe and North America, the "concrete had set", so to speak - churches and pastors dealt in matters of Christian orthodoxy and the "church culture" pattern of Songs and Sermons on Sundays and were more distracted by local political and social issues of national revolutions and ending slavery to pay much attention to the nascent women's suffrage and women-led temperance movements and the rise of Darwinism.

After first-wave feminism (the suffragettes) transmuted into second-wave feminism (the "bra-burners") and over-the-counter contraceptives became common, and the Sexual Revolution progressed, the sex and marriage patterns of Christendom were gradually overthrown or inverted.

- Traditional sex and marriage roles were attacked as "sexist". The feminist concept that women should seek societal roles and positions previously held exclusively by men, even at the cost of the childbearing and homemaking roles, became the dominant cultural assumption. Toy swords and guns were denounced as "encouraging violence", and today, of course, any promotion of certain toys to a child's sex (e.g., construction sets for boys, dolls and tea sets for girls) is anathematized. With the advent of transgenderism, this erasure of the distinction between the sexes is accelerating under the force of law.
- Marriage is an expression of "love". When the "love" ends, it is expected that the marriage will end as well. No-Fault divorce laws reflect this shift in understanding the purpose of marriage. The vows are merely a poetic decoration in an essentially meaningless ceremony.
- Women are encouraged to make their own way. In the same way as young men left home for school or careers in earlier centuries, women leave their families to go to school and/or enter the job market. They no longer live at home. The fathers no longer have a gatekeeping function. "Courting" has been replaced by "dating", and nowadays, "dating" is a code-word for extramarital sexual activity.
- The wedding is a merely feel-good public ceremony, a declaration of "love". Or an "I've arrived" ritual by the woman, who expects her family to pay for a "princess"-style wedding in emulation of the culture leaders (celebrities), with the anticipation that all eyes will be on her, she will be the star of the "show". Or a defiant "We're normal" role-play by homosexual couples. Often, the couple will plan some oddball,



"edgy" wedding ceremony, such as in their swimsuits in a resort pool, or while skydiving, or even the more prosaic Las Vegas Wedding Chapel thing; all of which merely trivializes an already silly institution. The wedding is usually preceded by a frequently-bawdy "bachelor party" and often a "bachelorette party". Since both individuals had already been living on their own (and more than likely already living together), the wedding gifts are more likely to be leisure or luxury items. The guests are merely party invitees and spectators, since there is no actual expectation of fidelity to which they would hold the newly-married accountable. After the wedding is the "honeymoon", a practice also of no apparent historical precedent outside the wealth classes. Possibly the "honeymoon" could be viewed as the first step of life as a married couple (except that most such couples were already living together), but with a perverse priority of Fun over Duty, or Fantasy over Reality.

- Childlessness is a frequent characteristic of marriage, even among church people. Producing and raising children is a lifestyle choice, not a divine service and certainly not a fulfillment of any creation mandate. In fact, informed by a (false) "scientific" narrative that humans are responsible for all the environmental ills of the Earth and it would be better if there were fewer of us, childbearing is increasingly cast as "evil".

Even by the mid-20th Century, the institutional church issued statements and preached sermons against the sins of the Sexual Revolution, but it was always *against*, never *for*; the church did not understand that the pro-marriage Christendom cultural defaults were already quickly vanishing away. Even when the successful "Homosexual Marriage" campaign blossomed, the response of the church was still always *against* and never *for*. About the only pro-active things the church has done to counter the sexual and marriage trends of the larger secular (or more precisely, atheist) culture are:

- Pre-marriage counselling. There are doubtless a wide variation of this broad-based "church culture" activity, but at best it consists of several weeks (I've not heard of more than six) of counselling sessions with the couple intending marriage and the pastor. More or less a topical Bible study. Other than hints picked up from infrequent sermons or Sunday School lessons over the years, this is as much focused treatment on the foundational Biblical doctrine of marriage that young people ever receive.
- ["True Love Waits"](#) [1] and [purity rings](#) [2], to encourage young people to "just say no" to the pressure for sexual activity they will assuredly encounter in their "dating" experiences. The "True Love Waits" was a campaign created by the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s, and became a fairly wide-spread phenomenon, jumping denominational lines. Purity rings were introduced through the federal bureaucracy in a combination of a conservative administration inclined to promote sexual abstinence by teens and a broader cultural consensus that wasn't vociferously opposed to this - a combination that will probably never happen again. I had taken my daughters to [purity balls](#) [3], and occasionally other young girls in my youth group whose parents were not involved with the church (in retrospect, even if these young girls attended only with my own daughters, I don't know that this was particularly wise, and it defeated the entire purpose of the *father* making a commitment to his own daughter) and found them useful. In fact, the negative response to the "purity ball" and "True Love Waits" concept of teen abstinence and the involvement of fathers by the larger secular (atheist) culture tells me this is on the right track. I'll note that Joe Carter has [a helpful survey of purity culture](#) [4]. I'll also note that the purity culture aspects are largely a para-church effort. The purity balls in Tucson were organized by [Arizona Baptist Children's Services](#) [5]. Even the SBC as an organization operates outside the individual churches that comprise the

convention. Furthermore, the purity culture phenomenon may have been a fad that peaked and is already passing away - I haven't heard anything about "True Love Waits" or purity balls in Tucson for many years.

So even the marginally successful purity culture movement was supported by (little-c) churches at best passively. This is unacceptable. The church must be pro-active about marriage and sexuality, not reactive. The church must be active about marriage and sexuality within a Christian Worldview, not passive while para-church ministries carry the torch. The church must work *intentionally* at creating a *counter-culture* to the dominant post-Christendom anti-Christian culture *particularly in the areas of marriage and sexuality where the cultural battle rages the hottest*.

- First off, the church must make a decision to consciously NOT yield to the defaults of the larger post-Christendom secular (atheist) culture, especially regarding sexuality and marriage. Pastors and the spiritually mature church members should recognize our historical inclination to rely on the larger culture, even the government, to support godly attitudes toward sexuality and marriage (and the responsibility for labor, and the content of the education of the young, etc., etc.) and realize We Just Can't Do That Anymore. Centuries ago, our Christian forebears intentionally created an internal culture, in opposition to the pagan world around them; surely it is not impossible for us to follow their example. Likewise, the church should also recognize this will eventually come with a price, when our rejection of enforced norms about LGBTQ and the mutilation of children carries legal consequences - and have plans in place to adjust to the consequences.
- It is not enough to have a 30-minute sermon maybe once every three to five years if the subject just happens to come up while preaching a series through some Bible book. It's not enough to have a guest speaker or an event with a visiting para-church marriage ministry aimed at the already-married. And it is Not Enough to introduce twenty-year-old marriage candidates to the subject for two to six weeks before the wedding. Like everything I've said up to now, the (little-c) church must be *intentional*. Marriage and sexuality is part of a person's *worldview*, and it should be the objective of the pastoral and teaching staff's efforts to instill a Christian worldview in the minds and hearts of the people. It might be a sermon-based affair in which the preacher takes a break from the Bible-book sermon series once a quarter to have a mini-series of essential worldview topics, including a treatment of sex and marriage. It might be an ongoing Sunday School class (yes, with a curriculum and homework and tests and a certificate) that all members are required to go through, and maybe a follow-up refresher course every few years. It should certainly include some organized means of equipping parents to educate their own children in a Christian worldview, including the issues of sex and marriage. Whatever the manifestation of intentionality, it will have to come from the top. The pastor will have to *lead*.
- Part of this teaching and culture-making would be to address the value of children, and the creation mandate for married couples to produce offspring as a primary function. If a ministry or para-church organization suggests that young people should postpone childbearing until they had spent their youthful energy and education on ministry objectives, this anti-biblical notion should be opposed in the strongest terms. The idea that Christians marry "for love" and childbearing is an option, a lifestyle choice, should be denounced as sinful.  
It might be interesting for the church to take more of a forthright position about artificial contraceptives. After all, if the Roman Catholic church has held a (more or

less) consistent position about contraceptives, why would it be so unthinkable for Protestants to take a position rather than Yet Again tacitly accept the default promotion of contraceptives in the larger secular (atheist) culture?

- The practice of Church Discipline should be reestablished in the church, regardless of the threat of losing paying club members who might be upset that the church would actually hold people accountable for their behaviors. The church should have a consistent position on adultery, extra-marital sex (even by the young people), sexual abuse, and divorce. In all such cases, a reaction to a situation should start with pastoral counselling before it escalates to excommunication. This would also provide some assurance against the problem of sexual abuse by pastors and church staff, a point of growing concern in the Southern Baptist Convention at the moment. The sort of situation that occurred in my family should never be allowed, in which a man (church member) divorced his wife in order to marry another woman (also a church member), and the ladies of the church (in an exquisite display of "church culture") held a wedding shower for her.
- Most of all, the church should *intentionally* implement a change of local culture to encourage (even enforce) *community* over mere "congregation". The couple making their vows will be far more likely to take them seriously if the guests at the wedding were people actually observing their lives and responding to their needs and living the example before them. This just can't happen with people that you only see for a few minutes a week and exchange some superficial social chit-chat, people who commute from some entirely different part of town. The cell-church concept I've described before would be a potential solution.

It might be helpful for the church to take an explicit stance on weddings held in the building and/or officiated by the pastor or other church member.

- Discourage elaborate, costly, and certainly avant-garde wedding styles, decorations, and programs. Especially by church members. Let the stated reason for this policy be the significance of marriage and the nature of the wedding ceremony that initiates the marriage.
- There might be some sort of non-binding statement about wedding aspects that fall outside the control of the church. For instance, some Christian Worldview-based perspective on the "honeymoon" (might it be interesting for a church to hold a discussion on the "honeymoon" and possible alternatives?). And bachelor/bachelorette parties. And the purpose of wedding gifts. Since these aren't really doctrinal matters that come from Scripture, there ought to be some concurrence by the church body and not just a pronouncement from the pastor.
- An exhortation upon the responsibilities of the wedding guests and the families of the bride and groom, more than merely being short-term spectators of a ceremony but rather long-term active participants of the new family's support structure.

Having such a policy might work to protect the church from legal threats by homosexuals who want to hold their "wedding" at the church building. In fact, it might not be a stretch to limit weddings to church members. Furthermore, the pastor and church leadership might advise church members (especially entrepreneurial young people) against undertaking wedding-industry roles like baking cakes, printing jobs, floral arrangements, photographic services, etc.; business activities in support of a non-biblical and potentially distracting cultural observance and which invite legal and social attacks by activists.

There is something else that the church really ought to consider. The cultural default practice for young people to choose mates is "dating". It is not at all obvious that "dating" is

an optimal method to achieve a very important goal. If the church is going to take an active part in a counter-cultural movement about marriage and sexuality, it ought not to leave "dating" in its current default position.

I admit I have a dog in this fight. I have two daughters (who yes, moved away from their family and therefore no, I cannot really "give them in marriage", nor can a suitor honestly or consistently ask me if he may marry one of them), so I am sensitive to their plight. Many of their peers at their Christian private school "dated" and married young men at the school. Others are sexually active outside of marriage. Obviously the Christian private school is also operating as if the culture still reflects a Christendom model - no surprise, since all the parents of the students do, and are members of churches who do. My children attend a church in Fort Collins, Colorado, which is a "young people's church". I've visited a few "young people's churches" in Tucson - I'd say 80% of the congregants are young married couples, many with small children, there are a few older couples (already, the potential for the older men and older women to have much influence on the younger men and women is seriously compromised in this kind of church setting), and there is a small population of unmarried women and men. The single girls outnumber the single men by something like five-to-one. I conclude that there is either intense competition for the young men, or there is something wrong with the young men that make them unappealing to the girls. Or maybe not something wrong; maybe the young men have seen the disadvantage and abuse men can expect in marriage in our contemporary culture and have [chosen not to participate](#) [6]. In any event, my daughter's prospects for finding a young man of good character in a "young people's church" is (so far) not good. Standard churches are worse; the young men are simply not there. Possibly as a consequence of the "60 to 80% of young people bailing on the church" phenomenon. Possibly due to the perception of the institutional church as "feminized". So what are my daughters to do? Even the on-line dating services ("Christian" and otherwise) are unsatisfactory - my older child tried one, encountered a young man who claimed to be Christian, but the ensuing "dating" relationship was unsatisfactory.

I don't have any solution in mind, but I could really hope (whether or not my own children might benefit) that the insitutional church might put their heads together - and even reach to neighboring churches, or even across denominational lines - and come up with some alternatives. After all, the institutional church came up with an alternative to Halloween; "Trunk or Treat", or "Harvest Festival". Maybe a young adult "dating fair". Or "speed dating" events. Somewhere at which young men and young women can encounter each other in a non-presumptuous environment and learn about each other, at least to the point of a successful course of "dating" - or "courtship".

And then the church can move on to explore other features of their Bible-honoring counter-culture reinvention: Something about the career roles of women and the gatekeeping roles of fathers - things that would make the larger culture roar with anti-patriarchal outrage. But that is something secondary to my overall desire to see the church *DO SOMETHING INTENTIONAL!*

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1. [www.lifeway.com/en/product-family/true-love-waits/history](http://www.lifeway.com/en/product-family/true-love-waits/history)
2. [christianjewelry.com/history-of-the-purity-ring](http://christianjewelry.com/history-of-the-purity-ring)
3. [allthatsinteresting.com/purity-balls](http://allthatsinteresting.com/purity-balls)

4. [www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/faqs-know-purity-culture](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/faqs-know-purity-culture)
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6. [winteryknight.com/2020/08/06/men-on-strike-the-social-changes-that-caused-men-to-opt-out-of-marriage-3](http://winteryknight.com/2020/08/06/men-on-strike-the-social-changes-that-caused-men-to-opt-out-of-marriage-3)