

# I N T R O D U C T I O N

## The Current Plight of the Church in the US

***“Men of Issachar, who understood the times  
and knew what Israel should do”*** (1 Chronicles 12:32).

When the tribes of Israel gathered to make David king, all of them journeyed to Hebron with thousands of troops. One tribe in particular, the tribe of Issachar, came with two hundred men *“who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”* If we are ever to see the powerful first century early Church restored, we must become a people who understands the current times. Then, if we have faith and courage, we can be part of the restoration of the Church as Jesus founded it: His Body of followers *consumed with love* for Him, for our families, for other believers, and for the lost. Before we consider what God is requiring of His people as He restores these biblical facets to the church today, let's assess the current status of the family and “The Church” in the US.

Carle Zimmerman, in his book *Family and Civilization*, provides unique insight into the disintegration of the modern family and church. Zimmerman traces the typical development and eventual disintegration of the family in a variety of cultures. In most great civilizations, including Greece, Rome, and now the United States, the shifts in family relationships and in societal attitudes toward the family follow a similar course. Initially there is great respect for the family, and individual desires are subordinated to family needs. Eventually this attitude gives way to its opposite: a deification of individual rights and a deprecation of family commitments. This is accompanied by a disintegration of society. This was the pattern, he believes, that took place among the Greeks and Romans, and the same pattern that currently operates in the US.

Zimmerman identifies three types of families, each of which predominates at various times in the life cycle of a civilization: the trustee family, the domestic family, and the atomistic family.

The **trustee family** is the most stable family form. Great value is placed on the *resources and truths* that ancestors have passed along from generation to generation. The governing authority is normally a patriarchal structure ruled by the oldest males. The input of all the relatives, however, is sought when typical problems arise in each family unit. Because family loyalty is held in such high regard, senior members can function as the recognized disciplinary agents. They can demand obedience in a way that those outside the family or clan might not respond to.

Divorce is rarely practiced in this type of family structure. Individuals are expected to subordinate their own interests to the greater interest of the family as a whole. Family members accumulate wealth and provisions through a spirit of selflessness and hard work. The solidarity of this family type can be seen in the era of the Pilgrims and Puritans of early America.

The **domestic family** occupies a middle ground between individualism on the one hand and absolute authority of the family on the other. The government structure in this family type values the strength of family ties and stability but leaves room for *individual*

*expression* and a certain creative autonomy to present new ideas. Clan power is subordinated to church and state agencies. Divorce is infrequent but does occur occasionally. A husband and a wife are seen as a family unit that assumes major responsibility for raising their children according to the values that they believe are right. Parents are willing to undergo the pain of childbirth and trials of childrearing because they view their children as an extension of themselves.

At times that means that some parental desires have to be sacrificed in order to focus on the needs and training of the next generation. Generally mothers and fathers of this family type are willing to forego, if necessary, luxury cars, upscale homes, and even time-consuming hobbies in order to have energy, time, and resources for their kids. This type of family structure epitomized Greece and Rome at their height of trade and commerce. The subsequent decline of these civilizations occurred when the state took over the responsibilities that up until then had been assumed by the families and religious institutions. Up until the 1950's, this structure characterized the majority of American households.

When the ties within the family unit disintegrate, an *obsession with individualism* develops. This marks the **atomistic family** stage. Each person is viewed as a distinct unit, disconnected from the family. Individual rights are emphasized rather than family responsibilities. Whereas self-sacrifice was the norm under the trustee and domestic families, complete and unabashed selfishness becomes normative under the atomistic family. Cultures of this type experiment with childless liaisons and suffer increased divorce rates. Because the majority are unwilling to sacrifice for the future, fewer children are born.

Religious and moral mores have little effect on protecting the sanctity of the family. "The individual, having no guiding morals, changes the meaning of freedom from opportunity to license. Having no internal or external guides to discipline him, he becomes a gambler with life, always seeking greener pastures. When he comes to inevitable difficulty, he is alone in his misery."<sup>1</sup> Not content to suffer in silence, the atomistic individual seeks out others with similar difficulties to establish a political "voice." His special-interest group can then gain power and influence in order to coerce social institutions to remedy their misery. Note the contrast between the ethic of personal responsibility in the domestic family and the development of social victimization ("It's not *my* fault") in the atomistic structure. A civilization in the throes of the atomistic period resembles a swarm of antagonistic insects engaged in mortal combat. Individuals become obsessed with their own desires and concerns, disregarding the needs or suffering of others. Commitments and responsibilities are looked on as infringements on personal freedom.

Consider the characteristics of an atomistic society.

- Marriage loses its sanctity as a stable, committed institution. The inviolability of marriage as a *covenant* is lost. The relationship is often broken by relatively easy, "no-fault" divorce.
- Feminist movements abound as women lose their inclination for childbearing and child nurturing. The birth rate decreases. Daycare facilities replace intimate parenting as mothers are no longer motivated or encouraged to raise their own children in the security of the home.
- Public disrespect for parents, parenthood, and authority in general rises. Parenthood

becomes more difficult for those still trying to rear children with biblical values. The media denigrate time-honored values and traditions.

- Young people are increasingly disrespectful of their parents and others in authority. Juvenile delinquency escalates, as do promiscuity and rebellion. Neither the legal system nor educational institutions are able to deter such unrighteousness.
- Adultery is accepted and even promoted in many circles. Alternatives to marriage, such as cohabitation, are increasingly accepted.
- Sexual perversions of all kinds (homosexuality, rape, incest, pedophilia) move from toleration to proliferation.<sup>2</sup>

In 1986, when we first began to share Zimmerman's thoughts with pastors and other people on retreats, there was unanimous consensus that the United States had entered the atomistic stage, the period when social disintegration was occurring. Many of us began to seek ways that we as Christians could be "salt" and "light" no matter what happened to our country; thus the purpose in writing this book.

### **How Has the Church Fared in the Atomistic Culture of the US?**

***"Another thing you do: You flood the LORD'S altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask, 'Why?' It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. 'I hate divorce,' says the LORD God of Israel, 'and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,' says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith" (Malachi 2:13-16).***

In his thought-provoking book *Marriage Savers*, author Michael McManus provides some startling facts concerning the church and single parenthood. He writes,

According to George Gallup, Jr., two-thirds of Americans are members of churches, and 42% attended church in any given week in 1991. Seventy-three percent of first marriages are blessed by the church, according to the Census, and we are troubled by the more than 50% divorce rate. Clearly, the American church—300,000 local congregations—has access, a latent power, to influence most people. This is in sharp contrast with the church's access in Europe, where church attendance is 4% in Finland, 12% in France, and 14% in Great Britain according to a 1986 Gallup Poll.

Yet....Japan, with almost no Christians, has one quarter as many single parents as America, and every European country and Canada do twice as well as the United States in holding two-parent families together. Clearly, the nation with the *deepest church penetration* has the *least impact* on central issues involving rearing of children.

<b>US:</b>	<b>22.9%</b> of homes headed by a single parent
Japan:	5.9% of homes headed by a single parent
United Kingdom:	12.7% of homes headed by a single parent
France:	10.9% of homes headed by a single parent
	West Germany:
	17.5% of homes headed by a single parent
Canada:	14.8% of homes headed by a single parent

(Source: Bureau of the Census report, "*Children's Well-Being: An International Comparison*," Bureau of the Census, 1992.)<sup>3</sup>

In this culture, the decline of strong supportive parental ties with their children has produced another detrimental side effect. During the 1960's, the period of adolescence spanned ages thirteen to nineteen. By the late 1980's, however, sociologists had extended adolescence from age twelve to *age thirty*. (This assumes that the beginning of adolescence is marked by the onset of puberty and ends when an individual takes complete responsibility for his or her actions and decisions in life.) Our culture has, in effect, produced a generation of "adult adolescents" ill-equipped to assume the roles of responsible adulthood and leadership.

At the retreat center we were asked in 1985 to conduct a singles ministry representing many different churches in our region. We did this for about two and a half years until individual churches began their own singles ministry. The average age of those who attended our monthly potluck and quarterly retreats was 28-29 years. The size of the group varied from thirty to sixty people. Except for one or two, the participants had never been married. Only a few resided at home with their parents; many lived alone in apartments.

Over a several month period we encouraged these individuals to ask their parents, "Is it a joy for you to have me as your child?" The vast majority of the singles were held captive by their fears. They could not get up the courage to ask their folks that question. Perhaps seven of the group did inquire. Their testimonies to the others were filled with wonderful love and affirmation on the part of the parents, much to the inquirers' surprise. Still, the majority could not overcome their fear to approach the very people who had once changed their diapers.

Many of these people were college graduates and had experienced a certain measure of personal freedom due to disposable income and an enormous amount of discretionary time. Many of their options and decisions centered around what "toys" to buy and what activities to occupy those extra hours. Their maturity level was commensurate with that of the 14-17 year-olds we had guided in youth groups during the early 1970's. No matter what counsel or suggestions we presented, little change was effected in the lives of most of them. (At that time, we were still unaware of how crippling the demise of the three-generation family had been as it impacted personal maturation.) We have followed the lives of many of these men and women, observing a disquieting pattern of migration

from one singles group to another to yet another.

About a year after we were “relieved of duty” from the singles ministry as various churches developed their own singles groups, a man we’ll call Bill came to us. He had been asked to start a singles group on behalf of his church, the largest congregation in our area. Someone on the church staff had recommended that he talk with us. After our introduction Mike asked, “Bill, do you know what hell on earth is? It is being forty, single, and wishing you had been married the whole time.” He peered at Mike sadly, replying, “I’m forty, single, and wishing I had been married all that time.” As we conversed, Mike encouraged him to pray for an older grandparent-aged couple to conduct the singles ministry. We had discovered that even in our forties, we were too young to significantly help our single friends. Bill disregarded our advice, and after one or two years of struggling with the group, suffered an emotional collapse.

How often do you labor in your own strength, even for “good” causes, only to discover that what *seems good* but is outside of God’s purpose and timing will not bear the lasting fruit of changed lives?

“Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain” (Psalm 127:1).

Today, many Christians question the meaning of our forms of worship and service. They dutifully attend services and meetings, yet are burdened by the meaninglessness of so much that is traditionally a part of our churches. They sense a need for a new perspective, a new awareness...Their Sunday-at-eleven culture is timed to fall between the two milking hours in the agricultural society. Sermons remain one of the last forms of public discourse where it is *culturally forbidden to talk back...*

Made up, usually, of a small inner core of believers who assume the necessary posts of leadership with gratitude and devotion,...[leadership is] surrounded by a cloud of *uninvolved and mildly approving witnesses*...Basically, we do not want anything to happen on Sunday morning that will upset our daily routine. We want to be ‘inspired,’ to come away with a warm feeling, *but we do not want to be disturbed*, so subconsciously we structure the service in order to assure safe, predictable, comfortable results...

We say that our faith must be lived—that Christ invades us to transform every aspect of daily life. Yet we teach this faith in formalized classes or sermons *far out of a life context*...We say that every believer is a priest, gifted and responsible for building up others in the Body of Christ. And we bring adults to church, set them down and *tell them to listen* to a teacher or to the pastor. They have *exercised no ministry, held no responsibility* but to be quiet and orderly, and have *helped no one* by their presence...

We say that parents are responsible for the Christian nurture of their children. Yet we develop *more and more church programs* to minister to them and thus pro-

mote the idea that parents can turn their children over to the church and *the church will do the job* of nurturing them...

It does not matter what we say. *What we do* talks most convincingly. And the fact is that our current church patterns and our educational programming *intellectualize Christianity*, promote *parental irresponsibility*, *prevent believers from ministering* to one another, and permit Christians to feel comfortable *without any personal ministry*.(emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>

Prophetically penned by Lawrence O. Richards in his book, *A New Face For The Church*, do these observations correctly describe the present state of the church in the United States? Or more specifically, can you see any similarity to what is happening in *your* congregation?

David Wilkerson, pastor of the Times Square Church in New York City, wrote in his 6-13-94 Pulpit Series letter,

The denominational church system appears to be in the throes of death. It has almost no influence in the secular world, no mighty power in Christ. Growing numbers of ministers are falling on all sides—to adultery, covetousness, pride and perversions of all kinds. Pastors...are bringing in entertainment and showmanship...[and] many pastors today are cowards when it comes to naming sin. They merely go through the motions of the ministry, having a form of godliness but no power. It is because they have grown comfortable in their position. They have lost the touch of God and no longer hear His voice.<sup>5</sup>

In May, 1994, Wilkerson stated,

I believe the gospel can't be fully preached unless it is accompanied by the power and demonstration of the Holy Ghost—working mighty wonders, proving the gospel is true...The church today has become weak and ineffective. Why? Because it no longer believes in the supernatural! Theologians tell us that at some point God quit performing mighty deeds. Yet, exactly when all of this supernatural activity stopped, no one can say!" (Authors' comment: This theological position reflects *revisionism*, altering Scripture to reconcile its meaning with current cultural beliefs and standards.) Wilkerson continues, "The miracles of this last-day church will be genuine, real, indisputable, undeniable—and yet they will not be well-known. Instead, they will issue forth from the hands of ordinary, holy, separated saints who know God and are intimate with Jesus...If you think you're too ordinary for God to use, listen closely: God is not going to do His last-day work through big-name evangelists or pastors...The fact is, God is going to need every housewife, teenager, elderly person and all who love Him to carry out His mighty work!"<sup>6</sup>

C. Peter Wagner, professor of church growth at Fuller Theological Seminary in

Pasadena, California, offered this in *Ministries Today*:

Rapid change is taking place in the landscape of worldwide Christianity...the form that churches are taking is so different from past eras...By far, the most rapidly growing segment of Christianity on all six continents is a type of church that does not fit traditional categories or classifications...Perhaps one title that would fit is the term 'post-denominational'. These churches are characterized by indigenous leadership, contemporary worship, concert prayer, power ministries and mutual affiliation based on spiritual rather than legal and bureaucratic ties.<sup>7</sup>

A trend of thought is evident in these quotations: a movement away from an institutional and hierarchical system toward a daily reliance on the Lord that empowers individual believers to worshipful obedience.

***“As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him,  
‘Look, Teacher! What massive stones!  
What magnificent buildings!’ ‘Do you see all these  
great buildings?’ replied Jesus.  
‘Not one stone here will be left on another; every one  
will be thrown down’”*** (Mark 13:1,2).

You must not let the size of your congregation or the beauty of your place of worship deceive you. Massive congregations filled with apathetic spectators are not what the Lord intended. Wayne Jacobsen, in *A Passion For God's Presence*, illustrates Satan's plan to make the church big and impersonal:

In the third century Satan must have called a BIG meeting with his demons. Hades 1, he probably called it. Since persecution had failed so miserably, this diabolical council needed to develop a new strategy to undermine the life of the church...The objectives were clear: The plan would have to diffuse the self-sacrificing love that carried the church through conflict, distract it from intimacy with God, and devalue the importance of the individual believer...Someone came up with a very simple idea: 'Trying to keep it small hasn't worked—let's make it big!' What would happen if the church suddenly became acceptable? Many would come just for social reasons. They would quickly dilute those who are really in God's clutches. And imagine all the programs and activities they would have to plan to keep those people happy. Nothing chokes out intimacy as well as busyness. The church would eventually become a machine, chewing up individuals instead of loving them. They couldn't possibly teach all the followers to walk with God personally, so they would soon substitute rules and guidelines for His ever-present voice. The machine would have to be run by professionals. The others would become nothing more than spectators and billpayers.<sup>8</sup>

Whether or not such a demonic meeting actually occurred is debatable, but the decep-

tion of the demonic goal can readily be seen throughout the church today: "Size equals success." We were visiting friends in a large Florida city a few years ago. As they drove us around the city, our host pointed out different church buildings. Many were vacant. His tale sounded something like, "This one once had 5,000 in attendance... This one had 3,000... This one..." Each church we were shown had grown to tremendous size and then destroyed itself from within.

Soon after our visit to Florida, we were visiting other friends outside Washington, DC. As we drove down one of the main streets enroute to the Sunday morning worship service, our host remarked that this particular street was listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. It contained more churches than any other street in the world! As we drove along, Karl pointed out which churches had split from others along that same thoroughfare. Interestingly, during the service we attended, a letter of reconciliation from the church leadership was read to the congregation. It was addressed to the congregation from which they had split some years earlier. This state of affairs would not be so serious if the two examples cited represented just a few isolated cases in the US. However, we are now talking about the rule, not the exception. Our churches have become *human institutions*, not *living spiritual organisms*.

Corroborating this thought is the following from Ernest Wright in *The Rule of God*:

God, through the work of the Spirit, has always been at war with human institutionalism, because the institution becomes idolatrous, self-perpetuating, and self-worshipping, because church membership becomes synonymous with the new birth, because man tries to make the Spirit follow law." How complex we have made the simplicity of the gospel, with our "programs, methods, organizations and a world of nervous activities which occupy time and attention but can never satisfy the longing of the heart. The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship, and that servile imitation of the world which marks our promotional methods all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all.<sup>9</sup>

John Stott, a well-known Christian author, was asked to explain why Christianity has declined in the West and how this process can be avoided as more and more of the world becomes Westernized. Stott replied,

It began with these philosophers who mounted a frontal attack on the Christian church, seeking to replace *revelation* with *reason*... And the church was feeble to capitulate to that assault... Another reason why Christianity is declining is that what is declining is *pseudo-Christianity*. It is not the authentic Christianity described in the Gospels and the New Testament... Christianity has declined in the West because Christian people who claim to follow Christ *don't look like it*... If Christians lived like Jesus Christ, the world would be at our feet today. The greatest hindrance to the spread of the gospel is the church. The church that is intended to be a stepping stone to faith is more often a *stumbling block to faith*. (emphasis added)<sup>10</sup>

Probably the biggest reason for the church's difficulty in breaking its ties with people management systems and programs is that *institutionalism*, an established and recognized body that performs a particular function, is so prevalent in our culture. The culture, more than God's Word, now influences the church. Both Jesus and the early Church kept organized institutionalism to a minimum, preferring the power of the Spirit and the relationships among believers to provide ministry. They could see from the Hebrew Scriptures and from the society around them that the institution of the priestly system had failed to produce an obedient people who loved and served the Lord.

Institutional efforts can provide a guise of success even where the vitality of Jesus isn't real. That's what is so deceptive about it. You think you're pleasing God for all your activity and its results, yet beneath the programs and entertainment lies an emptiness that few will admit. Institutionalism deceives you into feeling good about yourself even after your responsiveness to God has ceased. Our dear friend Casey Sabella was preaching in England a few years ago when he asked the congregation this question: "If Jesus Christ were dead, how long would you keep on doing what you are doing?" The people were convicted as they realized and admitted that *everything would go on just as it had*. The institution provided all that they needed or wanted to meet their social and religious needs.

***"You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.' So from that day on they plotted to take his life"*** (John 11:50,53).

Another hindrance to obedient intimacy with God is "vested interest" in the church. Vested interests are found in those people who, because of position and power, attempt to keep the status quo. For example, while Mike was in the Navy he read a dramatic account of vested interest that had required an Act of Congress to overcome. During the early decades of this century, airplanes were introduced aboard ships. The pilots of these aircraft were in control of the missions of the planes, free from the direct decision making of the ship's captain. Throughout the Navy's history, a ship's captain had always exercised total dominion over everything that was aboard his vessel. The captains perceived the pilots' autonomy as a threat to their own vested interest of absolute authority. A number of ship captains tried to jeopardize the success of aircraft missions aboard ships. Some actually endangered pilots' lives by putting their ship into a turning maneuver just as a plane was attempting to land onboard. Therefore Congress stepped in and enacted a law that any ship with aircraft stationed onboard was required to have a captain who was also a qualified aviator. Today over half the people in the Navy are connected to aviation in some way. Once vested interests are exposed and challenged, changes can occur.

In *A Passion For God's Presence*, Wayne Jacobsen wonderfully exposes the power of vested interests in churches today. Jacobsen illustrates his point with the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes* in which a group of royal advisors seeks to keep their jobs by lying about the emperor's nudity. As the king parades through the town in his "new

clothes,” a little boy with no vested interest at stake shouts the obvious: “He’s naked!” Jacobsen correlates the fable with the history of the church:

It’s easy for us now to look back at those generations, not sharing their vested interests, and see how believers sold out to political and personal corruption during the Middle Ages; to high finance prior to the Reformation; to terror and murder during the Inquisition; to natural reason during the Enlightenment; and to liberalism early in this century...We stay captive to deception by the same appeal of personal interest...So it is with the church today: many people are making Christianity just what they want it to be, whatever fits their interest...It doesn’t take great wisdom to unmask deceit—only a desire to look at things the way they really are, not the way we want to see them.<sup>11</sup>

A growing number of observers are now pointing to the church in the United States and crying, “We are spiritually naked!”

A tale from *The New England Church Resource Handbook* further illustrates the concept of vested interests.

Henry Cabot Lodge, a [former] senator from Massachusetts, was convinced that many bureaucrats have little else on their minds than maintaining their power and position (a problem sometimes encountered in churches, as well as government). ‘They are a lot like old Si Haskins,’ he said. One day we came upon Si sitting on the dam up above the town. ‘What are you doing, Si?’ we asked. ‘I’m paid to shoot the muskrats,’ he replied. ‘They’re diggin’ under the dam.’ ‘Well, there’s one over there right now.’ We pointed to a big one with his eyes just above water. ‘Why don’t you shoot him?’ ‘You don’t think I want to lose my job, do you?’ he replied.<sup>12</sup>

The Pharisees of Israel had their own vested interests. Many people had put their faith in Jesus following the raising of Lazarus from the dead.

*“But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. The chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin. ‘What are we accomplishing?’ they asked. ‘Here is this man performing many miraculous signs. If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him’...Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, ‘You know nothing at all! You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.’...So from that day on they plotted to take his life” (John 11:46-50,53).*

Think about how far the vested interest people would go to protect their positions: “So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him” (John 12:10,11). Do you wonder if Lazarus, having been brought back to life, ever found out that the priests were planning to kill him? At what point does a vested interest so thoroughly blind a person (who *thinks* he or she is doing God’s will!) from discerning the truth?

***“Do not go beyond what is written.’ Then you will not take pride in one man over against another”*** (1 Corinthians 4:6).

Revisionism. Does that word mean anything to you? Most of us are so subtly influenced by its effects that we don’t even notice. The *Random House Dictionary* defines revisionism as “attempting to *reevaluate and restate the past* based on newly acquired standards.”(emphasis added)<sup>13</sup> Many school textbooks are now being written with gross distortions of history or with omission of formerly significant facts and data with the express purpose of appeasing particular political or social agendas. For example, most references to the spiritual heritage of our founding fathers have been revised to reflect instead a desire for greater economic prosperity in the New World. In order to appease the Arab countries that provide them oil, several European universities are teaching from revised history books which claim that the Jewish Holocaust never took place. (An ancient proverb says, “Lies written in ink can never replace facts written in blood.”)

Not even the Bible is safe from revisionism. One version contains a genderless God to accommodate the feminist movement. Another has had all verses pertaining to the miraculous and supernatural events removed to accommodate the rationalistic and scientific community.

We are reminded of Frank Peretti’s novel, *Piercing the Darkness*. Although fiction, the book deals with the conscious demonic effort to undermine people’s confidence in the reality that absolute truth exists. The Bible tells us, “*The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent, called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him*” (Revelation 12:9). Jesus tells us that lies are Satan’s native tongue: “*You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies*” (John 8:44).

Lies and distortions have been with the church since its earliest years. Paul dealt with a serious deception regarding the return of the Lord: “*Concerning the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to Him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come*” (2 Thessalonians 2:1,2). The deceiver has been at work since the Garden of Eden and it is no surprise that his work continues unabated.

Revisionism within the church has had a profound effect throughout the centuries. Many today think that the customs, practices, even the organization of the church date from the time of Jesus and the apostles. History shows that prejudice and vested interests over the centuries “revised” the operation and function of the early Church, handing down to believers something far different than what was intended by the Lord. In fact, much of what you consider key elements of church practice may even violate 1 Corinthians 4:6, quoted earlier. We will explore these factors in subsequent chapters.

***“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true”*** (Acts 17:11).

The opposite of revisionism is *apperception*, interpreting new information in terms of the old or what you already know beyond doubt to be true. In other words, a newer teaching or practice is evaluated in light of older, proven truths. Jesus relied on apperception in His teachings by often quoting the Old Testament and then applying that truth to a situation He was addressing. For instance, while speaking in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read aloud from the scrolls the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 61: *“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”* (vv. 1,2). His listeners already believed this prophecy to be true, so He used these verses as the basis for understanding Himself, telling them, *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”* (Luke 4:16-21).

To justify His disciples plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath (see Matthew 12:1-8), Jesus reminded His critics of the commonly known fact of “sanctified Sabbath breaking”. David and his hungry troops had entered the tabernacle and eaten the consecrated bread that by law was relegated solely to the priests (see 1 Samuel 21:3-6). On the Sabbath, the priests regularly broke the commandment that demanded no work on that day in order to offer sacrifices and circumcise babies (see Matthew 12:6, from Hosea 6:6). So important were the Hebrew Scriptures as a basis for the Gospel message that they were quoted, or apperceived, throughout the gospels, epistles, and the Revelation.

The Bereans were commended for studying the Scriptures, apperceiving Paul’s new teachings in light of Hebraic scriptural truths (see Acts 17:11). Due to the extraordinary amount of revisionism which has entered the church over the centuries and the concomitant loss of the early Church vitality, the authors are writing with apperception in mind, trying to clearly discern God’s intent at the time the Scriptures were written.

In order to be true to the Word of God you must be willing to depart from today’s church structure and traditions that may seem “sacred” yet have no biblical foundation. Appropriate the nobleness of the Bereans, investigating the Bible to apply what God has said. Like the Bereans, you also may have a burning desire to reach the point in your faith experience in which the practices of that faith *“do not go beyond what is written”* (see 1 Corinthians 4:6).

If we are honest with ourselves, the Christianity that revisionism and institutionalism have produced bears little of Christ’s image. God is seeking a people who long to be touched by Him personally with the intensity of David: *“O my Strength, I watch for you; you, O God, are my fortress, my loving God”* (Psalm 59:9,10). The Lord penetrates hearts, not programs. That’s what intimacy is all about, and that is what you are called to pass on to others. You cannot expect to impact prisoners of the spiritual forces of darkness throughout the world—or even your family, neighbors, and coworkers—if you hold out a formula to them but withhold your heart.

Consider the merits of the following poem. As you appraise the loss of the Hebraic influence of the early Church, you may see in today's church the dominance of Greek philosophy (which concludes that the spiritual realm is far holier than the physical) and Roman organization (which insists that a hierarchy of church leadership is necessary in order to perpetuate the church system). Ask yourself, "*Is this what God wants?*" Have the reforms of the past centuries gone far enough to reestablish the biblical Church?

## THE CLIFF

'Twas a dangerous cliff, as they freely confessed,  
Though to walk near its crest was so pleasant;  
But over its terrible edge there had slipped  
A duke and full many a peasant.  
The people said something would have to be done,  
But their projects did not at all tally.  
Some said, "Put a fence 'round the edge of the cliff,"  
Some, "An ambulance down in the valley."

The lament of the crowd was profound and was loud,  
As their hearts overflowed with their pity;  
But the cry for the ambulance carried the day  
As it spread through the neighboring city.  
A collection was made to accumulate aid,  
And the dwellers in highway and alley  
Gave dollars or cents—not to furnish a fence—

"For the cliff is all right if you're careful," they said;  
"And if folks ever slip and are dropping,  
It isn't the slipping that hurts them so much  
As the shock down below—when they're stopping."  
So for years (we have heard), as these mishaps occurred  
Quick forth would the rescuers sally,  
To pick up the victims who fell from the cliff  
With the ambulance down in the valley.

Said one, to his plea, "It's a marvel to me  
That you'd give so much greater attention  
To repairing results than to curing the cause;  
You had much better aim at prevention.  
For the mischief, of course, should be stopped at its source,  
Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally.  
It is far better sense to rely on a fence  
Than an ambulance down in the valley."

“He is wrong in his head,” the majority said;  
“He would end all our earnest endeavor,  
He’s a man who would shirk this responsible work,  
But we will support it forever.  
Aren’t we picking up all just as fast as they fall  
And giving them care liberally?  
A superfluous fence is of no consequence,  
If the ambulance works in the valley.”

The story looks queer as we’ve written it here,  
But things oft occur that are stranger.  
More humane, we assert, than to succor the hurt,  
Is the plan of removing the danger.  
The best possible course is to safeguard the source,  
Attend to things rationally.  
Yes, build up the fence, and let us dispense  
With the ambulance down in the valley.

Author Unknown

Many of the past church reforms stemmed from arguments over revisionist writings. You are experiencing the results even today: thousands of denominations established because of doctrinal divisions. Each disagreement operates like the ambulance down in the valley. Today’s doctrinal differences have distracted God’s people from personal intimacy both with Jesus and with each other. Individual congregations keep people occupied with programs and meetings but generally fail to lead them to the fullness of loving obedience in Christ. In fact, church busyness often lures people away from intimacy. Instead of a source of edification and mutual support, “church life” is all too often a well-spring of pettiness, gossip, and manipulation.

It appears that there are two possible options open to the church: One, to continue to ‘effect repairs’, *i.e.*, to put the ambulance down in the valley pursuing the mistakes of the past, struggling to patch up the church as it has been revised over the centuries. If you use the same processes of reforming the church that your forefathers used, you will find yourself still clinging to non-biblical or extra-biblical forms and patterns that have, over time, become hallowed because of tradition. Just possibly, this generation can be honest with itself and recognize that the whole edifice is crumbling. A whole generation may reject empty form that lacks living substance.

Your second option is to accept the challenge of restoring the true biblical foundations of the early Church. If you understand that Jesus is the only Head and Builder of His Church, you must search the Bible for what He and the apostles presented in terms of the Hebraic framework in which it was initially addressed. Those willing to do this can work together in agreement with the Holy Spirit, and in our time see a true expression of the Church of Jesus Christ. Will it be popular? Probably not. Will it be powerful? Yes, exceedingly so!