

When God is Bored with Church (Chapter 3)

Several research polls were taken two decades ago aimed at discovering why church attendance was down. Why were people leaving the Church? Two answers were discovered by these polls: Church is irrelevant and church is boring.

The Reverend Jim Holland is the senior minister of St. Patrick's Presbyterian Church in Collierville, Tennessee. Once in a Sunday morning worship at St. Patrick's a mouse scampered across the floor of their sanctuary. Some moved their feet, some picked up their feet and others stood in their chairs. Jim said that no one was sitting still. Maybe God was turning the frozen chosen into lively charismatics! Finally an agile deacon chased the mouse down and took him outside.

I know that the young people there that day must have enjoyed the mouse episode. They probably talked about that service with laughter and excitement. Then again, maybe they were the ones who turned the mouse loose.

We all have experienced our children not liking to come to church. We have experienced that same monotony as adults. I can remember being bored when I was young...I can remember pretending to be sick so I could stay home. Many of us said to ourselves when our parents were taking us to church, "I hate church...when I get old enough I am not going to church."

One Sunday when I was young I traveled with my father to Dinwiddie, Virginia where he was scheduled to preach on a Sunday evening. This was a small church in a rural community. The attractive church building was made of brown stone. While my father was preaching a man slowly stood staring intently at the stone wall behind the pulpit. He took three or four steps toward the front and my father stopped preaching and asked him what was wrong. "Dr. Sartelle, there is snake on the wall behind you. I thought it was a crack in the wall...but then it moved." Dad, and several men looked closely and it was not a crack...it was a copperhead that blended into the brown stone of the wall. We did not pass it around like they did in some mountain churches...we took it

outside and killed it. Over a half a century has passed and I still remember being in church that evening.

Maybe services would be more interesting and have more life if we occasionally had mice on the floor and snakes on the wall.

But then sometimes we are not the only ones who hate church...or find it boring. Through the prophet Malachi God told Israel that He was offended with what was happening in church and was bored with it. That is a new twist isn't it? God hating church...God bored with church.

It is important that we know why God was upset and bored with their worship. The modern church has spent millions trying to make worship interesting to the world, but I find precious few churches asking the question of real significance...What does God think of our worship?

What had happened to this church in Malachi day?

The people in Isaiah and Jeremiah's day had turned to the worship of idols...they had brought the gods of the pagans into the Temple of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But the awful humiliation and exile suffered by Israel had taught them a lesson. The problem in Malachi's day was not idolatry. They were not worshipping the gods of the pagans.

They were coming to the Temple of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and going through the motions of worshipping Him. So what was their problem?

They were dishonoring God with the way they worshipped.

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD's table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 1:6-8)

Who was speaking in these verses? God. To whom was He speaking? He was addressing the priests and the worshippers of Israel. Now they had been doing this for some time. Yet they had not heard God speaking to them. They were treating God as if He was not there...as if He were dead...as if He was a grandfather figure and was just glad they were coming to the Temple. Look what God said in verse 8... "treat the Governor like you do me...take those sickly lambs that you cannot even sell in the market and give it to the Governor...see what he thinks." God was saying, "The Governor is real to you...you hear the Governor speak..." But I am not real...you have not been listening to my voice. You come through the doors of the Temple as if I am not there.

Suddenly God was talking back and they understood.

They were coming to the Temple of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...they were coming to the Temple of the God of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, David, and Daniel. But His reality had been lost in the ceremony...with religious activity...the religious activity had become empty ceremony. How do we know that they had lost the reality of God in their worship?

They were bringing lambs that they could not sell at market for sacrifice...they were lame, or deformed, or sick. But that was okay...who was going to say anything? They were there in the Temple. They were bringing sacrifices. They were keeping their religious traditions. Who was there to say anything?

"When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor?" says the LORD of hosts.

"Try bringing those lambs to someone who is real...someone whose response you can see. Bring that mangy, sick lamb to the governor...there would be a response you would not want to hear. So, in fact, you would not take them to the governor." God confronts them with His reality by carrying on a conversation with them...talking back to them.

There is no worse insult than being treated as if you were not there...having your presence totally ignored. Families and friends often do this when a family member or friend is seriously ill in the hospital. I

will see families talk as if the patient cannot hear them. His eyes are closed...he may have several tubes running in and out of his body...maybe he has not spoken in a week. I was a hospital room with a patient's family...he had not said a word for a couple of days...the doctor's prognosis had been dark. The family members were saying things like, "We know he would want this...we know he would not want that." Plans were being made for what would happen when he died. Suddenly they heard his strong voice, "I am not dead yet, and I am seriously thinking about changing my will."

When Winston Churchill was quite old he was carried into Parliament...he had to be helped along...the proceedings were stopped until he finally got to his place. A young member of Parliament several rows behind the former Prime Minister spoke to his neighbor, "He is old...they say he is senile...they say he should stay home and not interfere with the great responsibilities that we have in this room." Churchill turned to the young man and said, "They say the old man can't hear either."

There will always be results from ignoring the presence of God in worship.

1. There will be a lack of seriousness in our regard for God.

Malachi 1:6-7

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?'"

The word in verse six translated "honor" is the Hebrew word for "weight." To treat someone with honor is to treat them in a weighty manner...to take them seriously. If we do not see a living and speaking God of Scripture in our worship, we will not honor Him as we do others...that was the point God was bringing to the people...the governor of a petty province carried more weight with them than the God they worshipped...

One of my favorite hymns is the spiritual...*Were You There?*

"Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?
Oh sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Oh sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?
Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?
Oh sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when God raised him from the tomb?"

The answer is "YES...I WAS THERE..." And I return there when I come to worship every week...I return to the altar...I return to Sinai...I return to God in all of His vastness, holiness, majesty, and glory...I return to Calvary...I return to the resurrection.

2. There will be a lack of zeal in and for our worship...

But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD. Malachi 1:13

They were weary with their worship...they had grown tired...they were blasé.

When we see the God of Abraham...the God who demanded that Abraham sacrifice His only son...when we see the God of the gospel who sacrificed His own Son for the very people who rejected Him...when we meet with that God the one thing we will not be is bored.

They had disconnected from the living God who speaks and that resulted in there being a lack of reverence in their worship and a lack of zeal in their hearts.

God observed this and made an astounding statement. “Stop it. Don’t come to the temple. Just shut the doors and stay home.”

“Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand.”

Malachi 1:10

This is what I fear more than anything else as a minister. That we will get home and the Lord will say to me and to the churches I have served, “John, what were you doing? Elders, deacons, members what were you doing? All those years of coming every Sunday...useless...wasted...you would have done Me a favor if you had just closed the church...shut it down.”

At the beginning of this chapter I spoke of how bored I was in church when I was young. I spoke of how I sometimes hated going to church. Somewhere along the way Jesus came along. Calvary got my attention. The Holy Spirit showed me my sin...showed me the gospel...I saw the living God and I began to love the worship of God.

In those early days, the problem was not in the singing, prayers, and sermons...it was in me...it was in my heart.

Next Lord’s day instead of giving your critique when you leave the service...get alone with the Lord and ask Him what He thought of your worship. That is what we need to do as ministers, officers, and members. What does God think of our worship? We need to ask Him.

I have changed since those early days when I sat on hard pews that were made 100 years before I was born. I no longer think that we should make it more interesting with mice or snakes...maybe instead of letting loose mice or snakes...we need to pray that God will set loose the Holy Spirit in our lives. I don’t think anyone was bored at Pentecost.

