

Devotional Thoughts

There was an article circulating on the internet a few weeks ago. It was a survey that proposed to explain why some children who grow up attending church continue to do so when they become adults while others do not. The article didn't document the research, but I thought its conclusion was worthy of discussion.

There are three main things that tend to separate children who will continue attending church as adults from those children who will drop out as soon as they can:

1. As children, they had a real conversion experience. At some point these young ones made a spiritual connection with the God they came to church to worship.
2. They are engaged in a systematic study of the Bible. They regularly attended classes at church that taught them the Word of God. They don't just hear the same stories repeated over and over, but they are taught an overview of the whole Bible, and are shown how it relates to their present world.
3. Finally, the children who most often stay in church as adults live in homes where what they are taught at church is lived out. Their church and their parents are on the same page. Their parents practice what their pastor preaches.

So how does your church and family measure up? Many parents expect the church to do all the religious teaching and training, when parents should be the primary spiritual guides in their children's lives. On the other hand, Sunday school teachers should realize the impact their class can have on young lives. Let's make sure we are teaching and training our children to be successful Apostolic adults by purposely teaching and training at home and at church.

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Below is a list of ways you can set up your children for failure, by adopting the imaginary perspective of one of the wandering Israelites:

- 1. I did not have faith.** When God desired to lead us into the Promised Land, I sided with the majority who felt that we had neither the resources nor the ability to accomplish such a huge mission, rather than believing God. After all, there is safety in numbers, and the majority should rule.
- 2. When things didn't please me, I longed for the past.** I valued the confinement of the familiar past more than I anticipated the joys of a free future. With the familiar, at least you know what you've got. The future is uncertain and there are no guarantees. A bird in the hand is better than two in some bush that exists only in your (or some preacher's!) imagination.
- 3. When nobody was there to make me live for God, I became an idolater.** Serving God was just hard work. I never developed a relationship with Him.

4. I blamed my leaders when things got tough. I refused to take responsibility for my own choices and actions. I didn't ask to be born, and this little trek in the desert was hardly my idea, so why shouldn't I put the blame where it belongs?

5. I made an issue of what I perceived as my leader's mistakes. I made sure he (and everyone else) knew when I disagreed with him. The fact that one can never destroy their leader's authority without compromising their own wasn't important to me. He is the one who said God was going to tell him how to get us all to this wonderful land that flows with milk and honey. The good time he promised isn't exactly what I am currently experiencing, so don't blame me for talking about it. He is the one you ought to be complaining about.

6. I always saw the bad side of things. When so many experiences are bad, how can you not notice?

7. I didn't take God's Word seriously. You've got to admit, some of it just doesn't make sense. Come on! Killing your best lamb? Isn't blood the whole point of the sacrifice? So if the lamb only has three legs, what's the big deal? It still has plenty of blood. And why does our tribe have to set up camp in the same position relative to the tabernacle every time? What difference does it make? I really don't need some preacher telling me what God means. I can read and think for myself.

8. I expected success to always come easily. I don't see a God who can create a universe in six days needing forty years to get me to the Promised Land. He created the earth by speaking words, yet expects me to walk all the way to my new home?

9. I didn't have the courage to stand up and speak out for God. I'm not a preacher. God never spoke to me out of a burning bush. Sure, I saw a few amazing things like water coming out of a rock, quail covering the ground every evening, rivers parting so a couple million people could cross on dry land, but does that mean I am now God's attorney? There are other people who are better at that sort of thing. Anyway, I can't take a chance on offending some of these guys. I've got to live with them, you know.

10. I preferred earthly things over heavenly things. They called it angels' food, but after a while I grew tired of that light and fluffy stuff. We may not have had a lot in Egypt, but the onion and garlic certainly livened up the cuisine.

Be careful what you do. The lives you affect most are the ones dearest to you. Build for eternity.

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Who would want to live in a house built by a carpenter who couldn't decide how far apart the joists and studs should be? Today he might settle on sixteen inches, but tomorrow think it silly to waste all that good lumber and set them thirty inches apart. What security is there when a policeman decides which laws he will enforce based on how he feels each day? Would you trust a teacher who said to ignore scientific laws that didn't make sense to you? And who would have their car serviced by a mechanic who just disconnected all the parts that frustrated him? No sane person would accept any of those behaviors because we know there are proven standards that govern each scenario, and following them will result in a strong house, an equitable system of justice, a comprehensive education, or a finely-tuned automobile.

It is amazing to watch folks who would never accept excuses like these borrow those identical arguments to describe their own response to God's commands in the Bible. If they can't see a practical purpose for some command, they disregard it. Their interpretation of certain passages depends upon which friend is currently exerting the most peer pressure, so they vacillate from day to day. They assume that God inspired Scripture in such a way that it will mesh perfectly with how they happen to feel on any given day.

If that is the case, why did Paul talk so much about Christians being crucified with Christ? Why did Jesus speak about a cross that must be picked up every day? If we can toss out Scripture verses that make no sense to us, let peer pressure define unpopular commands, and observe His laws (or not!) based on how we feel, where is the need for a cross?

Paul wrote, "I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (I Timothy 2:8). In the following verses, he added women to the discussion saying, "In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works" (I Timothy 2:9-10). "Without wrath and doubting" are key words Paul applies to both men and women. A man's prayer and a woman's adorning, he says, must spring from a heart free of anger and internal debate.

If God wanted only to affirm our feelings, Calvary was a needless sacrifice. But His aim was much higher than that. "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Corinthians 5:21). There are some things we need to settle once and for all. Constant questioning of basic truths saps our faith and generates frustration. Decide what God means, accept it, embrace it, and trust that He really does work all things for our good. When we accept that God knows best, that His ways are above ours, we can surrender our will to His and free our souls from much frustration.

Both the effect of our prayers and the value of our works are dependent upon the state of our hearts. We should not neglect prayer or works, but make sure they both flow from a surrendered heart in which God's love now resides. We must be holy, and without wrath and doubting.

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Your family has a culture. Your church has a culture. Your community has a culture. Your college has a culture. Everywhere you go, cultures compete to influence your life. So what's the big deal about culture? Each culture is designed to cultivate specific values and predictable outcomes. To achieve those results, the culture must encourage the behaviors that will produce them.

Why do Apostolic churches lose many young people during their middle and high school years? One reason is that they sometimes become more involved in their school culture than they are in the culture of their church. The behaviors and expectations driven by the culture of their schools become the dominant and familiar ones, and the results are predictable. When teens are involved in school and school events thirty-fifty hours per week, yet spend only five hours in church events, parents must make sure their family's culture aligns with that of the church. Otherwise their children may become more comfortable with their school environment, and that will become their greatest influence.

Some suggest we should adjust our Apostolic culture to make it easier for outsiders to join us. I'm all for eliminating unnecessary barriers that make our guests feel uncomfortable, but the only way to completely eliminate the uneasiness for those investigating the Apostolic culture is to completely change our identity. Some Apostolics, in their quest to show how friendly and welcoming they are, have done just that.

Years ago, I invited a young preacher from a big city to preach to our farming community church. One of the local farmers invited us to join him at a cafe for lunch. As the preacher and I arrived, I received a call from the farmer. One of his tractors needed repaired, so he was driving it to meet us for lunch. Since it wouldn't go very fast, he was letting me know he would be a few minutes late. When I relayed the information to the preacher, he went into shock. "Oh, man!" he said. "I'll die if he shows up here on a tractor."

The big city preacher was embarrassed by the small-town farmer's culture. He wanted to eliminate it so he wouldn't feel uncomfortable. But if we eliminate the farmer's culture, we also eliminate the crops that farmers produce. If you enjoy access to high quality food, you must safeguard the farmer's culture.

If you value the outcomes of the Apostolic life, then you must embrace the Apostolic culture and lifestyle. The Apostolic culture is well worth the cost required to preserve it.