

PART ONE

*“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets
and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to
gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks
under her wings, but you were not willing.
Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you,
you will not see Me again until you say, ‘Blessed is He
who comes in the name of the Lord.’”*

MATT 23:37-39 NIV

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

“I am choking to death!” my spirit screamed one hot summer Sunday as I fled the bowels of the dingy little church I made myself attend. Week after week I’d sat in my pew wondering what was wrong with me. I tried to keep my focus while I struggled to discern something worth remembering from the lips of the minister, the rhythm of the litany, or the voices of the choir. Instead there was only a dull guilt that inevitably followed the questions my brain would spit while my body sat like a stone in the narrow, hard pew.

“Is this all you’ve got, God? Is this Your best? I mean, is this all of what it means to be a Christian?” I asked. “Are you there, God, or are You just a ruse that someone came up with so that most of us would behave?”

I didn’t like myself for asking these questions and I sure didn’t want to feel what I felt or think what I thought, but the truth was I was bored. I felt dead. I thought the sermons were shallow and trite, and I couldn’t help but think that someone else in that congregation surely thought so too.

Spiritually speaking, I was dying. I had listened and tried to learn, but when I had shyly asked the spiritual questions that vexed me, I got answers that pointed back to the church. You need to keep coming to church. Try giving more of yourself to the church. Give more of your time, your energy, and your money to the church, I was either told or it was implied. When I desperately needed to be fed more God, all anyone knew how to do, and all *I* knew how to do, was to feed me more church. When I sought understanding on how to be fruitful, I was told to be busy. When I questioned how to grow into a mature Christian, I was given personal or world views on how to be a better person. But religion is not Christianity, busyness is not the same as fruitfulness, and growing into a mature Christian is a great deal more than being a good person. In those days I got nothing out of Sunday worship service. And, while some of that blame can be attributed to the superficial, ineffectual presentations of the church, most of it can be blamed on me.

Looking back, I believe God was pushing me away from everything and everyone but Him. He was making me hungry for Him and discontented with the church, a place I had instinctively come to be fed. God was pushing me hard to develop a one-on-one relationship with Him **first**. It took many years for me to get straight on all this and to step into stride with God. As I told one minister many years later, “I couldn’t see God for church.”

Now I understand that church is a place God created for Christians to *worship Him!* This is one place specifically designed and designated by God where like-minded people can go to encourage, exhort, and enrich one another while we *express* our love for God. Church was not designed to be the *source* of God’s love, but instead to be one of the most perfect expressions of His love. We are not to receive God’s love from the *institution* of the church. That intimate transaction is designed to take place through a one-on-one relationship

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between God and ourselves.

Eventually I came back to the church with a gift from God to worship there and with a keen desire to feed others, but I don’t know how many people make this circle. I do know that I come into contact with many people who have the same spiritual hunger and religious complaints that I used to have and I believe, sadly, that Satan is using these things to confuse and anger many people toward a slow spiritual death.

These Are The Facts

Years have gone by and my anxiety has been silenced into what, for me, is a beautiful, personal relationship with God. However, I don’t think that the feelings and thoughts I had back then are that uncommon today.

Barna Research, a company out of Ventura, California, that statistically and strategically documents spiritual trends throughout the world and specifically in the United States, doesn’t think so either. They have monitored church attendance in our country since the

mid-eighties. Barna says that 41 percent of those adults attending Christian churches are *not* born again.¹ (Barna identifies born again as the individual who claims to have an ongoing, personal relationship with Jesus Christ, who has confessed his sins to God, and who believes that he will live with God eternally solely because of the grace extended to him through Jesus Christ.)² “Most of these people have been attending Christian churches for years and years without really understanding the foundations of the Christian faith and its personal implications,”³ said George Barna, president of the company that conducts the surveys.

In other studies, Barna discovered some enlightening and alarming statistics that encompass beliefs about the Bible held, not only by the unchurched, but by those who attend church. *These indicate the ignorance of many Christians concerning the Word of God.* Three quarters of Americans believe that the Bible teaches that “God helps those who help themselves.” Though this is a popular quote in our country, it originated with a 17th-century English poet and was later popularized by Benjamin Franklin. It is not in the Bible.⁴ Fifty-six percent of all adults believe the Bible claims that the single, most important task in life is taking care of one’s family. Instead, the Bible commands that you love God first, with all your being, and that you then reach out to others with that divine love. Forty-nine percent of all adults believe that the Bible teaches that money is the root of all evil.⁵ The actual teaching says that it is the love of money that is the root of all evil. And, in 1998, Barna Research discovered that of those people who consistently attend church, the primary reason they do is for the social benefits offered and the doctrine declared by their particular institution.

It seems that one message coming out of the many studies Barna has conducted with those people who attend church is *that nearly half of them do not have a serious commitment to God*, many are there for social reasons, and most do not know what is in the Bible. Assuming that churches are a place to meet God, know God, worship Him, and serve Him, one wonders why many of those who do attend church are there and what do they do once they get there?

Meanwhile, the unchurched population of our country continues to grow. There are, Barna estimates, nearly one hundred million people who are unchurched, with Barna defining a person as unchurched if he or she has not attended a Christian church service at any time during the past six months other than special events such as weddings and

funerals.⁶ Nearly fifty million of these think of themselves as Christian and claim that at one time they did attend church. When these two groups were asked why they did not attend church, their overwhelming response was that they found no value in it.

Shadows of that conclusion were commonly given in my former church when members were asked why they no longer attended church. Sunday is our family day, we were told. Being too tired and wanting at least one day free of hassles and hurry, was another common reply. However, this too is a tacit extension of their first reason: no time. Still, people find time for what they value and all these excuses continue to beg the question, do we value church?

We found, said Barna in his book, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In*, “that the dominant reason for avoidance of church is the lack of time and interest. They (the unchurched) duck church because of *irrelevant* past experiences. The ongoing obstacles we must overcome to get people back into church he says are indifference and value.”⁷

“Millions of the unchurched do not care about church involvement because they cannot see any need to get involved. Millions more stay away because they cannot make the value equation work. When they calculate the amount of time and energy they would have to invest in the church they do not see a reasonable return in their investment.”⁸

Interestingly enough, almost half of the unchurched claim that having a close personal relationship with God is one of their top priorities in life and two-thirds consider their

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religious faith to be very important to them.⁹ Over ten million identify themselves as born-again believers.¹⁰ So, perhaps one way of interpreting our statistical picture of the unchurched is to say that they went to church, didn’t get much out of it, quit going, want something more, and are still looking.

All that is to say that there is definitely a problem in the body of Christianity today

that is evident in the lack of growth in church membership and in the annual increase in the number of unchurched individuals. Mainline Protestant churches have tried countless ways to correct the stagnation and decline by working through the institution of the church. However, the problem, as I have discovered, lies *within* the individual, not the corporation, and the solution to the problem begins with the Born-Again Christian who wants spiritual maturity and is *aware* that it needs to be reached.

Its as though the dull, discontented frustration that we feel between the walls of the church and the ways of the world is pushing us into another path and compelling us to choose, through faith, a way we cannot see but that we know must be God; a Christian evolution of sorts. To know when to walk and where to go on this path we must come to God first, and never take our eyes from Him. It is following God first in all things that lead to a much deeper relationship with God, and a higher road of living, authority, and power.¹¹

God is giving us ample signs and clues that it is time for the wheat to separate from the chaff, that it's time for us to choose whether we wish to stay in the wilderness or move into the Promised Land. The dullness and boredom that we experience week after week at our Sunday worship services, the very notion that we have heard this all before (because we have) are clues that it is time for us to begin our journey from a dry, dead spiritual wilderness to the satisfaction and fulfillment of God's Promised Land. Yet, instead of letting these signals compel us to move into a deeper relationship with God, they have often served to condemn us and convince us that we are odd and will never fit.

The truth is that those people destined to become mature Believers do not fit in and never will anywhere, with anything or anyone but God. We do not fit into the stale religious world of many of today's churches. Neither do we fit into a free-spirited nebula where there is no God—or at least not our God.

Interestingly enough, our discomfort and lack of place within the world is covered repeatedly in the Bible. According to God, the mature believer will always be out of place. John 17:14 tells us, **I have given them the Word, and the world hath hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.** Two verses later Christ says, **They are not of the world even as I am not of the world.** NASV

I Peter 2:11 goes so far as to call the Christian a pilgrim or sojourner, which when

reduced to the Greek means “alien.” He says, **Dearly beloved, I beseech you as aliens and pilgrims abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.** *KJV* What God is saying is that the mature Believer is called to Christ and will never fit into the world, much less be satisfied with what the world has to offer.

Think of it! You are a Christian made by and called by God almighty! This is what you were made to be! This is where you fit! This path is where you find your purpose, where you, if you choose, drink the cup that will fulfill you. Anything you do outside this narrow path that is led by church, society, culture, peers—anything or anyone other than God will not work and will not fulfill you.

Today, some Christians will step out and begin to follow the tugs of Christ on their heart. Others will not answer the call because the limitations of their soul dilute and garble their deepest needs and questions. God may be asking us to come into a more meaningful relationship with Him. Yet, even though we can feel His pull, it is difficult for many of us to hear the still quiet voice of God and what He is saying amidst our busy, maniacal lives. We know we need something, but lost in translation, that need explodes into a spastic grasp for more, more, more. Imagine how God sees us—a bunch of maniacal, stressed-out ninnyes looking and feeling like trapped rats running on tiny treadmills. Everything *we* know how to do draws the walls of our cage in closer and compels us to run faster. Full of ourselves and our ways, we allow no space or time to meet God’s ancient request to simply come. Yet, God, in all His mercy, stands by waiting and watching, shaking His head and asking, when are you going to have time for *Me*? In a frenzy we try to acquire more pleasure, peace, power, knowledge, church, freedom, appreciation, attention, respect, or whatever—the list goes on and on. Yet, all we need is God.

END NOTES

¹Barna Research Online, “Annual Study Reveals America is Spiritually Stagnant,” March 5, 2001

²Barna, George, *Grow Your Church From the Outside In*, (Gospel Light, Ventura, Cal.: Regal Books, 2002), pg. 22.

³Barna Research Online, “Annual Study Reveals...,” March 5, 2001.

⁴Barna, George, *Grow Your Church...*, pg. 75.

⁵Barna Research Online, “The Bible.”

⁶Barna, George, *Grow Your Church...*, pg. 23.

⁷Ibid, pg. 81

⁸Ibid, pp. 33

⁹Ibid, pp. 71,72

¹⁰Barna Research Online, "Annual Study Reveals..." March 5, 2001

¹¹John 15:4-11