



NEW LIFE

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“For the Word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Rev 1:9)

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WHY DID THE BRITISH STOP GOING TO CHURCH?

Introduction

Deuteronomy 8:11-17 *“Beware that thou forget not the LORD thy God, in not keeping his commandments, and his judgments, and his statutes, which I command thee this day: Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage; Who led thee through that great and terrible wilderness, wherein were fiery serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought thee forth water out of the rock of flint; Who fed thee in the wilderness with manna, which thy fathers knew not, that he might humble thee, and that he might prove thee, to do thee good at thy latter end; And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth.”*

These are the words of God to the Children of Israel by His servant, Moses. God knew their hearts and therefore warned them of the danger of pride and ingratitude which can lead them to forget the LORD and disobey His commandments. All bible reading Christians will know that the Children of Israel did finally succumb to their pride and went down into spiritual apostasy.

We have a similar warning in Paul’s letter to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:3-4: *“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”*

The above passage gives us a warning of the time when people no longer desire to hear the pure preaching of God’s Word and turn to all kinds of fables (mirth, fanciful story, falsehood). Are we not seeing this in our days with the rapid decline in church attendance and spiritual declension in the Western world and particularly the United Kingdom, which was once a beacon of truth and light to many parts of Africa, Asia and beyond? Having said that, are these the reasons or the only reasons why the British stop going to church?

There are many theories to this question and according to Dr Michael Watts’...

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lecture – “Why did the English stop going to Church” he said,

“Both the early Victorians and many later historians assumed that there was a mythical golden age in the past when everyone went to church of his or her own freewill. But there is little evidence that this golden age ever existed. Certainly the medieval Roman Catholic Church placed very few demands on its lay members. Admittedly the Council of Sardica around 343 did attempt to prescribe that any Christian living in a city who failed to attend worship on three consecutive Sundays should do penance, but there is no evidence that the rule was ever enforced.”

So could it be during those days the churches were filled because there is a penalty for not attending church in the local area and not because they were genuinely seeking God? Dr Watts went on to say in his article that imprisonment was passed in the 1559 Act to compel people to attend their local parish churches. But in practise it was difficult to “enforce in large towns and villages where churchwardens were often reluctant to incur either the hostility of their neighbours or the retribution of their betters by reporting their failure to attend church”. Therefore we can assumed that when there was a high level of church attendance, it could be induced by the threats of fines and imprisonment besides other related reasons like out of obligations to landlords or employer at that time.

Whatever the reasons for people to attend church during those period, we cannot denied the fact that there was and still is, a catastrophic losses of church membership in all major denominations across the board in the United Kingdom including the official church especially from the 19th century onward.

Possible Reasons for Decline in Attendance

Social and Economic Development

Referring to Dr Watts’s article again, he argues that there is a premise to admit that the industrial revolution does have a social impact on the lives of the people where the country dwellers migrated into towns and cities thereby emptying their local parish churches. While it would be thought that these new city dwellers will come together to form new churches or join churches in the cities to find solaces since they were far away from home, and there are such possibilities, perhaps the big draw of the industrial revolution was their new found wealth which they have never experienced in their country life. If it is true that the high attendance in churches was induced by laws and punishment, which means they may not genuinely seek God, which was the case for many, then it is only reasonable to assume that their new found wealth had the better of them, after all the people at that time were not any more ungodly then anyone of us in our present generation.

The passage quoted earlier from Deut 8:11-17, I believe not only stand in Moses days but also in the 19th century and still stand in our days. King Solomon wisely said in Ecclesiastes 1:9,

“The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is

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that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.”

The “Family Bible Notes” explains the abovesaid verse in this way,

“The errors and follies of the present day are but a repetition of the errors and follies of past ages. One generation after another gives itself up to the same vain undertaking, that of gaining from this world solid peace and happiness, and meets with the same bitter disappointment. The way of salvation remains also the same in all ages; a way of holy watchfulness, prayerfulness, and self-denial. Thus the history of the past, recorded in God’s word, becomes a lamp to all succeeding generations.”

This wealth not only brought with it a change in the lives of the people socially, in the way they work and live but economically it also gave them alternatives and power to chose, which they did not have in the past and with further industrial developments, people especially in the 19th century have greater choices and freedom, for example alternative life style; one no longer need to go to church to hear the gospel, this same message can be brought into the comfort of their living room via the TV, radio and the Internet.

The alternative life style also meant relaxation and entertainment on the Sabbath day, after all one already worked so hard during the weekdays to keep up with the pursuit of wealth, surely a little bit of indulges on Sunday, being the only rest day, is legitimate. The God of mammoth has taken over the hearts of men and women. Is this not the reality since the early 19th century and grew larger into the 20th century?

Men and women, young and old are preoccupied with the worldly pursuit of temporal things and push themselves hard in the field of education and business in return for a place in the highest echelon of society. They no longer see the need for God or the church because their academic and material pursuits have so packed their heart and a mind that they supposed only a life of wealth is worth living for in this world.

Theological Development

The most compelling reason it seems and I would concur with Dr. Watts’ study of the contemporary religious press, suggests that the most impassioned debates did not concern either Evolution or the accuracy of the Old Testament. It is this, that just as in the first half of the nineteenth century, “the main factor” in the expansion of nonconformity was the conviction that “those who failed to accept the Christian gospel would spend eternity in hell,” so in the second half of that century, the growing antipathy towards the doctrine of eternal punishment is to be reckoned the paramount reason for the decline and fall of the churches in the twentieth century. He aptly concludes that,

“The English churches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like the Presbyterian church of the eighteenth century, did indeed abandon the ‘faith which was once delivered to the saints.’ That is why they have been so singularly unsuccessful in retaining the adherence of English men and women.”

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The message of health and wealth has taken over the message of salvation in Christ alone and the reality of hell awaiting those who reject the gospel. Evangelical reformed pastors and preachers have watered down the gospel of Jesus Christ to something palatable just to satisfy the liberal appetite of the congregation and for the sake of keeping membership in their churches. By so doing they have undermined the essential doctrine of salvation and “quenching the fires of hell”.

Furthermore with enlightenment, theologians were kept busy debating and arguing fervidly with one another endlessly on the various and differing views on the doctrines of the bible, which often times were on the non-essentials, to the effect of breaking up of churches. With all these in-fighting, the people in the church will naturally take sides and they too are embroiled in all these debates and not receiving proper spiritual food because preachers and pastors will speak on their pet subjects and use the pulpit to further propound their conviction and attack those who have differing views from them.

So not only have you the under-nourished flock in the church deciding to leave the church altogether or join another church or form another church of their own, you also have those outside the church who refuse to come in upon seeing all these wrangling and bitterness among God’s so called “children of light”. Such is the sad reality of not only churches but also Seminaries and bible colleges in UK and other parts of the world. Could this not be the main reason if not the only reason why churches are failing to draw in those outside? The church has lost her “savour” and her light is far from being bright, no wonder people are not interested in coming to church because they do not see the reality of Christ, which the Christians claimed to have, in the lives of God’s chosen people. When the church becomes like the world, there is no reason for the world to come into the church to get what already are put on offer in the world.

Conclusion

John MacArthur Jr. in his book “Ashamed of the Gospel – When the Church becomes like the World” cited from Spurgeon’s warning about the “down-grade” has this to say,

“In the early part of the twentieth century, the spreading “false doctrine and worldliness” – theological liberalism and modernism –ravaged denominational Christianity throughout the world. Most of the mainline denominations were violently if not fatally altered by these influences. The result in Spurgeon’s own England was particularly devastating. A hundred years after Spurgeon sounded the alarm, most theological education in England is rank liberal. Church attendance is a fraction of what it was then. Evangelicals are a tiny minority, true biblical preaching is uncommon even in supposedly Bible-believing churches, and the evangelical movement has been dangerously susceptible to almost every theological fad exported from America. In short, evangelicalism in England never recovered from the modernist/liberal assault that began a

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century ago". (underlined mine)

The Church of Jesus Christ, especially pastors and preachers who succumb to the wiles of the devil of liberalism and theological debates and thus candy-coating the Word, being careful not to offend anyone, must bear full responsibility for the decline in church attendance and membership whether here in UK or anywhere else. We cannot push the responsibility and blame it on industrial revolution or the attractions and philosophies of the world or any other external factors because the condition of the human heart since the fall has been the same. There was no less enticement that draws people away from churches during the 18th century than it is now in the 20th century. The problem still lies with the heart which "is deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9).

The Western world and most developing countries have been experiencing what Paul wrote to young Timothy in 2 Tim 4:3-4, which I quoted earlier. What is needed to reverse or to recover the days where men and women, young and old were filling the pews of the churches genuinely seeking the Lord is the pure preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Spurgeon saw the "down-grade" coming in his days; the result according to,

"The Tractarian leader Edward Bouverie Pusey once commented that nothing keeps men from the pleasures of sin 'but the love of God or the fear of Hell,' and that it is the 'the fear of Hell' that 'drives people back to God.' The English churches by and large ignored his advice, and as a result English men and women stopped attending their services."

"Why then did the 'English' stop going to church? Because, when the authentic gospel was abandoned there was no longer a God to fear, and therefore no longer a God to love. And when God is not there (and preachers are digging 'their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water') no normal person will find good reasons for going to church. 'Religion' as such has always been a minority interest." *(the words of the Rev. Dick Lucas, Rector, St. Helen's Bishopsgate-London)*

May the Lord have mercy upon us all and give preachers and pastors the undying love to preach only the pure and unadulterated gospel and return to the faithful preaching of evangelistic sermon. And to our congregation, may the Lord put on them the spirit of the Berean Christians – *"they received the word with all readiness of mind"* (Acts 17:11).

Yours in His Bond
Preacher Mok

Quotes taken from "Watts, Michael. *Why did the English stop going to church?*" London: Dr Williams's Library, 1995.

WELCOME TO NEW LIFE B-P CHURCH LONDON

CHURCH THEME: WALK IN THE NEWNESS OF LIFE (Romans 6:4)

Our **worship services** begin promptly at **11.00 am and 4.00 pm**.

Please stay back for Bible Study and fellowship lunch after the morning worship and for tea after the evening service. Do invite your friends to come to Church.

Worship Services			WELCOME
Morning	Today: 02/12/2007	Next Week: 09/12/2007	We extend a warm welcome to all worshippers this Lord's Day. We especially like to welcome Kyung Su-Park to the morning worship service last Lord's Day.
<i>Chairman:</i>	Jonathan Kim	John Poh	
<i>Preacher:</i>	Dr David Allen	Pr Mok Chee Cheong	
<i>Message:</i>	Shamed & Despised	Tbd	
<i>Text:</i>	Hebrews 12:2	Tbd	
<i>Organist:</i>	Anthony	Yanning	
Evening			
<i>Chairman:</i>	John Poh	Jonathan Kim	
<i>Preacher:</i>	Dr David Allen	Pr Mok Chee Cheong	
<i>Message:</i>	Fiery Trials	Tbd	
<i>Text:</i>	Isaiah 43:2-3	Tbd	
<i>Pianist:</i>	Hubert	Sophia	
Other Duties			NEWS/ANNOUNCEMENTS
	Today: 02/12/2007	Next Week: 09/12/2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome: We would like to welcome Dr David Allen, our speaker for this Lord's Day. Dr Allen is the UK Deputation Speaker for the Trinitarian Bible Society. • December Family Worship: The combined YAF meeting and family worship will be held on Friday, 7 December at the home of Hubert Wee. For those who would like to attend, please contact Pr Mok or Hubert. Also, for those who would like to open up their homes for family worship next year, please inform Pr Mok. • No Prayer Meeting & Bible Study: Please note that there will be no prayer meeting and bible study on 8 Dec 07. • Book Table: Please feel free to browse the book table and help yourself to any book of interest. • Sabbath School: Please note that class is held at the Library after the morning worship. All children are encouraged to sit with their parents during the main service. • Those serving on the Lord's Day for both morning and evening worship services: Please gather behind the pulpit area at 10.30am for prayer.
<i>Ushers</i>	Daniel/Joyce	Wah Soon/Sharon	
<i>Sunday Sch:</i>	Carol	Esmeralda	
<i>Lunch:</i>	Volunteers	Maureen	
<i>Washing-up:</i>	Volunteers	Volunteers	
<i>Bible Study:</i>	No DHW	DHW - Genesis	
Appointments of the Week			
Fri 7 Dec	7:30 pm	Young Adults Fellowship: Combined YAF & Family Worship	
Sat 8 Dec		Prayer Meeting & Bible Study: No Prayer Meeting & Bible Study	
Last Week's Worship Service Collections			
Offering:	£460.78	Lunch: £27.29	
Book Sales:	£2.00	Love Gift: £120.00	
Memory Verse			
<i>Last Week (Nov 07 Wk 4): Ezekiel 33:7-8</i>			
So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me. When I say unto the wicked, O wicked man, thou shalt surely die; if thou dost not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at thine hand.			
<i>This Week (Dec 07 Wk 1): Hebrews 12:2</i>			
Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.			