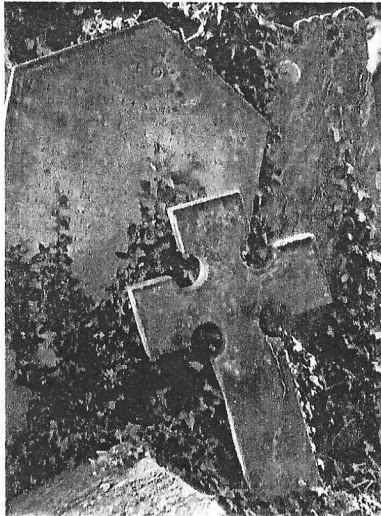


A Strawberry Mountain View of:

Dead & Dying Churches



By:
Frederick L. Pattison,
a radical Christian!

Dead & Dying Churches



I was in grade school. One day a neighbor friend¹ and I got on our bikes and began peddling. We lived next door to each other in a section of Long Island known as Hillside Heights. This was during the nineteen forties. We rode our bikes for a number of miles out on the island and suddenly came upon an old abandoned Methodist meeting house. This was in the days when there was still open land and even farms in Nassau County. The door of this old Methodist church building was ajar, so being curious kids *Lois and I* got off our bicycles and entered.² Oddly enough the building had not been badly vandalized and appeared as it evidently had been when the congregation assembled there for the last time. The pews remained in place though covered with lots of dust and cob webs. The cross and other items that are usually found on what these churches refer to as an altar had been removed. However, scattered Sunday School material, Bible maps, some old hymnals and Bibles remained in disarray on the old crickety wooden benches. It seemed somewhat weird to encounter this scene. It was as if the congregation had met one Sunday never again to return allowing neglect to take over. This has remained in my mind all of these many years. Remember, this took place when I was in grade school and I am now in **my mid-seventies** no longer living on Long Island but living in the

¹ Lois Bligh and here sister Marian were my next door neighbors as kids growing up on Long Island.

² This was in an area of Long Island known as Plainview.

mountains of central Arizona in the small rural community of Strawberry.

For many years church buildings all across the United States and Canada have been **closing**. Many of these buildings **at one time housed** thriving congregations, but lo, those days are long gone. **Rural congregations** have lost their people to the urban areas. **Predominantly white city congregations** incessantly flee the inner city areas for the 'white' middle class suburbs. **Young people** in increasing numbers see little reason to be part of what they often consider an antiquated organization refusing to change and be modern. Increasing numbers of people of all ages are just **"turned-off"** by churches for sundry reasons.

Apostolic fire

The fire that Pentecost with Holy Spirit upon spread like came into a new God. However squelched shortly the growing



was generated at the descent of the the first disciples wildfire. People relationship with this was largely after by heresy and power of what became hierarchy. I am of the opinion that much of religious hierarchy is **one of the greatest hindrances** of the **original simplicity** of apostolic Christianity. By apostolic Christianity I am referring to the faith, zeal and practices of the original apostles as the Christian Faith was spreading and new churches were being established throughout the Roman Empire in spite of persecution.

After Pentecost **the fire** that birthed what we know as the church spread from the original company of disciples to both Jews and Gentiles. God raised-up men and women who were **filled with the Holy Spirit**. These Spirit-filled believers spread the Good News of the Gospel. It could not be contained. The religious leaders of that day sought to deter it as did the Roman authorities but it could not to be controlled. The Message was too great and life-changing to be

kept selfishly to the original recipients of it. This Message was that God loved humankind so much that he sent **Yeshua**³ to be the Savior of all who would believe in him as Savior and Lord. This was **the best news** that the world had ever heard up until that time. The four Gospels and the rest of the New Testament portray the loving nature of **the Triune God**: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The pagan religions of the world worshipped gods and goddesses whom they feared, but did not love. This new faith was a **Message of grace** centered in love: **love for God and love for one another.** See – Matthew 22:34-40; John 13:34-35.

In its earliest days of existence while the apostles were still preaching and teaching and shortly thereafter this Message of **the Gospel spread** throughout the then known world. The early followers of Jesus took him at his word. He had instructed them to *“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”*⁴ **And guess what?** They took their Lord seriously.

On to Europe

The Good News swiftly spread from the Middle East into Europe⁵. **The Holy Spirit** instructed Paul and his coworkers to enter Europe. We read of this account in **Acts 16**. The record reveals that **the first convert** to the faith of Christ in Europe was a businesswoman named **Lydia**,

*“One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. **The Lord opened her heart** to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were **baptized**, she invited us to her home.”*
(Acts 16:14-15a)

³ **Yeshua, Y’shua and Joshua** is the Hebrew name whereas **Jesus** is the Greek name of our Lord.

⁴ Mark 16:15 NIV

⁵ The Gospel also spread into north Africa and on into Asia to such places as India.

This event took place in the city of **Philippi** which is located in **Greece**. It is worth noting that **the first Christian congregation in Europe** was begun in the home of a woman who was **the first convert** there.

The Gospel spread throughout Europe reaching the imperial city of Rome. Unfortunately the Gospel quickly began to be **watered down and compromised** with the rise of **hierarchy** to position and power especially in the city of Rome. This rapidly escalated after **Constantine** became Emperor leading to the marriage [union] of the Church with the State. This was **the major downfall** of the institutional Church. Europe overnight became Christian. However, it was largely Christian **in name only**, not in experience. **Many pagan practices** were supposedly **Christianized** and entered into the life and teaching of the churches. The religious hierarchy took on **the structural pattern** of the Roman Empire with **the Bishop of Rome** eventually replacing the Caesars. This was a clear **violation** of the New Testament teaching of **the priesthood of all believers**.

With the **Protestant Reformation** of the sixteenth century the various



countries of Europe adopted a State Religion. Whatever the faith of the political leader in power of a given area became **the enforced religion** of the citizens of that realm. Thus, Northern Europe largely adopted Luther-

anism as its State Religion whereas England’s reform led to the Church of England no longer recognizing the Pope but the English monarch as its head. Other State Churches included the Reformed in Holland, parts of Switzerland and other areas, Presbyterianism as the Church of Scotland, and Roman Catholicism in the rest of Western Europe with Eastern Orthodoxy married to the State in Eastern Europe.

Each of these **State Churches** was intolerant of other faiths not falling in line with the political-Church leadership.

I take the Anabaptist position that **Church and State** must always remain **separate entities**. Any form of bringing the political and spiritual realms together always births reprehensible results whether it be Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, or Eastern Orthodoxy.

The situation of the churches in **Europe** is indeed pathetic. Europe today is filled with a spreading **Christiano-phobia**⁶. It is estimated that **only 1% to 2%** of the people in the British Isles attend any type of weekly church gathering. The same situation is found throughout the continent. Today the Christian Church of Europe is **largely dead; spiritually and numerically**. European **secularism** reigns supreme throughout the continent although some believe that it may be Islamic by the end of this century.

In a few of the countries of Europe the churches continue to receive government support, yet their buildings are **largely empty**. People in growing numbers are turning away from the faith of their ancestors.

Even though the situation in our own country is not quite as dismal, yet I fear that the day is coming when we will follow in the footsteps of Europe. *George Weigel*, a theologian and senior fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. believes that what has happened in Europe will happen in our nation. In his view he states,

*"American high culture is vulnerable to the same kind of spiritual and philosophical amnesia that has afflicted Europe. The culprit is **the atheistic humanism** that took shape in the 19th century."*⁷

As Europe goes, so goes America!

⁶ I picked-up this word from US New & World Report. It means the fear of the Christian Church and the power it has exerted in the past to the detriment of the people of those lands where Church and State were united.

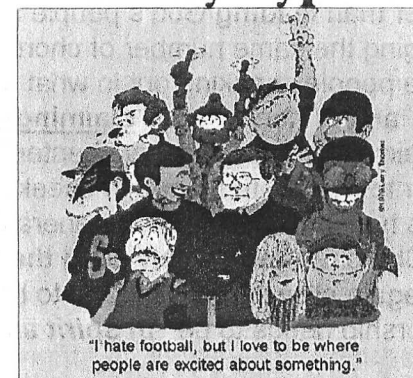
⁷ From "The Cube and the Cathedral" by George Weigel.

Dead orthodoxy

Few forces are more noxious to the Body of Christ than is dead, cold, rigid orthodoxy. The word **orthodox** basically means "**right or correct doctrine.**" However, it is **not enough** to be correct in what one believes if this belief lacks Christlike life and vitality. **The Pharisees** during the earthly ministry of our Lord were orthodox to the core. Yet, they had become so legalistic, narrow and rigid in their orthodoxy that it had become spiritually dead. **Our Lord** rebuked them over and over again, not for holding wrong doctrine, but for making the faith in Jehovah lifeless, harsh and austere.

I fear that the Body of Christ in like manner is filled with individual Christians, preachers and entire churches that pride themselves in their orthodoxy, in their fundamentalism, in their evangelicalism or in their progressiveness yet are lifeless; *spiritually dead*.

Meaningless formality and flashy hype



Personally I am not one of those evangelicals who is opposed to any and all forms of liturgy. I have always had a special love for *The Book of Common Prayer*. However, I am dead-set **opposed** to **cold formalism**. A curse upon much of Protestantism is that it has developed forms that it calls "**the worship service**" that are largely **lifeless**. The same **rote** week-after-week, service-after-service can be

boring becoming meaningless. In attending many churches I've discovered **many are plagued with a format** of sameness week-after-week-after week. Pick-up **the average church bulletin** and it reeks with boredom. The leader of the service dare not vary and/or change one iota or else **all 'hell'** breaks out among the members in these churches. This same routine is duplicated in literally thousands of congregations weekly. It matters not what label appears on the sign board: Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, UCC, Disciples, **the sameness** of format is there.

Lifeless formality and humanly devised **ceremony** is causing multitudes of people to leave today's churches. **Young people** are **repulsed** by it and so are some of **old-timers** like myself. Not all change is bad although on the other hand **change just for the sake of change** may not be beneficial either.

On the other hand there are an **increasing number** of churches that bill their services as either **contemporary or charismatic**. In many of these churches there, too, is a boring sameness service-after-service with the worship team **performing** rather than **leading** God's people into the presence of God, singing the same number of choruses at each service, the same people speaking out in what may be called "prophecy" and/or "tongues" all **claiming** that it is the Holy Spirit. Certain individuals who love center stage doing their thing. I refer to them with tongue in cheek as **"stars for Jesus!"** This type of service can degenerate into what is **flashy hype**. Churches desperately need **the fire** of the Holy Spirit once again allowing God's Spirit to be in charge. As Jesus said worship needs to be **"in spirit and in truth."**

Lukewarmness

The 2nd and 3rd chapters of the Book of Revelation, address seven local churches. These seven churches were congregations existing in what today is Turkey. The seventh message was to the church in the city of **Laodicea**. This particular congregation was characterized by **lukewarmness**. What was especially tragic in this situation is that this

passage indicates that our Lord was standing **outside** of this church knocking at its door to gain entrance,

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me." (Rev. 3:20) TNIV

What a dreadful situation. Christ **standing outside** of his church. I fear that this is too often the case with many congregations today. Jesus **does not dwell** in a dead and/or dying congregation. He simply exists there. He enters into the hearts and lives of those who receive him. He is with those companies of believers where there is spiritual life and vitality where the Holy Spirit is free to move.

The Meeting Syndrome

"Well, gentlemen, Robert's Rules doesn't seem to specify whether prayer should come before or after the call to order."



Can you imagine a church *without* endless meetings and committees? Is it possible? **Why not?** We read of **nothing** in the New Testament of **endless meetings** of committees, boards, or busyness to keep the organization operating smoothly. All of this developed later with **the breakdown** of the biblical teaching of the priesthood of believers; with **the division** of "clergy" and "laity." An authentic church **is not** an organization, **it is** a living organism. Christian faith is

not religion, it is a relationship with God in and through Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Church busyness and activity does not necessarily mean nor indicate that a church is alive and spiritual. In fact, many dying churches are gasping for breath in a desperate effort to appear to be alive believing that they must keep their members busy if they are to continue to survive. The church is more than endless meetings, building programs, fund raisers, pledges, membership drives, etc. Yet, church after church is dying. *How about your church?*

“We have always done it that way!”

The above words and the attitude behind them spells certain and sure **D-E-A-T-H**. Death to the church plagued with people who are convinced that what they have done in the past must not, dare not, better not be changed. **The fear of change** that plagues countless congregations is truly amazing. It appears to me that many churches would rather die than to change. **The Holy Spirit** wants to **rebirth** congregations, but lo, congregation after congregation has dug its feet into the ground and dare anyone to challenge and/or change what they have been doing. Church after church who in the past had men and women of vision have stopped going beyond what their founders envisioned. How many Lutherans have not gone on beyond Luther? How many Presbyterians and Reformed Christians stop at Calvin? Many Baptists appear to have stopped moving beyond the days of their frontier revivals. Pentecostals are often still at the Azusa Street revival. Churches must continually be moving forward, onward and upward. We cannot, we dare not stop. The church of Jesus Christ is on a sojourn. This sojourn **will continue** until our Lord returns.



So there you have it

Are you part of a dying church? Maybe your church has already died. So what should you do?

If your congregation is dead it probably is too late to do much of anything. However, if your church is in the process of dying there is much that you can do. The Reformed Christians have a **great motto** which indicates that though they have been reformed they are **continuing to reform**. This should be **the goal** of every congregation: **to continue** reforming, **to seek** the restoration of New Testament principles, and the **renewing** of the work of the Holy Spirit. In fact, this is what **true revival** is all about. Revival **is not** setting up a tent somewhere, bringing in an evangelist, and holding a series of protracted nightly meetings creating hype and begging, pressuring and embarrassing people to come forward to make “a decision”. It is **the Holy Spirit** who brings people to Christ, not forced by a dynamic preacher, hype and/or entertainment so popular in many churches.

As a follower of Jesus Christ I advocate that there be **some radical changes** in the way companies of believers today function in this twenty-first century. The past is the past. We have a new day dawning. **We are commissioned** by our Master to seize the opportunities placed before us. The world around us needs to see **that the Church of Jesus Christ is alive and well!**

I came across the following description on the Internet describing the difference between **live churches** and **dead churches**. I've edited it somewhat.

- Live churches constantly change; dead churches resist and refuse change.
- Live churches are never satisfied and dream of improvement; dead churches tell it like it used to be.
- Live churches worship and praise today; dead churches avoid praise and worship that is alive and look to form.
- Live churches move in faith; dead churches have to see it first.

- Live churches are full of regular, cheerful givers; dead churches are full of grudging tippers!
- Live churches move ahead on prayer and faith; dead churches work only on sight.
- Live churches may have some noisy children; dead churches are quiet as a cemetery.
- Live churches welcome all classes of people; dead churches stick to their own kind!
- Live churches' members enthusiastically support the ministries; dead churches have no ministries – only functions, committees and boards to keep their members busy.
- Live churches' members look for someone they can help; dead churches' members look for something to complain about!
- Live churches try and try again; dead churches say *"We never did it that way before..."*
- Live churches' members reach out to share their faith in Christ; dead churches' members don't have enough to share; they share programs, not saving faith in Christ with the outside community.

I've touched to some extent on what I am advocating. For more insight I invite you to drop me a line for a free listing of additional material or to be placed on our mailing list to periodically receive literature.

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