

Excerpt From
Church
(according to the Bible)

By Thomas W. Bear

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What must be done if the Church is to regain the form and vitality of the early Church?

As a result of analyzing the biblical narrative, we should conclude that, in general, the early Church was much different than the Church in twenty-first century America. Should we conclude that since God is sovereign over all things, it is His desire that the Church be so different from the early Church? Should we assume that it has evolved into the Church He desires for today by adapting to the changes that have taken place in the world since the days of the early Church? Or, should we hold tightly to the pattern revealed in the New Testament and believe that it more accurately reflects what God desires for His Church? I am of the opinion that we should desire the Church to reclaim the form and vitality that it had in the beginning. In this section of the book, I wish to point out some prevailing attitudes and traditions that must be changed in order for that to take place.

Let me start by asking you, “What do you think is the most glaring difference between the early Church and the Church today?” If you are like me, you would say that the most glaring difference is the lack of vitality. Hopefully, you have experienced moments in your church during which you were sensing awe. But the early Church kept feeling a sense of awe. God was making His presence and power known to and through the Church. Contrast what you know of today’s Church with the description provided in the following passage.

“And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:44-47).

I suspect that if you are reading this book, you would love to see God make His presence and power known like this in your church. I think most true believers would love to see God doing wondrous things and raising great numbers of people from spiritual death to spiritual life. I believe true Christians ask God to do this.

Now let me ask, “Is our only course of action to pray?” Obviously, it must start there and if we stop praying, we should not expect God to do anything. (See James 4:2.) I propose, however, that we can do more than pray. We can repent. I believe that God has communicated how we should think and act. He has communicated what our attitudes should be like. If our current attitudes and traditions are contrary to what He has specified, we should not expect Him to pour out His blessing. If we are not even willing to examine our current thinking or attitudes in light of Scripture, we have no business expecting anything from God. *“For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:7&8).*

If we truly want God to pour out His blessing, we should be willing to first acknowledge the attitudes and actions that deviate most from the biblical path and begin asking God to change them by His grace. I now propose that most of the deviation between the attitudes and actions of the early Church and today’s Church is either directly or indirectly related to what I call The Great Clergy/Laity Divide. I believe that the attitudes and actions of all believers have been affected by it and we are all suffering the spiritual consequences of it. Let me explain.

Generally, most Christians come to church week after week content playing the role of spectator rather than participant. They have grown comfortable with the notion that the “clergy” or paid leadership is supposed to carry most of the ministry load throughout the week and during the meetings. While they may be encouraged to “minister” to one another and to be witnesses to those outside the Church, the non-leaders think their main spiritual activity is to come to church and listen to sermons and sing songs. As a result, a great emphasis is placed on how eloquent the leaders deliver sermons and how well the song service flows.

Every pastor would love the members of his church to grow strong in the Lord and have greater spiritual vitality. But due to certain attitudes and traditions that permeate the Church, there is a Great Clergy/Laity divide. The Church is anemic and will remain so until these attitudes and traditions are identified and discarded. When that begins to happen, the Church will begin to experience true revival. We will begin to see God doing wondrous things in greater measure. We will see Him raise the spiritually dead to new life in Christ. On the other hand, if we resist facing these problems and go on pretending that everything is fine the way it is, we will watch the Church become increasingly weak. If you are willing, please consider what I have to say in this section and ask God to show you if you need to change some of your attitudes and traditions.

The Church is only as healthy as its members. Any attitude or tradition that stifles the spiritual growth of a church's members will always have a detrimental effect on the health of its members. Conversely, as the members grow spiritually, they will begin to pray more, witness more and minister with greater power from God. As that occurs, God will unleash His power through them which makes His power and presence known. Since this is what we all want, let us now identify attitudes and traditions that stifle the spiritual growth of any church's members so we can discard them by God's grace.

In this section, we will first examine what changes must be made in order to break down the Great Clergy/Laity Divide. These changes will probably have the most significant positive impact on the vitality of the Church. Subsequently, we will consider other changes that should be made to revitalize the Church which are not necessarily related to the Great Clergy/Laity Divide.

Note: *Appendix A: When and How the Great Clergy/Laity Divide was Formed* provides a brief history of how attitudes and traditions crept into the church producing what I call the Great Clergy/Laity Divide. If you understand how this came about, you will likely have a greater ability to recognize the destruction that it has produced and is still producing to this day. Therefore, I recommend you read this brief history.

The goal: That EACH member flourishes and matures spiritually

In the typical evangelical church, most members come to the meetings each week to sing a few songs and listen to a sermon. For the most part, this is what they have come to expect from their experience as members of a church. They do not see themselves as future "leaders." In their minds, it is the job of the paid pastors and perhaps a few select deacons to fulfill the role of leader. If you ask them if they sense any call to one day be a leader, they might tell you that they do not have the spiritual gifts necessary to fulfill that function. They have grown comfortable in their role as spectators who come to church week after week in order to listen to sermons. I aim to demonstrate that this mindset is unbiblical and harmful to the Church and its members.

*"Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though **by this time you ought to be teachers**, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:11-14). (Emphasis mine)*

The writer of the book of Hebrews rebuked his readers because they had grown stagnant in their faith. He said that they should be teachers but instead, they still needed to be taught the elementary principles. He told

them that they needed to grow up. According to this author, as believers mature, they automatically become teachers. Someone might object sighting that each Christian has been given different spiritual gifts and not every Christian has the gift of teaching. It is true that some Christians do not have the “spiritual gift” of teaching. But this does not excuse them from their responsibility to teach.

Moses told the Israelite parents to teach their children diligently. *“These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. “You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. “You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).*

No parent was excused from this duty. It did not matter that some were less apt to teach than others. They all were charged with this duty. Moses did not expect the parents to assemble and deliver sermons. Rather, Moses told them to learn the words Moses gave them so that they were always on their hearts. They were to write them down on the doorposts of their house and their gates and bind them as a sign on their hands and as frontals on their foreheads. In other words, they were to be diligent and take whatever steps necessary to learn the Word. As a result, they would always be ready to teach their children throughout the day as teaching opportunities presented themselves.

Just as God expected every Israelite parent to learn the Word and teach it to their children, God expects every Christian to learn the Word in the same way so that he or she will be ready at all times to teach it as opportunities present themselves throughout the week. This is why the writer of Hebrews could say, *“By now, you ought to be teachers.”*

This type of teaching does not require a person to assemble and deliver sermons. Rather, he teaches from his own meditations on God’s truth as opportunities present themselves. This is usually how Jesus taught. An opportunity would present itself and He then used that circumstance to teach something spiritual that was relevant to that circumstance.

If a person does not have something to say when a teaching opportunity presents itself, then it is likely that he does not spend much time meditating on God’s Word. He is someone, *“Who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant” (Hebrews 5:13).* It is clear that God wants each believer to grow out of this condition and become mature. This is not something He expects only of pastors and other leaders. It is something He desires for every Christian. Even if a Christian has a diminished mental capacity, he can still strive to become spiritually mature and God can still use him to teach others, including some who might have a far superior intellect than his own. The person with the superior intellect might actually know more information from the Bible but the one with the inferior intellect might be more mature in Christ.

Spiritual maturity that enables a person to teach from the heart is not something that can be acquired at a Bible college or seminary. It comes only through “practice.” (See Hebrews 5:14.) Intellectual capacity is not the driver. Rather, one truth at a time becomes engrafted into a person as God trains him using trials. The truth only becomes engrafted when a person relies on it in the face of trial. If he cannot rely upon the truth in the heat of trial, it remains out of reach to him. It has not become engrafted or implanted into his soul.

*“In humility receive **the word implanted**, which is able to save your souls. But prove yourselves doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:21-25). (Emphasis mine)*

When the Word of God has become implanted in this way, we are then prepared to teach. We don’t have to first learn how to articulate the truth. Rather, we speak from experience with the truth. In other words, as opportunities present themselves, we teach truth by simply testifying to others from our own experience of

relying on God's Word in the face of trials. This type of teaching is actually leading by example. God delights when His people lead like this because such leading demands God-glorifying faith in order to rely on the truth in the face of trial. Only God can sustain us through such trials so He is the one who gets all the glory. Our testimony of His deliverance points to His glory. Let me site a couple biblical examples of this type of teaching.

A married couple, Prisca and Aquilla, sometimes traveled with the Apostle Paul. Paul testified that they risked their lives for him. (See Romans 16:3). They would not have done this unless their faith was firmly resting on God's promise of eternal life. By risking their lives and suffering hardship for the gospel, they proved that they really believed that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory they were expecting at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Their actions served to teach others. They were thus teaching and leading by example. God was pleased with their example (leadership). Though the Bible does not record them, I am confident that they also spoke words when their faith was tested in this way in order to testify that God is trustworthy and that we can rely upon His promises.

In the fourteenth chapter of First Samuel, we read about a heroic act of Jonathan, King Saul's son. The Philistine army was gathered against Israel. Jonathan and his armor bearer were on the other side of a ravine from the Philistines when he said to him, "*Come and let us cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; perhaps the LORD will work for us, for the LORD is not restrained to save by many or by few*" (I Samuel 14:6). This is a tremendous statement of faith. From a human perspective, this was sure suicide. But Jonathan believed what he told his armor bearer, "*The Lord is not restrained to save by many or few.*" This was two men versus an entire garrison! Faith is best displayed when one's life is hanging in the balance. They went over and God indeed delivered them and brought about a great victory against their enemies. In this way, Jonathan was teaching by example. He was leading the way. His armor bearer was learning that God can be trusted with our lives. God used Jonathan's leadership to teach His people back then and ever since then as they read this story in the Bible. God was pleased with Jonathan's faith. He was pleased with Jonathan's willingness to take the lead by entrusting himself into God's hands.

A more recent example is the hymn writer Fanny Crosby. Shortly after my conversion, I heard that she was blind and yet wrote many glorious hymns that God used to teach and encourage His people. She served as an example to me that God can be known and trusted through any circumstance. Another person that God has used this way in my life is Joni Earekson Tada. She has been a quadriplegic for many years but she thrives on her intimate relationship with God. I look at her life and know that what she has is REAL and available to anyone that truly desires God to give it to them. Fanny Crosby and Joni Earekson Tada have taught me and encouraged me more than most people in my life through their example of trusting God. God used their examples (leading) to teach me. I pray that I will learn to follow more diligently the example they have provided.

God delights to show His power and wisdom through the acts of faith of His people. God wants every believer to mature and have a life full of acts of faith that glorify Him. Unless a person's faith is tested in this way, he simply will not mature. He will remain a spiritual infant. It is dysfunctional for Christians to remain spiritual infants. After Peter lists several virtues that accompany regeneration, he said, "*If these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you*" (II Peter 1:8-10). Paul said, "*Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong*" (I Corinthians 16:13). (Emphasis mine)

In his song, Moses used the imagery of a parent eagle to illustrate how God trains His people to walk by faith.

*"He found him in a desert land, And in the howling waste of a wilderness;
He encircled him, He cared for him, He guarded him as the pupil of His eye.
"Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, That hovers over its young,*

*He spread His wings and caught them, He carried them on His pinions.
“The LORD alone guided him, And there was no foreign god with him.
“He made him ride on the high places of the earth” (Deuteronomy 32:10-12).*

I have not observed it personally, but I have been told that at the right time, parent eagles purposely push their eaglets out of the nest high above the ground in order to teach them how to fly. The eaglets don't know how to fly and don't want to leave the security of the nest. But the parent eagle “stirs up its nest” by forcing the eagles to learn how to fly. As they plummet to the earth, the parent eagle swoops down, spreads its wings and catches the eaglet and carries it back up to the nest. God purposely used this eagle imagery to teach us several things about spiritual maturity. Spiritual maturity requires us to move from our comfort zones. Like the eaglet, it is not natural for us to step out in faith because we always come face to face with the temptation to retreat back to our comfortable nest. For example, a Christian may sense that God wants him to proclaim the gospel to his neighbors. By faith, he launches out and finds that many of the neighbors become angry at him for his efforts to tell them the gospel. He also learns that he is not able to convince anyone to become a Christian because only God can cause this to happen. He is tempted to retreat back to his comfortable lifestyle that does not include preaching the gospel. But if he persists in his faith, God sustains him and he learns to evangelize as a lifestyle. He may then be compared to the eaglet that has learned how to fly. It was not comfortable but by God's grace, he now soars like an eagle.

Whether it is a choice to proclaim the gospel or a choice to leave a high paid job in order to spend more time ministering to people, such steps stretch our faith. These steps appear radical to many onlookers. Unbelievers do not understand why we would make decisions of faith knowing that such decisions will make our lives less comfortable. To them, we appear peculiar. (See Titus 2:14 & I Peter 2:9.)

We have a choice to sit back and enjoy a comfortable life and experience little or no spiritual growth. Or, as a life style, we can make faith decisions that appear radical and reap the benefits of greater spiritual maturity.

When our lives are characterized by faith decisions that appear radical to others, we will also experience criticism. Even some people who consider themselves “Christian” will be uncomfortable around us because their manner of living does not include such steps of faith. This is why Paul could say, “*All who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*” (II Timothy 3:12). One way to determine if a person is making such steps of faith is to observe how much unexpected criticism and rejection he experiences. If he experiences little or no criticism or rejection from people about decisions of faith that he is making, then he is either a monk or not taking any significant steps of faith. He is like the eaglet that refuses to leave the nest. He should not expect to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus with this type of lifestyle. This is true whether he is a “lay person” or a pastor.⁹

In summary, God wants every believer to grow in their faith. Put another way, we are all called to be leaders who lead by example with lives of faith that appear peculiar to unbelievers. He desires for us to live extraordinary lives. If we refuse to mature and become leaders, our example will teach younger believers to live ordinary lives and remain spiritual infants.

(End of excerpt)

Books Written by Tom Bear

Church (according to the Bible): Most pastors wish that the members of their churches would grow and flourish more. The church members often sense that God has purposes for them but they don't know what He wants them to do. They often end up playing the role of an unfulfilled spectator. Church examines the early New Testament Church and its teachings for answers to this universal problem. It demonstrates how certain unbiblical attitudes and traditions exist which cultivate this unhealthy spectator mindset. Church challenges leaders and “laypeople” to identify and discard these unbiblical attitudes and practices that stifle spiritual

health. This book asserts that if the pattern of the early New Testament Church is followed today, Christians will mature at a greater pace and experience fulfillment as active participants in the advancement of Christ's Kingdom. (160 pages)

E-Book available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006FL00EO>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://bringmysheepback.com/biblical-church>.

Bringing Back the Gospel: In the 21st century, many evangelism techniques are being used that have no biblical foundation. *Bringing Back the Gospel*, examines the Bible to determine what Christians should and should not do in order to fulfill the Great Commission. Christians all over the world consider this book an excellent instructional resource that is firmly grounded in the Bible. (154 pages) E-Book available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006FXUME0>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://bringmysheepback.com/bringing-back-the-gospel>.

Bring My Sheep Back presents a candid framework for the process of restoring Christians that stray. Most of the books that deal with this subject approach it from the standpoint of solving conflicts between Christians. *Bring My Sheep Back* is founded on Jesus' teaching to put the interests of the straying Christian ahead of our own desire for immediate relief of pain caused by the one caught in sin. Personal observations along with much attention to biblical instruction produce a very useful and thorough resource for church leaders and lay people who desire to restore Christians trapped by sin. This book warns against dependence on man-made approaches to solving relational problems. Whether it involves private sin or public scandal, or even cases that involve the governing authorities, biblical principles are taught as foundational to the process of restoration. (130 pages)

E-Book available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006FXEDMM>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://BringMySheepBack.com>.

Birth Control: A Spiritual Shackle- Did you know that before the twentieth century, the Protestant Church boldly spoke out against the practice of birth control? They were opposed to any act of man that interfered with the natural order of procreation. Men such as John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Arthur Pink and Augustine were vehemently opposed to birth control. Today, Birth control is not just tolerated, it is embraced by the Protestant Church. Why has the Protestant Church changed its position? Is it possible that Christians living before the twentieth century were all mistaken? Why did they take a stand against birth control? Is it possible that the church of the nineteenth century was better equipped to discern right from wrong? Using six biblical arguments, this book demonstrates that birth control is a worldly practice that opposes God's will for His people, violates the marriage covenant and is an attack on the very character of God. (64 pages)

E-Book available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006J749NM>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://bringmysheepback.com/other-books>.

Christian Marriage: This book provides biblical principles that if applied, will result in harmony in the marriage and glory to God. Some will undoubtedly say that many problems in marriage are far too complex for such a short book to address. It is the premise of this book, however, that the source of all problems in Christian marriages are the result of failure to live as God has taught us to live in His Word. If a Christian couple lives in accordance with God's principles described in *Christian Marriage*, true harmony is guaranteed. (50 pages)

E-Book available from Amazon.com at <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B006J9EIFO>. Paperback available from Bring My Sheep Back Books at <http://bringmysheepback.com/other-books>.

Old Testament Historical Narrative Bible Curriculum- This course is designed to stimulate the student to read through the Old Testament historical narrative so that he becomes familiar with the history of God's work to bring about redemption through Jesus Christ. By reading just one Bible chapter each day, the entire Old Testament historical narrative can be covered in less than six months. Questions are provided to help students read with the purpose of understanding the content and help the teacher measure the comprehension

of the student. The answered questions also provide a basis for weekly or biweekly family or group discussion. As the student becomes more familiar with the Old Testament narrative, he will begin to understand how each part of the Old and New Testaments fit together into a harmonious message of redemption.

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