

I grew up in southern Ohio and there were a lot of Cicada insects. They're not technically locusts but we called them that. During the hot summer days the loud, shrill sound that the males made would fill the air. You would usually see them in the trees. At times you would come across the lifeless shell they had shed. It was just an empty form of the living creature that had once been there. If you put the slightest pressure on that empty form it would crumble. That's what I think of when I hear the phrase "a form of godliness." It bears some resemblance to the real thing. But there's no life in it.

Is there a chance that spiritual decline in Israel's history could repeat itself in Christian churches? Is there a chance today, that people could be faithfully going through a form of religion that bears resemblance to the real thing; but in reality is dead and lifeless? Listen to these words from God found in Isaiah 29.

And so the Lord says, "These people say they are Mine. They honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. And their worship of Me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote." Isaiah 29:13 NLT

Too often in our day God has become an abstraction, existing in an unseen and unfelt spiritual realm. People may try to appease Him by following His rules but lack much of the intimate connection and relationship that God has always desired.

God is an abstraction. An abstraction is: The removing of God from our daily experiences and from experiential life.

Think about this definition with me for a moment: Abstractions may be formed by reducing the information content of a concept or an observable phenomenon, typically to retain only information which is relevant for a particular purpose.

For example, abstracting a leather soccer ball to the more general idea of a ball retains only the information on general ball attributes and behavior, eliminating the other characteristics of that particular ball.

This is what many people have done with God! We don't know God nor serve God nor follow God we follow an abstraction of God that we have often made or created to fit our lifestyle and wishes. There can be nothing more damning than this to one's soul and future in eternity.

Israel is the Old Testament version of the church today. God has always desired a people that would follow Him with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength. More often than not Israel could never seem to make their relationship with God work. He was not first in their daily lives. He did not rate all that much attention on a day to day basis. He was called upon when there was trouble but there was rampant ungratefulness and blatant disobedience.

Listen to God's response in Isaiah 1:11-15:

“What makes you think I want all your sacrifices?” says the LORD. “I am sick of your burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened cattle. I get no pleasure from the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. ¹² When you come to worship Me, who asked you to parade through My courts with all your ceremony? ¹³ Stop bringing Me your meaningless gifts; the incense of your offerings disgusts Me! As for your celebrations of the new moon and the Sabbath and your special days for fasting—they are all sinful and false. I want no more of your pious meetings. ¹⁴ I hate your new moon celebrations and your annual festivals. They are a burden to Me. I cannot stand them! ¹⁵ When you lift up your hands in prayer, I will not look. Though you offer many prayers, I will not listen, for your hands are covered with the blood of innocent victims.”
Isaiah 1:11-15 NLT

It is so easy to fall into a religious formality and ritual that is devoid of God and much of any relationship. When this happens our actions become lifeless traditions that become more sacred than God Himself.

“Every church has its traditions, and they would rather sacrifice the truth of scripture than sacrifice their traditions.” David du Plessis.

Without self-awareness, we can push God out of our lives and our churches without admitting it or even realizing it because His name and activities still fill much of our time. This religious abstraction allows us to replace God in our lives and on the throne of our hearts with self-centeredness, and attitudes that are counter to the word of God.

It is often much easier to endure lifeless Christianity than it is to admit and face reality.

Today I am calling us to begin a journey of reality. I will begin working this week with my staff and eventually key leaders to give them the opportunity to be a part of leading us to self-awareness as a church. The call is coming; the call to reality and discipleship.

What is reality?

1. Reality won't allow us to substitute religious tradition for personal sacrifice

Religious routine is the first thing we grab for when the freshness of God's presence is no longer evident in our lives. All of us experience spiritual dryness in our lives. One day our relationship with God seems to be fresh and alive, and then suddenly our prayer time and Bible reading turn empty. Even going to church begins to look like a chore.

You have two options: You can learn to be content with going through the ritualistic motions, trying to make the best of it or you can throw yourself before God to find out why you are where you are. By pursuing Him, you will learn what you can do to change to keep moving ahead. Let me give you an illustration of this.

God has promised to be moved by our prayers but we settle for unanswered prayer and excuse it away instead of doing the hard work of intercessory prayer. We can come up with all kinds of excuses as to why He never seems to move but in reality He longs to move on our behalf.

Abstraction creates a pseudo-Christianity that allows us to function without God's involvement. As shocking as I hope that is to us I am afraid it is the reality of too many of our lives. Reality should force us to get on our faces before God and seek Him with great fervor. Reality will cause us to settle for nothing less than what God wants for us.

2. Reality will demand our effectiveness

If the church believes that salvation in Christ offers people a personal relationship with Christ then we had better be willing to see them through to it. Discipleship doesn't just happen. Way too often I see people say that they are committing their life to Christ or "accepting" Him but there is very little evidence of that in their daily lives.

I have a question: How can the King of Glory and all creation ride into someone's heart unnoticed? It is impossible. When you accept Christ as your Savior you are also taking on a life where He will become Lord of your life. That means Lord of your habits, Lord of your relationships, Lord of your actions, Lord of your reactions, He will be Lord of things seen and things unseen, things public and things private.

Our church is facing some major decisions over the next few months. To be honest I am ready to pull the plug on all activity that is not leading people to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. Our "growing relationship" mission statement may be way too vague and leave too much to chance.

A pastor met with a young man who never seemed to be able to grasp what it meant to be a Christian. He had been encouraged to ask forgiveness for his sins and to believe that Christ forgave him but he just couldn't seem to do it. Finally the pastor pressed him enough in the conversation that he learned the problem. He had a major reservation about serving God because he enjoyed his life of sin and only wanted to be saved to escape eternal punishment for his sins. Is it any wonder that he couldn't seem to feel forgiven? He hadn't been forgiven! Fortunately he finally surrendered to Christ and knew the peace of forgiveness and the call of discipleship.

Our church must do more to really and truly bring people to a salvation experience in Christ. We do what we do and we do much of it well, especially on Sundays, but in reality people are not assimilated *into* the Kingdom of God. We are assimilated *in* the Kingdom of God but not *into* it.

Those of us who claim to be Christians must engage in the hard task of bringing men and women to a confrontation with a living Savior. Bring them to church? Great but better yet bring them to Christ. Introduce them to the power of a living Savior who will not only blot out the sins of the past but has the power to deliver them from the grip of sin in their daily life.

We are so far from this it seems like I don't even know how to address it. We love buzz phrases and trendy words but inviting people into the Kingdom doesn't get it done. When Charles Wesley wrote these words in the hymn '*And Can it Be?*' it was describing a life-changing, radical and top to bottom transformation:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray ---
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
Amazing love, how can it be?*

I've said it before and I will say it many more times; Our denominational bureaucracies have it all wrong. Nickels and noses are no way to gage the health of a church . . . spiritual growth, becoming more like Jesus, deepening our Biblical knowledge, discipleship and outreach should be the measure.

No one has illustrated this phenomenon better than Hans Christian Andersen in his tale *The Emperor's New Clothes*. The church today is more like this fictitious emperor than anyone would care to admit, and so are many of the people who fill its seats Sunday after Sunday. How it happened to him could not illustrate any better how this has also happened to us.

The story is about an emperor who was more concerned about his appearance than about governing his people. Seizing that opportunity, two swindlers convinced him they could weave the most beautiful clothes ever made and also fashion them in such a way that they would be invisible to anyone who wasn't fit for his post or who was hopelessly stupid. What could be better for the emperor? He could satiate his vanity and be a good ruler at the same time. He gave the self-proclaimed tailors money and the finest silk and gold thread.

The swindlers only pretended to make the clothes, pocketing the money and the material. Fearing his own incompetence, the emperor sent his most honest aides to check on the progress of his clothing. The swindlers pretended to weave and sew, but the aides could see no clothes, for there weren't any. Thinking they would be thought unfit or stupid, they lavished praise on the nonexistent garments.

Eventually the emperor came to see the clothes. His aides were so enthused about them that he was sure of his own incompetence when he couldn't see them. So he joined the pretense, as did everyone who thought they alone weren't seeing the clothes. His aides suggested a parade to show the people his new clothes.

Even though the emperor couldn't see them or even feel them, he pretended to put them on and went off to parade naked before the crowd. Never had the emperor's clothes been such a success. Everyone praised their beauty—until a little child said, “but he hasn't got anything on!” the word quickly spread through the crowd as people realized they weren't the only ones not seeing the clothes.

When the emperor overheard their shouts he realized his own nakedness, but he could only say, “I must go through with it now, procession and all.”

But you say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. Revelation 3:17

3. Reality will not let us substitute saying for doing

There was a study several years ago that measured the difference between what people say they will do and what they actually do. A random sample was split into two groups. The first was notified that they were being polled to measure community spirit in America. They were asked to donate three hours of their time on Saturday to help collect money in their neighborhood to fight cancer. The second group was not told they were being polled but they were asked to give three hours of their next Saturday to help collect for a fund drive.

About 73 percent said they would be willing if asked, but only about 5 percent of those asked to do it said they would. It was an astounding difference. We often confuse confessing with being and willing with doing. Saying “I forgive,” is easier than actually forgiving. Going forward for prayer is not the same as giving your life to God. Israel lived this out to profound depths.

They tried to evoke God’s presence by their sacrifices. He said to do it so they did and assumed He was with them because of their rituals. That’s like saying you can put a bunch of people in a room singing songs to God and that He is there to participate. It just doesn’t work that way.

Listen if you really come to understand the way of the cross you will have to be very careful not to substitute religious habit and ritual for the authentic life. It’s one thing to read the Bible for ten minutes a day and quite another to feed your soul daily on it. Ten minutes is automatic but feasting on God’s word demands attention, concentration and openness to the Spirit of God.

The question you and I have to answer is simply this: Is God a reality or an abstraction in your life?

Richard Foster years ago wrote about trying to make his prayer life reality instead of an abstraction. “I determined to learn to pray so that my experience conformed to the words of Jesus rather than trying to make His words conform to my impoverished experience.”

In Exodus 33:15-16 (NLT) Moses was adamant about not going anywhere without God completely in control.

“Then Moses said, “If You don’t personally go with us, don’t make us leave this place. ¹⁶ How will anyone know that You look favorably on me—on me and on Your people—if You don’t go with us? For Your presence among us sets Your people and me apart from all other people on the earth.”

Christianity does not exist in words, and church services and rituals unless it first thrives in our hearts.

In 1961 A.W. Tozer was given the opportunity to speak to a group of ministers on a subject of his choice. Not surprisingly he chose to speak to them about the holiness of God. During that talk he said the following words: "I believe we ought to have again the old Biblical concept of God which makes God awful and makes men lie face down and cry, 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty. That would do more for the church than everything or anything else.'"

A healthy church is characterized by a serious concern for spiritual growth on the part of its people. In a healthy church, people want to get better at following Jesus Christ.

Like newborn babies, you must crave pure spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. Cry out for this nourishment,³ now that you have had a taste of the Lord's kindness. ⁴You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but He was chosen by God for great honor. ⁵And you are living stones that God is building into His spiritual temple. What's more, you are His holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God. 1 Peter 2:2-5 NLT

Fred Craddock, who taught at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, once said: "To give my life for Christ appears glorious. To pour myself out for others ... to pay the ultimate price of martyrdom — I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory. We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table — 'Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.' But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbor kid's troubles instead of saying, 'Get lost.' Go to a committee meeting. Give a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home. Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul."

That's radical conversion. It is being faithful when no one cares and no one notices. It is spending our 25 cents doing the right thing when no one is watching — when we could have easily given into the wrong thing. It is being faithful in the mundane and ordinariness of everyday life, when it may have been more exciting to do something else, or give in to laziness by doing nothing at all. It is being faithful to God when it doesn't seem to matter. It is doing the right thing even in the small things. It is being a person of character when everyone else is simply pleasing themselves. It is being willing to stand out when everyone else conforms. This is the proof that we have encountered the living Christ. It is the proof that there has been a radical change in our lives and that we will never be the same again. It is the radical conversion that marks us as disciples of Jesus.

A young couple rented a vacation cottage for a week. One afternoon the husband looked out a window at the swimming pool and exclaimed, "Let's change our clothes and go get some exercise!" His wife, who was washing the dishes in the kitchen and looking out the window watching some people play tennis, quickly agreed. While she dressed for a tennis match, he put

on his swimming trunks. The window a person chooses to look out at the world often determines that individual's perception of reality. Lyle Schaller, *Activating the Passive Church*, p. 19.

And so our goal and prayer today must be to allow God to reveal Himself to us in all of His holiness and then to walk in the light of His word; believing Him, following Him, imitating Him, glorifying Him, honoring Him, surrendering every area of our lives to Him, loving like Him, and most of all loving God with all of our soul, mind strength and heart.

Is God a reality or an abstraction in your life? Honestly is He everything or just a convenience to have when you are in trouble and when you need Him to deliver you from something?

The last verse of 'And Can it Be':

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Is this your reality today. . . It certainly can be. Press into God and pursue Him with everything you are and everything you have. Push into the holiness that God longs for you to possess.