
Subject: Chapter 6: The 'Out-of-Church' Christians.

Dear Saints

Below please find Chapter 6 of Andrew Strom's book: The 'Out-of-Church' Christians. Please visit his web-site at <http://www.streetrevival.com/>. His e-mail is prophetic@revivalschool.com. You can also subscribe to their newsletter by sending an empty e-mail to anzac-subscribe@welovegod.org.

Enjoy!

Eben Swart

CHAPTER SIX THE MACHINE

A large number of the people who wrote to me mentioned how tired they had become of all the programs, church-growth techniques, building-funds and systems found in today's churches. "Where is God in all of this?" was a common cry. To them, it is almost as though the church has become a kind of 'machine' that grinds on and on, whether God is present or not. For many, this was a significant factor in their decision to pull out of the churches. In fact, quite a few of those who wrote had been former leaders who had fully participated in this "machine" themselves:

From: D.O. (-USA):

Your "Out of Church Christians" article really grabbed me. I also read the other testimonies of people who were tired of the church "game." I wonder how many testimonies you will hear from Pastors like myself who also got tired of the church game, didn't know what to do about it, and when I prayed, there was great silence in Heaven (as well as on my part of the earth) so I quit!!

I pastored Foursquare churches fifteen years and an Assembly of God for eight. I finally got tired of pouring my heart out to people who just didn't seem to "get It." Oh, there were some with a good degree of zeal, but they went right off to Bible school and became ministers in their own right. This is not bad, but it left me with no one to help me. We had "glorious song services", exciting prophecies, messages in tongues, testimonies, special singers and all the rest - but it didn't seem to have any lasting effect on anybody. If we should have a rather dull service following one of the "glorious" ones, people were ready to leave.

I just got tired! Tired of trying to get people "fired-up" for Jesus. Tired of trying to help them get out of sinful and self-destructive practices. Tired of crying my eyes out when people, in spite of my efforts would go off into fornication, adultery, drugs or whatever. I even got tired of not having my prayers answered regarding these people.

I also got tired of taking care of old church buildings in need of repairs. Air-conditioning and/or furnaces breaking down. Tired of my wife having to spend hours doing the janitor work. I was also tired of her having to drive all the church "poor" folk all over town to get their chores done.

I got tired of paying the bills and keeping the Tax-man happy by obeying all the IRS rules for churches that in reality "hamstring" a church. I got tired of a denomination that charges its ordained clergy per month to retain their credentials.... I got so tired I quit my church and my denomination. I was frustrated, angry and hurt - and a little disappointed in God Himself for not doing something to keep his churches from being so lax spiritually, and so materially-minded. I didn't go to church anywhere for over a year. Finally at my wife's persistent urging we started "checking-out" churches in the area. I don't need to go into details to talk about what was going on there. Other writers have eloquently described the endless preoccupation with the various "activities" to keep everyone busy and/or happy.

Recently the Lord has been nudging my heart to get ready to minister again. I don't think that the Lord wants me to be a "pastor of a church" as we know it now. It may be a home Bible study - I just don't know....

From: Phil (-Australia):

As an ex-Pastor of a Pentecostal assembly (in NZ) I saw first hand the inside workings of a large movement, and left disappointed, rejected, disturbed, dismayed and many other "dis" words. Now many years later I am free and healed of all that, but as far as Churches themselves and those that run them is concerned, not much has changed.

Most churches and Pastors (not all) are primarily interested in their "success". This success is of course measured by the size of the congregation and they feel the need to validate their existence as the "head of the team". Big church = big success syndrome.

That in itself has problems enough, but even more disturbing is the imperative to be constantly "flag waving" as extolling the virtues of their particular movement. Often they see themselves as having something unique, exclusive or some other special call or revelation of God that the others don't - thus setting themselves up as proud, and sometimes boastful. "Hey, we're special, we're doing what others aren't or can't" (even though they may not actually be doing anything out of the ordinary).

As a nationwide body of believers we've done precious little over the last few decades other than keep the doors open. Many Churches by and large are predictable, often irrelevant, frequently boring even. I get so sick of preachers and Pastors raving on about the awesome presence of God in the place, the strong anointing that's here, when in reality, there's little more than a lot of hot air coming from the front....

From: Anthony (-USA):

I eventually found myself in what some call a Holiness Pentecostal church. We spent many years there trying to do what was right. I even got a degree from one of the organization's Bible Colleges.

As time passed we left this organization to work with other churches, some independent, some parts of other organizations (Assemblies of God, Vineyard, etc.) We saw some good and bad in each but overall we were never satisfied... it was as though the depth we wanted in God was not really there, so much of what we found in the churches was really superficial. Many churches proclaimed they did not believe in "programs" but their very non-program was a program in itself from which they could not deviate. As much as it pains me to say it, what we observed was Jesus being pushed out of the churches and plans and programs of man being placed IN the churches. It seemed as though church was not about the Lord at all but about "church" and the pastor or his ministry...

From: Teresa (-USA):

We were strong Church leaders. Between my husband and I we taught teens, kids ministry, worship, poor ministry, jail ministry, lay counseling, intercession, prophetic groups, small group ministries, and my favorite which was women's ministry. We were involved in this Church from late 1990 until late 1999 so we certainly would not be considered "Church hoppers" but dedicated to the things of the kingdom. Why we left you might ask? As the Church grew, programs became more important than people. People began to be declined ministry positions if they didn't dress a certain way, talk a certain way, or jump through all of the "hoops" that they desired. I began to be a thorn because I went to battle for multiple people that were not "allowed" to do ministry. They had no scriptural reasons or integrity issues to keep them from doing tasks in the Church. I tried to respect their decisions and be under the authority God has placed there, but it got more difficult as time went... I had a scrapbooking party a few days ago and realized that except for one Church attender, I had a room of 15 additional women who had been hurt by the Church and bailed. These are good women who instead of continuing in their search of Jesus, they stopped because the Church has told them that they are no longer "good enough" because they also do not buy the stuff that is being taught...

From: Mario (-Canada):

The fact that there is such a large and growing number of true Christians who share a deep rooted frustration about the established "Church System" could be viewed as an indication that God Himself is the Author of that frustration. The following is my own, personal experience... It was in 1993 when I was asked to take part in a church plant. After about five years I found myself burdened with an ever increasing frustration concerning church stuff. While the congregation kept rapidly growing, our progressive church leaders began to implement more and more strategies and programs to ensure the continued success of the ministry. As a member of the worship team I had to spend hours at seminars and in meetings. The objective was to develop a most efficient, cutting-edge ministry. We had to learn all about the meta church system and how to create a comfortable atmosphere in a user-friendly environment. And, while strategically focusing on peoples needs, to be "seeker sensitive" was seen as the key for church growth and success. It was during that time that I became convinced that "seeker sensitive" really means being a people pleaser. Soon I found myself wrestling with a spirit of guilt and condemnation. Maybe I was just too critical or judgemental in my attitude. But, no matter how hard I tried to calm my convictions, the frustration that I felt was only increasing. Trying to talk about it wasn't going anywhere, and praying for the church leadership didn't seem to help either. Finally, after the Lord had given me a vision regarding the root of the problems in our church, I decided that I could no longer play this game. In the vision that led to my decision I saw a picture of a boardroom. God had called for a meeting where He told the pastors of our church that He was giving them a ministry, and that they would be meeting together on a regular basis. The Lord wanted to help and equip them with everything they needed. So they kept meeting until one day our pastors told Him that they don't want to bother Him with these meetings any longer. They felt confident that they had now learned how to successfully run the church, and that, with all of the acquired study materials, the seminars and courses, they would be able to do just fine. Although the church continued to grow in numbers, many quality people have left in their quest to find His glorious presence rather than another program or tradition. In their wilderness, they have developed an unquenchable thirst for His water of life.

Others who wrote to me declared their frustration at having seen man-made methods and programs take over something that is supposed to be a haven of spiritual refreshing - with a focus on GOD moving and not MAN. Many of them had seen so much of this kind of thing that they had almost despaired of finding a place where God was truly free to move:

From: Connie (-USA):

It is hard to sit in an institution that professes to be serving the Father, when all around you watch and "see" the things of man on the rise more and more. I couldn't stay in that place anymore. I would find myself warring in the spirit before I even got to the building and praying for answers from the Lord. There are so many programs being brought in. I heard prayers like, "Father, I pray that everyone here will come up under these new programs and be a team player, and if they don't then get them out of my church." That one broke something in me that I can't explain. My spirit was in sorrow and pain. I cried out, Oh God, Oh God, Oh God. It is very sad when you see how the "church" has become a thing, an "it". It has a bank account and people are sought to become members to take care of all the bank loans. Then they want to make the building bigger so we can house the new members they are out to bring in. IF it was for the Lord, that would be great. But I find it hard to find God anywhere involved or seen. Your article was right when you stated, WHERE IS GOD IN TODAY'S CHURCH?

From: Robin (-USA):

I have not found a church. I have attended churches in a 30 mile radius and have not found one who has the heart of God. For the most part, they are about money. One does not allow you to minister in any way unless you prove that you tithe 10% (not just say, but PROVE). What happens to the ones who cannot tithe because to do so would make their family starve?

From: Lisa (-New Zealand):

Oh, how one could go on forever, about why so many truly Born-again Christians have and are continuing to leave the physical church... When one really takes a cold hard look at the institution of church in the West this is precisely the problem, ITS an INSTITUTION. The problem for me is, it is no different to the strict Italian Catholic upbringing I received as a child. How embarrassing it was to realize that they are all the same, they all run the same.

From: Tony (-South Africa):

In the early 90's the era of the mega church started here in South Africa. Even the local mainstream denominational churches were swept up and many adapted the cell church system with the many trappings and promises of success that the system offered. A few of the charismatic leaders in the nation had in fact applied the systems with great success and built mega churches, which these churches amplified as being the blessing of God, which even made worldly peoples' mouths hang open at the extravagance of the churches in their buildings, etc. And the extravagant lifestyle of the leaders, but this was all toted as "Blessing from God" and the show goes on. "Excellence" was the buzzword and everybody was striving to achieve this with bigger worship bands and glossier pamphlets. Enough just never being enough, some leaders even had more than one church and so became self-appointed apostles with titles like founder and President of whatever ministries. These Apostles gaining this newfound importance which needed to be propped up even more and security guards were now employed to protect "The man of God", while he arrogantly strutted around like a peacock with little or no touch of reality, never mind even being in touch with God. These churches were the breeding ground for the performance-driven and they flourished in this newfound environment. At the end of the 90's the buzzword was VISION and DESTINY, with these churches having huge Visions to take their cities and their nations for God. These visions, however large, were just man's attempt to reach heaven by his own means and striving efforts. These visions, like the original Tower of Babel, have that same "come let us build for ourselves" stamp on them and sadly they have the same end result - The confusion and scattering of God's people. This problem is as old as the church itself. It is common for man to leave the voyage of faith in grace and charter a course based on works and sadly the end is always the same. You are left with a bunch of burned out and hurt Christians, and a leader that ends up falling to the very laws he practiced and preached every Sunday. We've seen countless numbers of leaders fall to sin in mainly two categories, women and money. You see, the one thing works cannot suppress is the flesh. It is only the Son that can set us free and grace is His ability operating in our lives, not our own ability. The thing that got my attention was the lack of God in all this activity. People never got healed, set free and had no change in their lives. They became sin conscious and spent their lives walking in guilt and condemnation. Trying the latest strategy or buying the latest book or going to seminars to try and straighten out their lives. Divorce and other social problems were as common in the church as in the world. With some of the top leaders falling in this category....

Many who wrote to me disagreed with the entire mindset of today's organized church and the way it is run. They simply do not believe it is Scriptural or right:

From: Richard (-USA):

The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not a man made organization or institution. It never has been and it will never be so. That man attempts to organize and put his approval on God is comical at best, it is extremely tragic at worst. In the process of doing so God is eventually just pushed out of the whole picture.

From: Tom (-USA):

The mainstream religious Christian today is so often caught up in doing "christian" things that they have lost sight in BEING Christian. Performing obligations imposed by religious systems does not make you a Christian - just religious and often tired and discouraged - ask the many pastors who today fit that description. The world sees this and consequently doesn't see any redeeming value in the church that attracts them.

The church systems today are so busy seeking that one formula that will bring in the masses of lost souls. They're even resorting to entertainment, complete with coffee and capuccino in the services to keep people "happy" and wanting to come back. Where's the call to repentance and humility and the call to walk without compromise? The reason is that we are more concerned about making someone feel good than we are about making someone "good" (redeemed).

I am from America, but I have a friend who lives in Australia. He shared with me a brochure handed out by a local church to the neighborhoods to attract people to their church. Nowhere in the brochure was Jesus even mentioned and all through the brochure there were pictures of kids, clowns, and people helping and being nice to people. That's all well and good as kids like having fun and people should be helping each other, but the question still stands, Where is Jesus? None of these "good" works in the community can save the soul.

"What does it profit the church to gain a church full of people, but lose every soul?"

From: Roberta (-USA):

It seems to me that many of those who are "out of church" have not only gotten tired of programs but also of church-as-a-spectator-sport. If all one is allowed to do in church is watch, they might as well stay home and watch from a distance. Even if one is "allowed to participate" in the programs, it is still a program and not God.

My heart cries and I weep with God sometimes over the spectator spirit in the church. I want so badly to be in a place where the people want God so much that they will consecrate themselves and prepare themselves for a real visitation from God and not just a good show. He will not tolerate the idolatry in the church that gives the glory to the performers.

Some had come up with an entirely different solution to the "machine" - and that was to start something themselves with a whole different flavor:

From: Bob & Jan (-USA):

The Lord led us to a huge park in our area which is quite a gathering place for people and said to go be a presence there. Well, to make a long story short, we have been meeting with a group of people there for many months now. Since we live in Florida it is easier to meet outside. We meet under a pavillion and just recently we were offered the use of a building free to use when weather is bad, but we all enjoy the freedom of being out in His creation. It's wonderful worshipping looking up at the sky! We do not consider ourselves a church. We are the "church." We have no format or overhead. We just go and wait on God. It's so refreshing. He shows up every time. We are still growing and learning and only hope we don't get too big or start planning an agenda and end up right back where we were. We enjoy the simplicity of it. Also, part of our being there is for outreach. We hope to draw people in and also we are reaching out to people who live in the campground located on the park grounds....

It is clear to me that this "machine" thing is a major issue to many Out-of-church believers (and rightly so). Until they see a Body that is more of an 'organism' rather than an "organization" they will simply not be interested. The programs, the activities, the fund-raising and so on - all have the smell of "MAN" about them. But what these people are desperate for is "MORE OF GOD". And until they see this in the churches, they simply won't be coming back.