

NOT DISCERNING THE BODY

2 TIMOTHY 1:7 (NRSV) *...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*

I CORINTHIANS 11:17-22, 28-30 (NRSV) *When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ²²What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the*

church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

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Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. ³⁰For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

I'm going to talk about some cultural generalities today. You know, there's a difference between the behaviors and values typical of identifiable groups and subcultures (Baby Boomers, Generation X...)—and individual character and integrity. Not everybody fits the pattern—not everyone born between 1964 and 1982 lives out the expected behavior patterns and values of what we call "Generation X". On the other hand, that doesn't deny or discount the pattern. A story to illustrate:

In the Tulsa church I served during most of the 1980s, a lot of families—most of them Baby Boomers—owned lake houses, and during the summers our worship attendance went way down. These people were active in church. They served on committees; they were elders and deacons; they were good stewards and were faithful to their church responsibilities. They just didn't come to worship often during the summer.

Since several of the families owned houses on the same lake, I thought it might be nice if they gathered at one of the lake homes on Sunday morning for fellowship and communion. Come as you are, get in your boat and motor over; short service, fellowship if-and-as desired.

So, at Elders' meeting I brought it up. I suggested they do it once a month, rotating homes; elders rotating in leadership. The idea went over like the proverbial pregnant pole-vaulter.

One of the elders, I'll call him Bob (I really don't remember his name; I remember he was an attorney in a large Tulsa firm—and he was a Baby Boomer) Bob spoke up and said, "I work long hours away from my family and keep tight schedules all week. I go to the lake to get away from all that. I don't need another obligation on my calendar. If I feel a need for religion, I'll stay home and go to church."

"If I feel a need for religion..." And he was an elder! Remember Bob.

During the 60s and 70s people began dropping out of church. It was a time of great prosperity. The Middle Class was at its peak, retail business flourished, discount stores appeared for Blue Collar workers, and the collecting of "stuff"

became the national pass-time.

Before iPads and iPhones, our eyes were glued to television. I saw my first TV when I was 13. My family got one about a year later. That was about when churches began struggling to keep Sunday *evening* services going. Bonanza, Ed Sullivan, Walt Disney. Too much competition. I remember begging my parents to let me stay home and watch the Disney show on Sunday nights.

By the late 70s, Baby Boomers were moving into management in business—and moving to the suburbs—two-car garages; privacy fences; bigger and bigger houses; a cabin on the lake... And on summer weekends they went to the lake.

And their kids got into sports—at younger and younger ages. In the 50s, there were no Little League Baseball games or practices on Wednesdays or Sundays. By the 70s and 80s, it was seven days a week; baseball, soccer, basketball, football... "soccer moms" appeared as a social category; and, they had visions dancing in their heads of college sports scholarships for their kids.

By the late 60s, the marketing industry had taken over. Now, there's nothing wrong with marketing. It's just a tool: nothing more; nothing less. But like any tool, it can be used, and it can be misused. For good or for ill, the marketing industry molded America into a consumer culture: Church members morphed from servants of Christ to customers of the church, and, "the customer is always right."

Now, Boomers get bad press. On the whole, it's valid to some degree; but, in every church I've served, Boomers have carried the load... But when I say the Boomers with whom I have served don't fit the stereotype, that's not to deny the stereotype, because... well, because there's Bob.

Bob typifies the Boomer stereotype. They're sometimes called the "consumer generation" or the "entitled generation." In their mindset, church is just one option among others: an obligation; a burden; an investment of time and energy that pays questionable dividends... So a whole generation participated less and less in the life of the church. "If I feel a need for religion..." which translates, roughly, into once I've been baptized, I no longer need the church. I got my "fire insurance." And in their consumer mentality they blamed the church—the minister—the worship service... "I'm just not being fed." (I generally felt they were being fed; they were just picky eaters.)

Their kids grew up in that value system and became the first American generation of which only a minority is active in any faith community.

Church attendance was cratering, youth programs were disappearing, and the church was desperate. Some went into survival mode—turned the electric blanket up to 9, pulled it over their head and assumed the pre-natal position. Others adopted corporate organization, applied marketing strategy in place of evangelism,

and adjusted to whatever the market indicated: sanctuaries became theaters, worship became a high-tech production; Glitzy youth programs; celebrity bands...

The church was scrambling to attract people any way it could; and, in its desperation some lost sight of the church's calling and purpose—kind of sold their souls, and a new generation sensed the incongruity—the lack of integrity in a lot of what was being advertised and marketed as "Church." And that generation said, "I'm spiritual. I believe in God and in Jesus; but, if that's religion, I'm not religious." Sadly, they really haven't looked beyond the stereotype: the hypocritical-prosperity-gospel-megachurch-celebrity-preacher stereotype. Well, like Baby Boomers, not every church fits the stereotype.

And that's a very long introduction into my message today.

I have no data to support a cause-and-effect connection; but, it's easy to document that the decline in church participation was paralleled with an increase in levels of stress and anxiety and cynicism and depression and suicide—all of which are symptoms and byproducts of the current culture of fear.

Are they related? I don't know; but I can build a case that faith—the Spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline—will not grow in isolation. Christianity's not a DIY thing—a do-it-yourself project. It's personal, yes; but it's not totally private. Personal faith development most effectively grows and matures in a context of fellowship and mutual support and corporate study and worship.

[It's not just religious faith. Studies relate healing with a large network of friends] Without that kind of nurturing context, faith becomes just an isolated belief built on whatever I'm feeling at a given moment; and the Epistle of James is blunt: "*Even the demons believe; and tremble.*" (2:19)

HEBREWS 10: 24-25 (NRSV) *let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...*

Paul wrote to the church in Corinth (the text I read earlier) and said, "The reason some of you are weak and ineffective in your faith and your life is that you're approaching faith—you're even approaching the Lord's Supper—as a private thing for you and your family; therefore, when you come to the table, you don't connect with the whole body (which is Paul's favorite metaphor for the church.)"

Last week I introduced the theme Scripture for this series: "*...for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.*" I suggested that a first step toward experiencing that gift is to practice the inward disciplines of prayer, meditation, study and perhaps even fasting. *[Like a muscle]*

Today (and I realize I'm 'preaching to the choir': you're here), today I want to connect the dots and draw a line between the corporate disciplines of worship, guidance, confession, and celebration, and God's gift of a "spirit of power and of

love and of self-discipline.”

Coming to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than walking into a garage makes you a car. But a Christian without the nurturing, mutually encouraging fellowship of a community of faith—and it doesn't have to be a named and recognized congregation or denomination. It can be a house church; or it can be a group of friends who meet every Tuesday morning at a local donut shop for coffee and Bible study—a Christian without a community of faith is like a football player without a team.