

Then and Now, Why and How

Joe Slater

Rapid growth characterized the Lord's church in the United States during the mid-20th century. Older brethren recall with fondness the "protracted meetings" lasting weeks, or sometimes months, with packed houses and dozens of baptisms. They remember when a Bible study with a neighbor, or even a total stranger, was there for the asking.

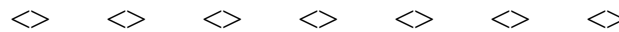
Today, we have week-end meetings; anything past Sunday-through-Wednesday is considered too long. Responses have become the exception rather than the rule. Bible studies are fewer, and far more groundwork must be laid than in years gone by. What factors brought about the change? Let's consider two points, not to be negative or discourage ourselves, but to understand the circumstances so that we can deal with them more effectively.

First, Bible knowledge has declined tremendously, both inside and outside the body of Christ. While some few among us are excellent Bible students, we are no longer known as "walking Bibles" as were our spiritual forbears.

Our religious neighbors are also less knowledgeable than they were fifty or sixty years ago, but they may harbor even more erroneous ideas than in the past. As a result, while people need more extensive instruction to learn the Lord's will, we are often unprepared to provide it. This is despite Peter's exhortation that we be ready at all times to explain our hope in Christ (1 Peter 3:15). Nothing but long-term dedication to educating ourselves and our children in the Scriptures can solve this problem. Parents, elders, deacons, preachers, teachers, brothers and sisters, **are you listening?**

Second, our culture has digressed from widespread interest in spiritual matters to epidemic indifference. Materialism rules the day. No doubt this has contributed to the lack of Bible knowledge discussed earlier. Secular Humanism dominates education, entertainment, news media, and government. We are distracted with sports, TV, computers, and the ever-increasing demands of the workplace. Who has time for God? Who cares anyway?

Rather than oppose materialism with the gospel, some have surrendered to it. "Worship" then resembles a carnival as felt needs determine the direction of the church. **Brethren hear me:** Gimmickry is not the answer! God calls people to transformation, not to conformity with the world (Romans 12:2). Salvation comes through the gospel (Romans 1:16), not through gimmicks. It is the crucified Christ Who draws people to Himself (John 12:32). Gimmicks may draw crowds, but they do not draw souls toward Christ. Indifferent souls will become interested in the gospel, now when they are entertained or bribed, but when they are convicted by God's word of their utter lostness. Our response to the world's materialism must be militancy, not compromise!



God Loves A . . .

Zach is a grown man physically, but with the mind of a three-year-old. His parents lovingly care for him and bring him faithfully to the congregation where I recently preached a meeting. Zach's parents bring a little brown sack containing goodies of the sort many parents bring for their children.

Also in that sack is another item very important to Zach: a one-dollar bill. When the collection plate is passed, he digs the dollar bill out of his sack and, with great glee, puts it into the plate, laughing and giggling, long and loud. He loves giving!

May each of us be such a cheerful giver!

--Cecil May, Jr. (via Preacher Talk)

Defeating Idols

Idols are defeated not by being removed but by being replaced (Kyle Idleman, *Gods At War*).

If only the first missionaries into the interior of New Guinea had understood this. In the first village that they entered, they immediately destroyed the idols and turned to face, not a willing audience, but a flight of arrows! The next group was successful because they first gave the natives Jesus. Then the idols were removed and replaced.

What does that have to do with me? We have idols, but not of stone, wood, metal, or plastic. Our idols are found in the temples of pleasure, power, and love. They are the gods of food, sex, entertainment, success, money, achievement, romance, family, and me. Note that none of these things is bad in and of itself. However, any one of these can become the center of our universe.

Matthew 6:24 says you cannot serve two masters, and Luke 14:26 says you cannot love family more than Jesus. Jesus is not willing to share us. He will be first in our hearts, or He will not be with us. Surely Jesus who loves us wouldn't be so harsh and unforgiving. He is that harsh. It is because we are His by right of creation and redemption, even more so because of His love for us. He left heaven, He gave up the rights He had as part of the Godhead (Philippians 2:5-8). He willingly took our punishment and died that we could be redeemed.

Jesus demonstrated that He loved us totally. He showed that He was fully committed to us. Do you think it's unfair that He wants us to love Him and place Him first in our hearts?

It is not enough to kick out our idols. We need to fill that space with Jesus. The only way I know to do that is to keep filling up on His word.

--Ed Wittlif (Denver, CO)