

Chapter 11

Church Life Beyond the Bushel (2)

Using Devotional Practices Properly

Years ago my wife and I struck up a brief friendship with another young couple. They were brilliant, sensitive folks who were looking for more than what their Presbyterian fellowship had to offer. “But,” they told us, “We don’t know if your fellowship is a valid alternative for us. We’ve heard that the Local Churches are pretty weird. Sorry to say it, but we don’t know if we could stand your meetings.” I brushed their concerns aside, assuring them that their worries were misguided and that apart from the mild eccentricities that were typical with any Christian group, we were normal.

It was a naïve confidence on my part because I had little or no contact with other believers, let alone their meeting cultures. That meant I really had no data for any sort of informed comparison. For the most part, all I possessed was the anti-Christianity propaganda of the LC Movement. Under that influence, I was sure that my friends would immediately see the refreshing difference between the shallow truth-twisting, self-serving groups out there and a real church life. The thought hadn’t crossed my mind that a decade of immersion in LC culture might have jaded my consciousness toward things that outsiders would find bizarre.

The following Sunday morning my friends showed up. I watched them from the corner of my eye

during the meeting. Somewhere into the first quarter of the Lord's Table, their curious expressions melted into glum "I told you so" looks. The rhythms of our spiritual exercise had struck them as decidedly unsettling—exactly what they expected. I wanted to retreat to my favorite haunt of blaming their religious heritage. Presbyterianism after all, is not known for its explosive worship styles. I had hoped that they would find our impromptu approach to worship exhilarating. It took almost no time, however, for them to detect that the appearance of spontaneity among us was mostly a set of deeply ingrained patterns of practice. Immediately after the meeting, the couple disappeared but not before paying a quick visit to the church library to confirm their other suspicion—that we were a Witness Lee church. I had fed them the standing-on-the-shoulders-of-those-who-went-before-us apologetic to prove our inclusiveness, but rows and rows of books bearing one name and one publishing house uniformly reinforced the opposite idea. That was the Coup-de-grace. Our friendship chilled considerably, as the couple suspected we had deliberately attempted to deceive them. They never trusted us again, and within a short time, were no longer in contact with us.

As this scenario replayed in my life countless times over the years with other people, I eventually began to wonder why so many visitors concurred that we were strange. Yes, there was the verse in Acts that recorded how the early church was spoken against everywhere (28:22). However, I eventually realized the irony of using that passage for consolation. The strongest critics of LC Meetings were not unsaved Jews or Gentiles but the church. The redeemed themselves, the church at large that had been spoken against everywhere in the book of Acts was itself now speaking against Local Church meeting forms. Naturally, not every visiting Christian was vocal about it. Many attended our gatherings and then quietly slipped out,

keeping their feelings to themselves. But wherever I could manage to get beyond politeness and obtain honest feedback, I found mild visitor distaste nearly unanimous. The truth certainly didn't feel good. In moments of unguarded sincerity, guests were leveling with me and saying they couldn't take our "exercise of the spirit." Except they weren't calling it the exercise of the spirit. They were labeling it as weird and cultic.

Some of the questionable items included the vaguely off-center behavior that I mentioned at the end of the last chapter. Guests were sure to notice the gratuitous overuse of Witness Lee's name. They quickly marked habits like rocking back and forth and praying in sing-song tones. Visitors who came a few times would begin to perceive ubiquitous stock phrases such as "I'm deeply impressed" and witness the overwrought declaring of hymn stanzas. Yet among these quirks and the number not mentioned, nothing rivaled the sense of weirdness for outsiders quite like LC devotional practices. These public displays of calling, amening, shouting, and pray-reading will be remarked upon later.

A Difficult Admission

Without a doubt, the Bible tells us that soulish or fleshy people find the things of God foolish (i.e. 1 Cor 2:14). Perhaps every one of the guests in question during my decades-long experience had been in those categories. The problem was that our meetings were especially adept at running them off before they had the slightest chance of becoming spiritual. From my vantage point, the overwhelming majority of other American Local Churches had the same problem. They had become revolving doors. Stragglers who managed to find their way in to meetings would just as quickly stream right back out. We couldn't understand it. People were telling us that they enjoyed the gatherings (we believed them) and then they'd never return. Some

of us tried to put a positive spin on the problem by saying that we had to improve our shepherding. If we would just learn to re-contact visitors and care for them, things would change. I wanted that to be true. But for the most part, it wasn't. None of the honest visitor feedback that we had managed to obtain critiqued a lack of follow-up care. Instead, we were told that the meetings were simply too strange. And infrequently when guests felt safe to do so, they would say much worse.

There were and there continues to be of course, those occasional folks unfazed by Local Church peculiarities. They happily embrace the entire package of LC beliefs and practices. Just enough of these amiable people exist to keep the LC Movement in business, at least incrementally. The law of averages suggests that if one stays at any endeavor long enough, he will turn up customers, no matter how unpopular the goods or services he is offering. There will always be an Eskimo willing to buy a bag of ice. It is only a matter of contacting enough of them and persuading them that the abundant supply of free ice is not good enough. A church that attempts to base its continuing existence on that approach should be prepared for huge amounts of work with discouraging returns (exactly where Local Churches live).

After years of productivity in the poverty margin I began to grudgingly admit that something was broken. Apparently the Local Church meetings that had exerted such magnetism toward seekers in an earlier era had quietly slipped into extinction. This was made even clearer when saints I knew admitted to deliberately not inviting friends and relatives out of fear of being embarrassed. I remember challenging one of our more committed members to invite his coworkers, to which he replied, "Brother I have to be honest. I love the church here and all the saints. But I'm a professional and I rely on my reputation in the community to generate

clientele. I can't afford to bring my friends into a meeting where they will so easily misunderstand what's going on." Others, bless their hearts, still persevered. One high school age brother in the church finally worked up the nerve to bring a classmate to a traditional LC youth event. The visiting kid predictably found the meeting "exercise" bizarre. He took his experience back to school and turned it into material for a comedy routine—while the humiliated brother stood by. Peer group rejection is especially painful for young Christians. It is even more demoralizing not knowing whether one is suffering for the name of Christ or for some unnecessarily peculiar practice.

The LC Movement has certainly attempted to offset the misgivings of prospective recruits. Experts have been enlisted to testify that LC meetings are normal. Techniques have been utilized to manipulate web search engines and thus bury negative assessments. Public relations energy has gone into obtaining favorable edicts from Christian magazines and Bible colleges. This is the Living Stream Ministry way—do not listen or learn or make meaningful adjustments; instead, try to override the common sense observations of the public. Our way must be different from this cosmetic approach. Rather than vying for a change at the public relations level, we must do something at the grass roots level where visitors enter our doors.

When Practices Both Help and Hurt

When it comes to stoking the intensity level of a Christian meeting, no one gets an "A" for effort like a Local Church member. There is something impressive about the determination of believers who can suddenly begin pumping fists and shouting at the top of their lungs. However, attempting to make a meeting "alive" minus authentic spontaneity, excitement, or reaction, will always look strangely forced.

People accept the fact that Christian meetings will have some level of enthusiasm with practices like prayer, Bible reading, preaching, and singing. But they also intuitively know when something has grown two heads. It doesn't take a genius to eventually wonder why LC meetings try so hard to induce religious euphoria. If Jesus promised to be there when two or three are gathered into His name, does it really require such laborious efforts and histrionics to sense His presence?

Nevertheless, counter productive worship forms continue even in churches that have begun meeting apart from the LSM system. I am convinced that nothing more quickly sabotages opportunities with new people than an exhibition of typical LC meeting "exercise." As these habitual practices go unchecked, it is like a platoon of red flags rushing over a hill toward the visitor virtually shouting, "Strange Group! Strange Group!"

"But wait," you say, "Our habits might be peculiar to others, but they really helped me. Besides, they are biblical." Please bear with me for a moment. I'm not trying to dismiss anything scriptural. I'm not even trying to throw away unscriptural practices that help believers. The issue is not whether practices are bad or good but whether they are self-serving.

The typical way Christians think about their meetings is as a place to come and worship, be refreshed, edified, learn, and be encouraged. The Apostle Paul would no doubt agree with that mindset, but would add the thought of testimony to his expectation of a Christian gathering. This expanded understanding sees the assembly as a place where the unsaved or unlearned can come and perhaps for the first time be exposed to New Testament realities. Hopefully after having fought through the desire to stay at home, they will at last come among believers and find something understandable and ultimately worth

receiving. Not all Christians have this hope for their gatherings. Some only think of Sunday morning as a time to enjoy themselves. Their chief concern is what they get out of it rather than Christ being competently exhibited to new guests.

The Bible addresses this problem in 1 Corinthians 14. There Paul portrayed tongues-speaking as a beneficial practice for the individual spirituality of the saints, but a potential disaster for folks fresh off the street. In fact, Paul could foresee it being such a problem for visitors that he said concerning the tongues-speaker that “if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in the church, and let him speak to himself and to God” (1 Cor. 14:28). Without the benefit of interpretation to make sense of what was spoken to visitors in the meeting, Paul’s advice was to keep the tongues exercise quiet and personal. Apparently in the Apostle’s mind, nothing could be worse than the people of Corinth coming away from meetings thinking that the church was full of weird people. Hence his concern—“will they not think that you are mad?” (1 Cor. 14:23). The question was not whether the saints got something out of their tongues-speaking, but whether their spiritual self-gratification would end up neutralizing the Lord’s testimony in Corinth.

The 1 Corinthians passage exists to accomplish a lot more than providing a check for out of control tongues-speaking. These verses represent the larger concern of whether visitors can make sense out of what is happening in a Christian meeting. This is why we encounter the phrases “no one understands him” (v. 2), “an uncertain sound” (v. 8), “I do not know the meaning” (v.11), “my understanding is unfruitful” (v. 14), “he does not understand what you say” (v.16). The focus is clearly upon the guest’s ability to receive and assimilate what is being said. I think it is also fair to the spirit of the chapter that what is being done and how it is done should make sense as well. It is unlikely that Paul

would have commanded understandable words while endorsing strange, incomprehensible behavior.

The Apostle's charge must have been a bitter pill for some Corinthians at that time. I could imagine them at least quietly grumbling about how they liked their meetings the way they were and how their spiritual enjoyment was being annulled. Maybe a few of them reasoned in an accusatory way: "Paul, what are you ashamed of? I'm not afraid of letting people see who we really are and how we touch the Spirit!" Now maybe I'm too much in suggesting this kind of reaction. The Corinthians might have immediately tweaked their meetings with no opinions at all. But given attitudes among the religious today, I doubt it. Some church dispositions all but declare, "We're not changin' nuthin' for nobody!"—even after Paul's meeting instructions have existed in the Bible for 2,000 years.

When a group tends toward an uncompromising love affair with particular forms of worship, a mindset unavoidably develops. Members will see specialized practices as being indispensable. Without these cherished group customs, it is thought, quality spiritual experiences in a meeting are all but unreachable. Therefore, members are not likely to alter anything without some type of general outcry. Instead, the strategy toward guests becomes that of nicely encouraging them to change. I've been a party to sessions like these, where we would testify to a "new one," graciously admitting that we also found certain things in LC meetings strange when we began attending, but that with time and patience, we got over them. "Just try it for a while," we'd say. "Once you touch your spirit, then you'll understand."

Paul did not advise this course of action toward newcomers. He told the Corinthian believers to change whatever might confuse the typical person who wandered in to the meetings. This is terribly hard for us to understand. How could anything spiritually

enjoyable be a detriment to others? In fact, since it helped us, that must mean other people will certainly benefit from it also. Unfortunately, some brothers believe this with all their heart and use themselves as examples of the typical person—“I just don’t understand why the exercise of the spirit would bother anyone,” they say. “I wasn’t bothered a bit by any of it.” The saint who says this, though, does not represent the typical person.

Statistically speaking some people will find unknown tongues and wild, spontaneous exercise inviting, even interesting. However, Paul understood that it wouldn’t be the typical Corinthian. He anticipated that in Corinth, the average person would not walk away with favorable impressions of church meeting “enjoyment.” Yes, someone could have objected and said, “Paul, I am relatively new to the church in Corinth and I had no problem with tongues-speaking. I found it exhilarating.” But Paul wasn’t interested in the small percentages that might be able to say such a thing. He was thinking about the broad cross section of the population. He hadn’t allowed his own experience of the Spirit to blind him to what people on the outside still thought.

Some say (and I actually heard), “This is the church of the Lord Jesus. If sinners don’t like it they can go to hell.” And guess what? They will—right in your city, on your block, on your street, next door to your meeting place. We can call ourselves the church in whatever city or give ourselves a new name and get a nicer meeting place, but if people-repellant practices are still a part of our habitual meeting life, then folks will march through the front door of the assembly and straight out the back. The cross is already a “stumbling block” to natural men. Why would we want to install our own hurdles and make it that much harder for them to enter the kingdom of God?

Calling on the Lord

Calling on the Lord's name is a soundly biblical and edifying practice. Personally, I do it every day of my life. Somewhere along the way, though, the LC Movement managed to confuse biblical calling with a calling form. That is, shouting repeatedly in unison, "OOOOOHH, Lord Jeeeeesus!" Now there's nothing at all wrong with a bunch of people that just suddenly, spontaneously end up invoking the name of Christ. But it won't be long before someone detects when it is really just the religious habit of a group. I have never yet encountered an honest newcomer who thought that choreographed, rhythmic intonations were genuinely spiritual. In fact, from the time the LC calling form became standard practice in meetings, people have called it chanting. "No, no," we vigorously protested, "We are not chanting!" So, we kept doing it, and they kept calling it chanting. We even enlisted the help of folks who were familiar with authentic Far Eastern chanting to say that our calling was not chanting. We got experts on cult research to testify that we were not chanting. And after all the dust settled, people still said that we chanted. Why? Because our form of calling sounds like chanting. It really doesn't matter how many facts can be marshaled to the contrary. Perception will win every time. The warning signals that assail a guest's senses in a meeting will carry ten times the weight of all the LC "apologetics" combined. Bottom line: if the visitor feels you were chanting, you were chanting.

This shouldn't call into question the biblical practice of calling on the name of the Lord. What really ought to be questioned is our way of doing it. Rarely does it dawn on Local Church members that calling in the Bible and the thing we have labeled "calling" might be two different things. For instance, when Abraham built an altar and called on the name of the Lord In

Genesis chapter twelve, he was not necessarily saying over and over again in rhythmic cadence, “O Jehoooooovah, O Jehoooooovah.” Yet well meaning Local Church members use this passage and scores of others to support calling on the Lord, which is to them indistinguishable from their peculiar style of calling.

I have no doubt that some saints really do experience the Lord’s presence within the LC form of calling on His name. I also have no doubt that while it can personally edify believers, it tends to alienate and confuse hordes of visitors. What would the Apostle Paul say? He probably wouldn’t advise us to collect a batch of “calling” verses and then argue with newcomers, pressing them to “Just try it, you’ll like it.” According to 1 Corinthians 14 he counseled believers to either alter the practice (abstain from tongues unless there was interpretation) or keep it to oneself (let him speak to himself and to God).

A recommended way to tweak our form of calling has to do with not trying to choreograph the entire meeting into a unified exercise of it. Let it occur naturally by individual. In addition, rather than repeatedly saying “O Lord Jesus,” we might consider calling upon His name in the normal context of prayers and praises (i.e., “Lord Jesus, thank you for your great salvation”). This would make more sense to visitors, including non-Christians. And, incidentally, “O” needn’t be used as though it were part of the Lord’s name. The Psalms frequently employ that expression with a great deal of feeling but not as a form. While we’re on the subject of structured addresses, mentioning the title “Lord” is not an absolute necessity, either. You can say “Jesus” without committing a sin. The plain name occurs in the Bible both before and after His ascension. One final consideration has to do with adjustments to the volume of our calling. The Lord is not hard of hearing. Calling on His name works even at a soft, conversational level.

The Amen

The “Amen” is an audible rejoinder that means, “Let it be so” or “I agree.” Ideally, it emanates from spiritual depths and registers agreement with others or with God. Unfortunately, the Local Church version of the “Amen” has taken on a distinctly mechanical shape that employs rhythm and cadence far more than genuine response. The LC practice of giving the amen relies on a symbiotic partnership with the LC practice of prayer. That is, while praying, a person instinctively learns to leave a slight gap at approximately five second intervals. Others in the meeting immediately fill the tiny break with a united chorus of amens. Of all practices, this is the one most highly ingrained in the LC membership psyche for the simple reason of its constant repetition. In a one hour prayer meeting (allowing pauses for another person to pray), the attendant says “Amen” hundreds of times. Strictly by the math it works out to over seven hundred times in an hour. After having done this for months or years, other styles of prayer that do not hyper-utilize this form will seem foreign. In fact, it is common for long time LC members to feel that prayer is dead if it is not punctuated with droning Amens. Of course this has a lot less to do with “life” than it does with conditioning.

The most common response to the objection of over-using the Amen is that the Lord Himself is “the Amen” in the book of Revelation. It is therefore good to say “Amen,” as much as one can. There is nothing particularly wrong with that reasoning, but I have sat in almost twenty-five years’ worth of LC prayer meetings. I have both seen and felt what it is like to try and fill every one of those five-second gaps with an Amen. Sometimes by the Holy Spirit I gave one. The vast majority of the other times, I was trying to honor the person who was praying (“standing with him” we’d

say). At the very least I was simply upholding a church form. Regardless of the intention, the constant “Amen” often became terribly tiring and mind numbing. I knew that many sitting around me in those meetings must have felt the same because of the way they would begin slipping into automatic, groaning, disconnected, or monotone amens. If the person praying had said, “The moon is blue cheese,” most people would’ve said “Amen,” before they realized anything was wrong!

Although 1 Corinthians 14 briefly mentions the giving of the Amen in church meetings, it is impossible to establish the LC form based on such slight information. No one can say with certainty that the Christians in Corinth were giving a rhythmic amen at every slight break and pause in someone’s prayer. For that matter, no one can say whether they sang it, said it once, said it in unison, or whispered it. Therefore, if we change the habit, we will not be guilty of betraying any sacred truth. This is a good thing, because there is probably not one LC meeting practice more in need of reform. The peculiar Amen that pervades every nook and cranny where prayer might occur, is the newcomer’s first clue that there is something definitely unorthodox about your church. It’s the advance tip-off. Even before they hear anything negative through the grapevine or see anything on the internet or discover any objectionable doctrine, the guest has gotten a taste of something strange.

A brother said to me, “John, I’ve been in Pentecostal circles for a long time and I’ve seen a lot of strange things, but this constant amen chant is really hard to take. It was the hardest thing of all for me to overcome in order to stay in the church.” Since the LC Amen is such a primary piece of equipment to those who have spent years in the Local Church, it is difficult to tone down, let alone to stop. “I touch my spirit when I do that,” we irately cry. But once again, what are we trying to do with our meetings—gratify ourselves or

effectively present Christ to our communities? As we venture into an era of greater potential fruitfulness, this is a question that must be answered.

One modest adjustment to our form might be to withhold the amen until the closing of prayer. When it is clear someone has concluded, then responses could be given. Another possibility is to abolish automatic, habitual amens and only sparingly give them as they are subjectively provoked from within. Or why not respond with “Yes” or “I agree,” or “Yes Lord!” to avoid the knee-jerk response of a uniform rhythmic “Amen”? In either case, the positive side effect is that attendants will pay more attention to the words and sentiment of others’ prayers rather than to the cadence accompanying them.

Shouting

Numerous passages like Isaiah’s “Cry out and shout” (12:6) model the devotional outbursts of joy that the people of God sometimes experience. Perhaps nothing is more exhilarating than being filled in spirit and then outpouring it in exuberant praises. Unfortunately the LC Movement has managed to borrow this simple reality and boil it down to the bare bones of volume. Boxed, manufactured hollering has become synonymous with the phrase “Release your spirit.” (Interestingly enough, Watchman Nee’s *Release of the Spirit*, where this term seems to have had its genesis, says nothing about shouting in meetings to achieve that release).

Don’t misunderstand this opening word about shouting to be an all out assault against expressive worship. I certainly don’t advocate converting our meetings into mere cerebral events. Visitors can generally accept a congregation’s joyful praise, as long as context seems to justify it. For one thing, he or she

must witness the evolution of the meeting and the reason for our excitement. Perhaps they saw the slow build-up of appreciation through a few songs and then a word was preached which captured it. Then in the final song, the entire meeting seemed to crescendo in responsive praise. Even if the visitor has no wish to participate he has seen why it went there.

Once logical context is missing, however, it leads to trouble. Sudden yells, screams, and groans outside the flow of developing worship are jarring and extremely unpleasant. Years back after a particularly tiring and unfruitful quarter on the campus, we finally encouraged two college girls to attend our meeting. Hearing the word preached and feeling the friendly warmth of many saints, they told the person who brought them, "We've found our home!" But in their second meeting they sat in front of a man I'll call "Recovery Guy." Recovery Guy doesn't believe you can be in Spirit using a conversational tone. When he stands to address the meeting, even if it only numbers 50 people, he shouts as if there were 50,000. And that's what he did. Suddenly, during a milder reflective moment in our gathering, Recovery Guy felt the need to touch his spirit. He leaped up, screaming until his face was red and veins popping. The ordeal went on for an excruciating minute or so. After the bellowing was over, he sat down abruptly and went back to acting normal, as though he had not done something incredibly strange. A few other saints were then emboldened to exercise similarly. The two visiting girls quickly realized that they had not found their home after all. Later they wouldn't take phone calls or emails from any of us. Scratch our efforts for that quarter. But Recovery Guy got to "enjoy his spirit" that day, which to him was worth the cost of two young souls.

In addition to keeping demonstrative praise in context, we might also want to consider deliberately limiting the volume level of it. Yes, we can do this

without offending God. The Bible tells us that “the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32). Our spiritual exercise in a meeting is like a television playing. The Holy Spirit broadcasts through us, however the color, contrast, tone, channel, and yes, volume, is in our hands. It serves us well to remember that loudness does not improve the quality of the picture one iota. Adjusting it down does not diminish it, either.

Pray-Reading

Bible verses are plentiful that imply the principle of combining prayer with scripture. As a devotional act, prayer with reading is also well documented in the lives of many whom the Lord has used in church history. In addition, a myriad of small potato Christians can testify of the innumerable benefits they have reaped from this spiritual discipline.

The Local Church Movement rightly appeals to the rich tradition of prayer and scripture but it then promotes a package called “Pray-Reading.” The term is something of a misnomer because LC “pray-reading” neither involves prayer nor reading to any measurable extent. The public form of it actually consists more of animated shouting and repeating. Those who engage in LC pray-reading will experience mixed results. At one level, the most intense and sincere practitioners will at least trigger an internal burst of euphoric sensations. This they often enthusiastically describe as “the Spirit” or “life.” Such determinations, I am fully aware, are subjective. This exercise and a hundred others of equally peculiar ilk could bring someone into a genuine enjoyment of God. However even if the exhilaration felt is authentic, we’re right back to the tongue speaking dilemma of the Corinthians, who felt that spiritual self-gratification was more important than alienating visitors.

Another level of experience associated with pray-reading is found among the folks who dutifully do it in meetings just because it is established Local Church practice. Morale and peer encouragement get people standing up by two's and three's zealously yelling something. The sum total result of the practice with that mindset: zero. It's hard to say that any status quo activity can so easily bring a person into the manifest presence of God. Of course then the question on the table is why continue the practice publicly if the beneficial effects of it are so miniscule and the possibility of estranging people is so high.

New practitioners of pray-reading often characterize another station of experience—that of feeling downright silly. Perhaps we've all seen it before. Carol is the rare newcomer who has hung on and ignored every peculiarity she's seen in the meetings. She doesn't participate when everyone starts shouting lines from the hymnal or words from the Bible. Thus, a "burden" begins to mount among the saints for her to "break through" and touch her spirit. Finally after some long-term encouragement—hounding, she has begun to feel—Carol hollers some words from a verse over and over, receiving many exaggerated Amens from those sitting around her. Afterward, she sits down awkwardly, not feeling anything but a vague sense of humiliation at having done something so weird.

Unlike Carol, other visitors will find they like the new exercise. But again, they represent only the tiniest minority. Most people entering church doors do not possess the personality nor the inclination to ever participate in exercises like LC pray-reading. Pressing the issue upon them or submerging them in an atmosphere where they feel bad for not participating will lead to their rapid departure.

My recommendation about pray-reading is simple. Actually pray-read. Praying is normal and reading the Bible is normal. Therefore, it is not too

great a stretch to suggest praying the words of the Bible. I have found that where I introduced this spiritual discipline, even novice believers easily took to it. I strongly suggest leaving the unusual forms related to shouting, emphasizing and repeating for the prayer closet or in small groups of like-minded saints who want to have a good spiritual blow-out.

Every Sunday, seekers attend churches of all sizes and shapes, only to leave unimpressed, unaffected, and sometimes even offended. This is a reality. We cannot capture the hearts and minds of everyone, nor should we try. More than a few congregations have fallen into liberal extremes while trying to incorporate what sinners “like” into their meetings. When it comes to content of belief, our foundational faith and the living out of it must remain inviolate.

But there are things we can do to our meetings that will improve the chances of first time visitors wanting to return. These adjustments might sound confining to those of us who are accustomed to doing whatever we want without regard to who is in the room. However, not every devotional practice is appropriate for public display. Although altering ingrained forms is not easy, it can be done over time. Besides teaching, the most powerful tool of change is the tactful, sensitive example set by leaders. When leaders noticeably step out of peculiar patterns, others see and will be encouraged to do the same. The long-term affect will be local assemblies that become viable places of growth.