

Expect to Experience God

by N. Graham Standish

Many denominations, churches, pastors, and members have become mired in a series of worthless arguments in their attempt to diagnose why mainstream denominations and churches are in decline. Too many in the mainstream church think the problems have to do with theological positions, styles of worship, or availability of programs. So they say that the decline is the result of churches being too liberal or too conservative, or that the decline is due to our too-traditional worship. They say that we don't meet enough of people's needs, and we need to offer more programs.

What I have consistently noticed in almost all thriving congregations, however, is that what makes the difference is the extent to which the community is open to God at its core. Many churches simply aren't open to God. They let the will, ego, and purpose of the dominant voices in their congregation, whether the pastor's or that of a few strong members, drive the agenda. Instead of seeking God's call and purpose, they argue over who is right and wrong. Declining churches tend not to be open to God's presence. They worship, meet, and engage in ministry and mission, but their sense is that God is in heaven, we are on earth, and all that matters is doing good deeds. The congregants have no sense that Christ is in their midst, and that this presence of Christ can bless them and make their churches places of love. So they continue to engage in the practices of the church, but they don't expect an encounter with Christ.

These churches have no awareness that God's grace and power can work in their midst. They have no awareness of the Holy Spirit. They are unaware that when we become open to God, God's Spirit flows through the church to make miracles happen.

This lack of awareness in mainline churches today is symptomatic of a far greater problem—something I call "rational functionalism"—a disease that has afflicted all mainline denominations.

Rational functionalism is rooted in the idea that we can uncover the mysteries of life and the universe mainly through rational thought and disciplined investigation. It is the tendency of denominations, their congregations, and their leaders to subscribe to a view of faith and church rooted in a restrictive, logic-bound theology that ignores the possibility of spiritual experiences and miraculous events.

This approach to faith is a by-product of the Age of Enlightenment, whose focus was on the rational and scientific pursuit of truth. From this perspective, God is a problem to be solved through a method that mirrors the scientific method as closely as possible, and if that isn't feasible, then by restricting the inquiry to the laws of human logic and analysis. The rational functional approach can reduce a congregation's practice to the attempt to lead people into a positivistic, logical exploration of religion and faith. The idea here is that a theological, historical, sociological, psychological, anthropological, economic, and philosophical understanding of the Christian faith will enable us to discern the laws of God and human life more clearly, and we can therefore learn to live better lives.

In short, this approach reflects what a national leader in my denomination once said to me: "If we can just get people to think right theologically, then all of our problems will go away." The problem is that faith is more than just a logical, empirical inquiry into God and God's ways. It involves our minds, spirits, bodies, relationships, and beings. To address the human seeking for God from only a rational, logical, theological perspective is limiting.

One danger of rational functionalism is that it can cause pastors and leaders to become overintellectual in their approach to faith. God becomes an abstract notion, not a presence whom we can experience, form a relationship with, and love. Increasingly, these pastors and leaders endanger their faith. They don't know what to do with God. They especially don't know what to do with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. They can appreciate Jesus from a historical perspective, but what do they do with the resurrected Christ who, according to Scripture, is incarnated in the world, in relationships, and in

the human heart? What do they do with the Holy Spirit, who inspires, heals, and miraculously touches life? Ultimately, they become so intellectual in their approach that they not only lose their own faith, but struggle with leading others to faith.

I am not advocating that pastors and church leaders should remain theologically and historically ignorant, or that we should blindly accept everything in the Bible as historical fact. Understanding Scripture and Christian faith from a more critical and academic point of view is a good thing because it can help us to understand the context and intent of Scripture, thus helping us hear God's voice more clearly when we read Scripture. My point is that when academic inquiry and scientific skepticism become stronger than an emphasis on forming faith and leading people to an encounter with God, the church declines because people are no longer led to form a living faith in God that can transform their lives. The church becomes little more than a social agency filled with well-meaning but spiritually dead people.

In churches caught in the grip of rational functionalism, sermons tend to become academic papers read to the people in the pews. They don't address more basic issues: How are we supposed to endure living with pain, loneliness, and turmoil? How are we supposed to find God amid life's darkness? Bible studies focus on the historical, sociological, economic, and cultural issues of the time, with the intent of uncovering what theological message the writer of a Bible passage is trying to impart. They don't address more basic issues: What is God saying to me through the Scripture about how to live my life? What is God saying to me about what God is doing in my life, especially in the face of my suffering? How is God calling me to love others and to reach out to those who are suffering, both near and throughout the world, and who are in need of God's love as well as mine?

The primary problem at the core of rational functionalism is that it fails to treat God as a tangible presence. God is treated mostly as an idea or thought, or as an entity we encounter when we die, rather than as a tangible presence in the here and now. There is no sense that God's kingdom is all around us, and that this kingdom is a spiritual reality in which we can experience God directly.

A second problem with rational functionalism is that it functionalizes the life of the church, turning everything from worship to committee meetings into routinized events with little connection to a larger purpose. In the rationally functional church, the focus is on maintaining the institution, not on creating experiences through which God can be encountered and experienced in our midst. What matters most is preaching in the prescribed manner, adhering to particular rituals in the traditional way, and singing only the traditional hymns. Guiding people to a tangible encounter, experience, and relationship with Christ isn't much of a concern. Teaching people how to discover the power of the Holy Spirit in their midst is never emphasized because the object of the church has been reduced to doing what we've always done, to function the way the church has always functioned simply for the sake of functioning. Guiding people to discover the Creator's call in their lives, calling them and us to live deeper, richer, and greater lives of love and service, is ignored in favor of guiding people simply to function as Christians have always functioned. In short, the message is reduced to (as someone once told me) "We should be Christians because Christianity is good and ethical, and we should be good and ethical people. The church's role is to teach us to follow the Golden Rule."

Ultimately, becoming a blessed church means overcoming rational functionalism. In blessed churches, people not only *expect* to experience God; they do experience God. Their expectations open the door to God, who stands knocking. They *expect* to hear the Creator's voice guiding the church to what it is called to be and do. They expect to encounter and be blessed by Christ. They expect the power of God the Holy Spirit to flow through their life and the church's, blessing them in so many ways.

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