



Curing Pew-Monia

Like the Corinthians, our biggest problem is ourselves

The hip-hop lolly-pop syndrome may be the Sunday sugar boost for some Christians in our modern world. They come away feeling great and "uplifted" from a temporary energy burst that does not last outside the church door. They have not been fed from the Word and have missed out on their spiritual square meal for the week.

We glimpsed this in a recent TV segment on Hillsong featuring its senior minister and presenting a style of worship and view of the Christian life that does not seem always to resonate with the Word of God.

It was certainly not in the tradition of Reformed Christians. But what is? There are alternatives to hip-hop Christianity. Not all of which measure up to the Word and thereby solve the trouble with the church. The trouble with the church is not to be found in worship styles or any other contemporary trend to fill the pews but in individual Christians themselves living according to 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1.

Here we will identify and assess five aspects of contemporary Christianity and church life which militate against filling our pews.

The "pew-monia" Christian: In some situations a mutant has developed. The church is doctrinally correct, the service is Word-centred in terms of preaching, but the church is stagnant. Its members "turn up, sit up, stand up, sing up, look up and pay up" for Sunday worship. It is becoming a submerging church going underground by natural attrition, and facilitated by the undertakers.

Does this explain why some Reformed churches and Christians belonging to them are suffering from "pew-monia"? Do we think of church on Sunday as a respite from the rat race? Is it a forerunner to another busy week where, if there is time, we may attend a midweek Bible study? Have we factored in time to give to Christian ministry to others, or do we just employ staff to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12)?

Often we are all too busy with work and families and grandchildren and other pressing needs and priorities to do the jobs that were once done by members of the congregation. Youth work, visiting the sick or elderly, pastoral calls, teaching Sunday School and Scripture in our secular schools have now mostly been assigned to paid staff. Ministry has become the domain of the trained or "professional" rather than the Christian in the pew.

Our excuse is often that we need to put our own family first — and rightly so. But our family is wider than those who live under our roof. Let us not fail to focus also on the family of God, our brothers and sisters in Christ and their needs, not just when we meet on Sundays but throughout the week as well.

This family is not confined to one age group, nor is our biological family which often reaches across four generations. A church which operates by ministering to different segments of the family on the basis of age is not necessarily a healthy one. In a time of dysfunctional families it is important that we hold these different age groups together connecting children, youth, married, singles, widows, widowers and the elderly so that each may enhance and minister to the other.

Hospitality is an important biblical injunction (Heb. 13:2, 1 Pet. 4:9). Furthermore, it is modeling to our children a Christian lifestyle which embraces others, and one we would want them to emulate.

Christians are to "*devote ourselves to good works*", "*help in cases of urgent need*" (Tit. 3:8, 14) and "*give to those who beg*" (Mt. 5:42). These things are always to be on our radar and we may need to give less time to the rat race to do them.

The "recliner" Christian: This is not only the person who has a Lazy-boy and a flat screen TV. The apostle Paul confronted this "recliner" lifestyle when he arrived in Corinth. A decade before his arrival, some Corinthian Christians had rights that had been acquired in an unprecedented era of affluence in the time of the emperor Claudius. These meant that they were now being waited on. In some cases, this extended to those who reclined for dinners in the precincts of the great pagan temple to Octavia. After Paul left Corinth these people rationalised that "*an idol is nothing*" and "*there is only one God*", so they could recline to dine in the temple precincts at formal dinners with impunity (1 Cor. 8:4, 10).

But there were consequences. Recliner Christians had an effect on Christians new to the faith. These converts rightly assumed that this was the norm for Christians. If the culture taught that life was "all about me and my rights", they could continue to go to the temple after they became Christians as they had always done.

Recliner Christianity harmed and, in fact, put out the light for new converts who followed these examples. Paul refers to this as "*sinning against Christ*" who is the head of the church that is His body (8:11-12)

Paul also declared, "*If food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make a brother stumble*" (8:13). For some of the Corinthian Christians this meant denying themselves a free, major feast! But serving, not reclining, is the hallmark of biblical Christianity.

The self-centred Christian: If, by some unforeseen circumstance beyond your control, you happen to be sitting in your Lazy-boy watching your flat screen TV, use the time to evaluate the ads. Some encourage us to "do something for me". "You deserve it," says one, while others mouth for us, "I want", "I need", "I'll get". "Indulge yourself," says another. They are so convincing we almost believe them — or perhaps we do!

We can turn to Paul again for the right model. He possessed rights as both a Roman citizen and an apostle, but he did not always exercise them. To do so in Corinth would have put him into the category of "the paid teachers" whom all knew were in it for the money. At that time there was a new wave in education that departed from learning for living and became all about learning for earning to become a "somebody".

But as a gospel-first Christian, Paul could say to the Corinthian church, "*Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ*" (1 Cor. 9:12).

He pronounced "*Woe is me*" against himself if he did not preach the gospel. This apostle of the gospel went to extraordinary lengths to make sure that nothing he ever did or said created an obstacle or deterred others hearing about the amazing rescue operation that God had mounted through His Son.

Clearly there were some of the elect in the Corinthian church for whom their rights were inalienable and as a result the gospel had no actual priority. In doing so they would be simply affirming the cultural mores of their day.

The "nimby" Christian: This acronym for "not in my back yard" is well known among the affluent in most western countries. The dictionary defines it as somebody who objects to something unpleasant or dangerous being located near his or her home but is perfectly happy to see it located elsewhere.

But in some places the definition has been stretched to refer to those from ethnic minorities, refugees, religious groups or denominations with different emphases and worship styles.

Such people who adopt this attitude would probably try to argue that "ethnic" churches had been in Jerusalem following the day of Pentecost when the vast number of people from all over the Roman empire heard and believed.

1 Corinthians 9:22 confirms that Paul was colour blind. *"I have become all things, to all men, that by all means I may win some,"* he says. His mission was to all races and his tailor-made evangelistic messages spoke to all classes in Roman society from senators downwards, and were crafted for Greeks and Jews and other ethnic minorities in Corinth.

While the majority of the names of Corinthian Christians are Latin ones (which is to be expected because Corinth was, after all, a Roman colony), there were names from other ethnic groups in this multi-cultural congregation. There was no homogenous church mentality with Paul but rather the gospel priority was a mark of the church in Corinth

The friends or neighbours Christian: The Bible has much to say about friends and friendship, with Jesus Himself calling us friends if we do what He commands.

Church is always a good place to meet people, and generally the people we meet there are people we like (or who are like us!). It is a safe place to be. But friendship can be to the exclusion of neighbours whom we may not like, (or who may not be like us!).

"Who is my neighbour?" is a question Jesus answered with a long parable. But it was not a priority question in Corinth. In fact you did not need to know your neighbour. Life was all about net-working and the politics of friendship. You only related to those who might be useful to you and your career. So who cared who your neighbours were? That question was simply not on their radar.

However, Paul comes in with a counter-cultural command when he asserts, *"No one must seek his own good but the good of his neighbour"* (10:24). Christianity was not about oneself but about the others. It must have sounded strange in that first-century world and not easily digested — that you were not first in your priorities.

Paul's dear-cut command is preceded by two refutations of the Corinthian culture's catch-cry that *"everything is permitted"*. In both Latin and Greek this was a popular affirmation. But Paul emphatically states that not everything is beneficial. Some behaviour patterns are clearly detrimental to the person who acts them out.

Another reason is mounted against what everyone believes as a given, needing no proof. *"Not everything builds up."* This must have sounded weird to the Corinthians. Life for them was not about affirming others and seeking to enhance their lives. Life was all about themselves.

What *would* or what *did* Jesus do? WVVJD badges, bracelets and books still sit on the shelves of some Christian bookshops. What would Jesus do? What would Jesus drive? This type of question defined a recent popular movement especially among young Christians. It sought to help them think before acting. However it is not a question that Paul would ever have asked.

First, Paul sought to imitate Jesus by *"seeking to please everyone in everything I do"* (1 Cor. 10:33a). Others were always first, as were their needs. Paul's way of life was always other-people focused.

Second, Paul never sought his own advantage as he lived day by day (10:33b). He trusted the Lord to look after him. He would not be asset-orientated or Super-focused.

Third, he sought *"the advantage of many in order that they might be saved"*. His absolute sensitivity to others' sensitivity is one example (10:27-30), even though he has come under condemnation from other Christians (9:3). That others can and must be rescued from hell was urgent and all consuming. His teaching on election never bred complacency.

Paul declared *"I imitate Jesus"* (10:33c). So what did Jesus do? Paul reveals elsewhere what Jesus did. *"Christ did not please Himself"* (Rom. 15:3). That statement is testimony that He was the

one for others throughout all his life, as his life in the gospels so clearly demonstrates. Paul models his life as a Christian on this.

The amazing statement is also a binding command on every Christian person. *"You must imitate me, just as I imitate Jesus"* (1 Cor. 11:1). This means *"whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, you must do all to the glory of God"* (1 Cor. 10:31). You must give no offence racially to others by comments or actions or to be offensive in what you do in the church of God (1 Cor. 10:32).

There are choices to be made in the way we live as Christians. Will it be characterised by pew-
monia, self-centeredness, nimbyism, friends or neighbours or "what did Jesus do?" characteristics? Or will it be the other — doing all to the glory of God, not pleasing yourself, not giving offence to any ethnic groups, not seeking your own advantage but that of those about you whether in your neighbourhood or work place — in order that they may be rescued by Jesus.

What is the trouble with the church? 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 gives us some very important dues. It can make the difference between the church either dying, or surviving and thriving. The ball is in our court. It is up to each of us to live according to this section of Scripture.

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