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Chapter One

PASSION FOR JESUS

The next generation will have an earnest, abandoned passion for Jesus and little or no tolerance for lifeless religion.



After ministering at a Sunday morning service at a church in Florida, I was preparing to go out to a restaurant with the pastor and his family. The pastor suggested that his fifteen-year-old son ride in my car so that, if we became separated in traffic, his son could direct me to the restaurant.

We got in the car. I glanced over at the teenager—baggy jeans and a t-shirt, three or four earrings, and hair that was a unique shade of green. We started the drive in silence. I wondered if he would be interested in conversation. I began wondering how long it would take to get to the restaurant.

Breaking the silence, I said, "So, do you have any hobbies? What do you like to do? What makes you tick?"

His answer came, clear, vulnerable, and powerful in its simplicity. "Loving Jesus," he said.

In a moment, my perspective changed.

Paramount to every other trend in this book is the fact that everywhere the Church is rediscovering Jesus. Traditional, lifeless, religious motions are being replaced by a vibrant sense of the availability of a living, dynamic relationship with this glorious person, Jesus, the Messiah.

RELIGION VS. SPIRITUALITY

We are living in the midst of a spiritual awakening.

Unfortunately, it is happening largely outside the Church of Jesus Christ.

Someone has said, "Religion is someone who has not had an experience with God telling other people who have not had an experience with God about people who had an experience with God."

There has perhaps never been a more sinister plot concocted in the depths of hell to keep men from God than the spirit of religion. Of course, this is not true religion, which James defines for us as visiting the fatherless and the widow and keeping ourselves pure from the spirit of this world, but the vain, hypocritical religious spirit that Jesus attacked in the Pharisees. (See James 1:27; Matthew 23.)

If religion could attract the unchurched masses and really impact those who faithfully attend church, then America would certainly be in much better shape. Unfortunately, the statistics

show that the world perceives the institutional church as irrelevant. The nominal Christian cycles around from church to church throughout his city or town without ever being established in a true discipling context where life issues can be addressed and Christian growth can take place. George Barna notes that in recent years, "Average attendance in mainline Protestant churches has dropped to just ninety-eight adults."¹

In the midst of this, however, we see spiritism and the New Age movement at an all-time high. The most successful movies and television programs include angels or the supernatural. Psychic telephone hotlines proliferate. Western society at the beginning of the 21st century is groping beyond the shallow materialism of the past 50 years and yearning again for a deep spiritual foundation. The hedonism of the sixties and seventies and the materialism of the eighties have produced a generation that knows that there must be more because they have seen a basic meaninglessness to their parents' lives. They are wanting and willing to "sell out" for anything that answers the need of their hearts.

Unfortunately, most of this generation grew up in some kind of Sunday school setting in a church that they drifted from in their late teen or college years. They have no thought that the Church can provide any real answers. Many cannot get over the hypocrisy that they have seen in their parents' lives. Others have been disillusioned by moral failures from spiritual leaders. They believe they have tried Christianity, and it has failed to answer their needs for a spiritual reality. They go looking elsewhere. George Barna comments:

The Busters Generation [born between 1965 and 1983] have shown an inclination to reject church right from the start. The result: slowly declining church attendance among the adult population. Millions of them have

rejected churches because of the perceived lack of relevance and sensitivity of churches to human need.²

I had an experience recently that brought this trend home to me, literally. As a child, I used to attend Vacation Bible School every summer in a little, idyllic American-village church near my home. Our town was far from any big city, with very little pluralism or multi-ethnicity. I remember going to these summer Bible lessons, playing with friends, and learning basic Bible stories.

Recently, I happened to be driving in that same quaint, old neighborhood and thought I would drive by this small country church that was such a source of memories of my early spiritual formation.

As I approached the church, I noticed that the cross was no longer on the top of the steeple. I slowed my car at the front of the building and read the sign. It said "Center for the Practice of Eastern Religion." Whatever happened to small-town Judeo-Christian heritage? America is changing!

AND DELIVER US FROM...RELIGION

Religion is insidious because it reduces the supreme loving, liberating force in the universe to a series of "oughts and "shoulds" that have no power to produce true change in a life. It sounds like a cliché, but it is true that the greatest power in the world is love. The source of pure love is God. But religion has portrayed God as a harsh, unloving taskmaster who is more concerned with actions than attitudes. God certainly does care about actions, but Scripture is crystal clear that a holy life flows out of a pure and clean heart. Jesus taught us that the sick need a doctor, not the healthy (see Luke 5:31). King David wrote, "Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom" (Ps. 51:6 NKJV).

Dead religion, this plot of hell, has deep and long-lasting impact. For example, one of the most difficult areas in the world today for evangelism is post-Reformation Europe. Europe, once the home to holy revolutionaries like Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, Knox, Wesley, and others, has been so burned out on religion that Christianity is essentially regarded with cold indifference, and paganism is on the rise.

I believe the next generation will not tolerate a Christianity that is not wholly authentic. There will simply not be time or effort invested in churches or institutions that sound and look shallow and plastic. There is a tremendous anointing of discernment on this generation, even those not consciously in relationship with God. They possess an instinctive quest for the real thing. This discernment ferrets out insincerity and thirsts for the genuine.

This generation will have the blessing of honesty. They will not prophesy "peace, peace...when there is no peace" just to maintain a status quo Sunday morning service. (See Jeremiah 6:14.) They would rather admit spiritual emptiness and desperation, and begin before God and one another in a place of honesty, than play the part of the counselors' lauding the emperor's new clothes. A hunger for a real individual and corporate spiritual life will become their driving force. It will replace the deeply inbred "ought" of going through religious motion. It will release a cry and a demand lifted up in the land for life.

Heaven answers those kinds of prayers.

This will have tremendous impact on the institutional church. This driving thirst for spiritual life will directly oppose the apathetic deadwood who want to maintain church as usual. Pastors and boards will be presented with a terrible quandary. The present church leadership, seeking survival, may decide simply to placate the faithfully attending and tithing Sunday morning crowd.