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THE SEDUCTION OF SENTIMENTALITY

How Extra-Biblical Traditionalism Hinders the Church

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It was the spring of 1969. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was visiting Westminster Theological Seminary to instruct the students about the nature of preaching and pastoral ministry. In the very first lecture, the renowned 20th-century physician-turned-minister gave a pointed diagnosis of what was afflicting the Church and undermining its credibility in the culture.

“You are familiar with the talk of ‘religionless Christianity’, with the idea that many have that the Church herself is perhaps the greatest hindrance to the Christian faith and that if we really want to see people becoming Christians, and the world, being ‘Christianised’, as they put it, we have to get rid of the Church, because the Church has become an obstacle standing between people and the truth that is in Christ Jesus. With much of this criticism of the Church one has, of course, to agree. There is so much that is wrong with the Church—traditionalism, formality and lifelessness, and so on—and it would be idle and utterly foolish to deny this.”¹

From the depths of his heart, Lloyd-Jones spoke of what he believed was the greatest hindrance to the Church’s legitimacy in the Western world. It wasn’t the corruptive influence of liberal or progressive theology. It wasn’t the secularization of Western culture. Traditionalism within the Church was the spiritual illness at the tip of his tongue. He saw how an emphasis on extra-biblical traditions imposed an unnecessary formality within the Church that sapped its vibrance and undermined its credibility. As a result, the Church was hindered from being the healthiest, and most effective that it could be. A significant amount of time has passed since then, but the proverbial boot of this critique still fits the American Church today. But you may ask: how?

First, we need to establish a clear definition of the issue. There are several proposed definitions for the word “traditionalism” that do not rightly identify the problem that Lloyd-Jones

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Zondervan, 2011) pg.18.

has called to our attention. For example, traditionalism is appropriate when it comes to biblical orthodoxy. We must “adhere to the doctrines and practices of tradition”² when it comes to the foundational beliefs and functions of the Church according to God’s Word. It is from our conformity to the explicit teaching of Scripture that we are equipped for every good work.³ So, traditionalism, in that sense, must be embraced or else we will drift into heresy. But traditionalism is problematic when we establish and work to maintain “extra-biblical traditions”. When we go beyond the explicit instruction of Scripture in our beliefs and practices within the local church.

If we are not careful, we will naturally formulate beliefs about how the local church should function based on personal opinions, preferences, or secular culture. As a result, beliefs and practices are established in the church with little to no grounding in the explicit teaching of Scripture. Yet, there is often a passion among professing Christians to uphold and maintain those extra-biblical traditions as if they are absolutely essential. So, what we are looking to consider and confront is what we’ll call “extra-biblical traditionalism”. Defined as, “establishing and maintaining man-made traditions as essential to the Church, despite their lack of clear biblical grounding.”

The problem with extra-biblical traditionalism is not just that it adds to God’s calling for the Church, but that it tends to distract us from what we’re called to do. This is an age-old problem for God’s people. Jesus confronted it in the Pharisees as recorded in Matthew 15. But even then, He was quoting the prophet Isaiah who rebuked the people of Judah on God’s behalf, saying, “in vain do they worship me, *teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*”⁴ That is

² “traditionalism” entry from www.merriam-webster.com.

³ 1 Tm. 3:17.

⁴ Mt. 15:9, Is. 29:13 ESV.

the essence of extra-biblical traditionalism, treating our ideas like the doctrines of God.

Believing our man-made traditions are essential to fulfill the purposes of God.

It's easy to look down on the Pharisees, but we would be wrong to distance ourselves from them. Particularly as those who are labeled, or perhaps self-proclaimed "conservative evangelicals". We are the Pharisees of our day. We often overlook that the Pharisees had good intentions. They took God's Word seriously and wanted every aspect of life in society to conform to the will of God. They didn't just want to meet the minimum requirements but aspired toward excellence in their scriptural understanding and personal holiness. They went astray because they got distracted. Their focus turned toward the numerous things they came up with that weren't prescribed by God Himself. As a result, the simple truth of God's Word was exchanged for an overly complex combination of distorted divine truth and human invention.

The Pharisees were subtly pulled away from the heart of God by the extra-biblical traditions they established and passionately upheld. Over time, those human traditions became the status quo. By the time Jesus came around, the extra-biblical traditions of the Pharisees were so engrained in their culture that it was the only way they knew. But by then they had become so blinded by the distractions of their traditions that they couldn't even recognize the Savior they had longed for when He stood right in front of them. This serves as an important lesson to us all. Whenever God's people establish and uphold their traditions as if they are as essential as the commands of God, even well-intended efforts can distract or even blind us to the glory of Christ Himself.

To clarify, we must understand that extra-biblical traditionalism takes many forms. It is evident and problematic in every generation of Christians. It afflicts long-standing historic churches and brand-new church plants. Extra-biblical traditions can be established in a

denomination or local church over the course of centuries, or be injected into a local church with one “new idea”. It can hide behind the defensive reply, *that’s just how we’ve always done it*, or it can be packaged as a new ministry methodology to grow your church in three easy steps. It can express itself in written rules etched in church constitutions, or through unspoken expectations regarding dress codes, and church bulletins. The point is, extra-biblical traditionalism is something every Christian, and every local church is susceptible to.

But why do we allow ourselves to become distracted by extra-biblical traditionalism? It would be easy to say it’s just pride or biblical ignorance. When it comes to the creation of new extra-biblical traditions, those seem to be common ingredients. But the creation of such traditions is not nearly as common as the desire to maintain them in our hearts. Most, if not all of the traditions we cling to are things we’ve inherited. We adopt them from other sources like our church upbringing, our denomination, our spiritual experiences, our education, etc. The reason we become so passionate about the traditions we adopt is sentimentality. In a myriad of ways, we develop an emotional attachment to those traditions. It is those attachments that lead our minds to think that our traditions are essential to our faith, or to the life of our churches, regardless of whether or not they are things God has called for in His Word. It is our sentimentality that lures us into the trap of extra-biblical traditionalism.

Consider, for a moment, the disorder of hoarding. If you’ve ever seen the reality tv-show, “Hoarders”, it’s the same basic story in each episode. A family member or friend reaches out to these hoarding disorder specialists. The testimonial of the person who made the call on their loved one’s behalf quickly explains the backstory. It all began with a few strange behaviors. A sudden, uncharacteristic aversion to throwing things out or an obsession with accumulating certain items. Initially, it was easy to dismiss, like a slightly odd hobby. Meanwhile, the hoarder

justified their actions by claiming their “collection” was meaningful or useful. They *needed* that stuff. As time went on, what seemed like a harmless peculiarity became debilitating, even dangerous. Eventually, all the unnecessary things that the hoarder claimed were valuable became a barrier between them and their loved ones, making it impossible to functionally live in their house. Without realizing it, their own health and safety became jeopardized by their obsession. The subtle seduction of sentimentality leads to a destructive trap that hinders a person from experiencing the best parts of life and harms them instead.

Extra-biblical traditionalism works in the same way. In the beginning, it seems harmless. We easily justify our thinking and behaviors because we are doing things in a way that is meaningful to us, or useful at one time in another context. We have powerful emotional and spiritual experiences tied to those things. So, we naturally long to replicate those experiences by attempting to recreate the conditions we associate with them. When promoting or defending our extra-biblical traditions we often rely on our narratives. Instead of presenting a biblical or logical defense, we tell stories of our experiences. *I got saved through this kind of ministry program. We did this event years ago and we always had such sweet fellowship. We did this at my last church and the church grew. It just wouldn't feel like “church” without this.* The expressions are various, but there's a common sentimental drive. The lack of a clear, biblical basis for our traditions is overlooked because of our nostalgia. So, we don't even question if our traditions are what's best for us or the local churches we're a part of. Often we fail to recognize when our traditions become hindrances to the health and growth of the church because our sentimentality blinds us to reality.

We can't just acknowledge this potential problem in vague concepts. To effectively identify where extra-biblical traditionalism is hindering us and address the issues that arise, we

must pursue specificity. Now, it would be impossible to appropriately identify every potential way that extra-biblical traditionalism may be present in our lives and churches. So, allow me to highlight four that tend to be common anywhere I have lived or served in connection to the local church.

Let's begin with the hindrance Lloyd-Jones pointed out in his previous diagnostic comment. Number one: extra-biblical traditionalism creates obstacles between people and the truth of Christ.⁵ I've had the privilege of getting to meet people when they come to church for the first time. People from all different ages and stages. I have especially loved talking with people who visit but have little to no church background. Talking with "unchurched" visitors gives a very unique and objective perspective on what's going on in the church, and the real impression it's making. Some of the best things I've heard have been from unchurched children who have come with their families for the first time in their lifetimes. The things they say are often humorous but also raise interesting questions. *Why did we sing some songs in a different kind of English? I didn't know what you guys were saying! Why does the table you were talking behind look so ancient? The church's bench-things were kinda hard to sit on. Why don't you get some comfy chairs?*

It's hard not to laugh in response to those kinds of remarks sometimes. But humor aside, there are things to seriously consider. Are we creating unnecessary distractions through the traditions we follow in our churches? From our worship service planning to our interior decorating, are we doing everything we can to remove all distractions from the truth of Jesus? Our hope for any first-time visitor is that they would hear the truth of Jesus, have the eyes of their heart opened to see the glory of Jesus, and trust in Jesus, right? But how many of our

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Zondervan, 2011) pg.18.

worship services are leaving a very different impression on the hearts and minds of those who attend?

This doesn't just apply to our unchurched visitors, but also to younger generations within our churches. I've had the humbling privilege of leading local church ministries to children, youth, and young adults. The perspectives of our young people have proven very insightful, often in surprising ways. I've heard young people from kindergarteners to twenty-somethings express that they felt they didn't belong in their church. They felt like tag-along bystanders whose presence was tolerated as long as they didn't spill anything on the carpet or cause a disturbance. Church felt like a place where they had to walk on eggshells. Some spend years growing up in the same church and they don't understand why the church does things in a certain way, and they are too afraid to ask. Perhaps the saddest thing I've come across are teens and young adults who are afraid to invite their non-Christian friends to church.

I remember talking to a young man who spent his entire life at the same church. He was a college student I was disciplining who would regularly meet with me to talk about life, faith, etc. One day he told me he had been afraid to invite his non-Christian friends to church for years because the worship services were so confusing and irrelevant. He thought it would only give his friends an even worse impression of Christianity. When I asked him to give me specifics, his answers surprised me. It had nothing to do with the length of the service, the preaching, or even the music. It came down to a combination of several, seemingly small, quirky traditions that the church had done for years. It gave the impression that everything was catered to every other generation but his. On top of that, there was a culture where the majority of older adults would only talk to each other in a way that often excluded young adults. All those factors understandably made this young man feel he wasn't really welcome there and he wasn't

confident his non-Christian friends would be either. How sad, that while extra-biblical traditions were being maintained in a way that hindered the younger generations of the church from feeling like a part of the body, the call to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us was being neglected.⁶

Jesus rebuked his disciples when they hindered children from coming to him.⁷ The disciples viewed the next generation as an unwelcome nuisance around Jesus. If we create a safe place to listen to the next generations of Christ-followers, we will often find convicting surprises. In ways that we may otherwise be completely unaware of, the young and unchurched that attend our worship services may feel like unwelcome aliens that do not know what's going on or why. They don't have the sentimental experiences we do, so while we do things in a way that's very meaningful for us, they are left out. And often those things are creating distractions that pull their attention away from Christ Himself because they aren't clearly presenting Christ to them in a way they can perceive. When that happens, we are hindering our children from coming to Jesus. Placing obstacles between them and an intimate encounter with the truth, presence, and power of Christ. And the most common obstacles that hinder them are products of our extra-biblical traditionalism.

Number 2: extra-biblical traditionalism hinders a church's worship. As I've served or led in music ministry for the last 20 years, there is a common occurrence. Perhaps you can relate to this kind of scenario. The worship service has just ended. From your perspective, everything went pretty well, praise the Lord! As you make your way through the building, chatting with folks along the way, one person approaches you and has something they need to share with you.

⁶ Rom. 15:7.

⁷ Mt. 19:14.

Trivialities and backstories lead to the same complaint in the end: *I can't worship because...* The music is too loud, or not loud enough. We don't sing enough upbeat contemporary songs or not enough traditional hymns. It only feels worshipful with the sound of the organ or the beat of a drum set. The decor of the place doesn't meet some "sacred" specifications. The people up front are dressed too casually, or too formally. The list could go on, but the bottom line is that this person believes they cannot worship without these conditions being met. They seriously think the worship of the church is hindered because these extra-biblical traditions aren't fulfilled. It's ironic because believing those things are essential conditions for worship is the actual hindrance.

When we understand the practical implications of how Jesus defines "true worship" it completely goes against the typical worship philosophies of our day. Christ casts a vision for the new covenant era of worshipping God when He says, "...the hour is coming, and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him."⁸ There are only two conditions for true worship to take place: "spirit and truth". In the words of Bob Kauflin, "...worship in spirit and truth is worship that springs from a sincere heart and lines up with the truth of God's Word."⁹ True worship requires a heart that has been enabled by the Holy Spirit to acknowledge and cherish the worth of God. The only other essential ingredient is the truth of God which inspires the response of the Christian spirit as it reveals the Lord's worth. Like baking soda and vinegar, any time that the truth of God comes in contact with a believer's heart, true worship bubbles up within them. Or at least it can.

"For those of us who think of worship primarily in terms of musically driven emotional experiences, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman should be eye-opening. Jesus is

⁸ John 4:23 ESV.

⁹ Bob Kauflin, *True Worshipers: Seeking What Matters to God* (Crossway, 2015) pg.27.

talking about “true worshipers” and he doesn’t reference music once. Not a whisper of bands, organs, keyboards, choirs, drum sets, guitars, or even lutes, lyres, and timbrels. Can we find out what it means to be a true worshiper and not talk about music? Apparently.”¹⁰ So simple, it almost seems too simple. But it is in the simplicity of our worship understanding that we experience freedom in worship.

If our hearts have been made spiritually alive, enabled to love and cherish the glory of God, then any time the truth of God’s glory is presented to us, we can worship the way God wants to be worshipped. He will be glorified, and we will be satisfied. It doesn’t matter what’s going on around us, where we are, what the song or style is, what the preacher’s delivery is like, or any other worldly condition. If we have the truth of God, then as Christians we can and must worship Him. It is our extra-biblical traditionalism that hinders us from engaging in true worship and experiencing the freedom of being Spirit-enabled, God-sought worshipers.

Number three: extra-biblical traditionalism often compromises the sustainability of local church ministry. In most churches that I’ve heard of, and all that I’ve served in, there is a common dilemma. We have all these ministries we want to do, and not enough volunteers to do them. The “20-80 principle” is sadly true in most churches. 20% of the congregants do 100% of the work to provide the ministries that the other 80% sit back and enjoy. I’ve had the privilege of being called in to lead or be a part of a wide variety of ministries within the local church. Each time I had that opportunity, I witnessed the same thing. A core of faithful people who were servant-hearted and committed, but often exhausted and bewildered.

In most initial ministry team meetings, I would try to listen to the team’s thoughts about what’s going on in the ministry. The team would lay out the list of things they were currently

¹⁰ Ibid., pg.27.

trying to do. Often in a very polite, apologetic way, the team would express how difficult it was to keep all those things going. I remember one time I met with an influential member of a children's ministry leadership team, and they confessed to me with a heavy heart, "I don't know if we can do this much longer." As I'd look over the list of things that the volunteer teams were burning themselves out to maintain, the question in my mind was always *why?* The most common answer I've received for that question has been, *that's just what we've always done.*

In discussions, I've often found a clear acknowledgment that all the things we do aren't essential to fulfill the mission of the ministry or the church. But when you suggest or announce that you're considering whether or not to continue something, that's when it gets interesting. People come out of nowhere and ambush you with sentimental narratives. *We have to keep running that program or else how are we going to reach kids in our community for Jesus?! If we do that, it's going to ruin the dynamic of our small group that's been together through thick and thin for years! My daughter grew up in the church and that thing had such an impact on her life. This church just wouldn't be the same without that.* So, you feel stuck. You know it's not sustainable or healthy to keep going, and it's not really the best use of resources right now. But if you let it go, some people will be heartbroken or even enraged to the point where they might leave the church.

The challenging and insightful book, The Trellis and the Vine, describes what's going on in many of our churches. "We become so used to doing things one way (often for good reason at first) that important elements are neglected and forgotten, to our core. We become imbalanced, and then wonder why we go in circles."¹¹ We often start ministry initiatives because, at the time of origin, they were great opportunities for certain individuals to use their unique gifts and

¹¹ Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Matthias Media, 2009) pg.15.

engage in wisely contextualized gospel ministry. Over time, the people with those particular gifts moved away or went to glory without anyone to effectively replace them. But because of the initial benefit the church experienced, we assume that the best thing is to keep it going. However, with the combination of changing volunteers and the shifting context of culture outside and inside the church, those initiatives slowly become an act of spinning logistical plates rather than fruitful ministry. We can unknowingly sacrifice the health and growth of our people on the altar of maintaining the status quo of extra-biblical traditionalism. Tom Nelson identifies an unfortunate trend among many churches today. “While the church [or ministry] had a well-crafted mission statement, the actual mission had really become congregational comfort and institutional survival.”¹²

Number three: extra-biblical traditionalism often overburdens pastors and leaders in the local church. About a year ago I felt led by God to pursue a new opportunity to serve a local that had a greater need for a pastor with my gifts than the one I had happily served for over eight years. So, after talking through that with the elders of the church, and getting their approval, I began looking at The Gospel Coalition job board. I’d see a posting that seemed promising based on the theology and location of the church (since my wife and I felt called to serve in the Northeast due to the evident need). But I learned to curb my excitement until I got to the job description section. Most of the time, the listed qualifications meant that the Apostle Paul or even Jesus couldn’t be considered. The expected functions of the pastor were shockingly long and required an omniscient candidate. In addition to the experiences and stories I heard from burned-out friends in ministry, the process broke my heart. The Church in America has created a culture where the norm is to overburden pastors with extra-biblical expectations.

¹² Tom Nelson, *The Flourishing Pastor: Recovering the Lost Art of Shepherd Leadership* (InterVarsity Press, 2021) pg.143.

In Acts chapter six, the twelve apostles were in Jerusalem when a complaint arose that the Hellenist widows weren't receiving adequate care. According to the norms of our day, you'd think that the apostles would publicly apologize and then put in whatever overtime was necessary to address the problem themselves. But that's not what they did. These men who serve as the forerunners for all pastors/elders in the Church responded by calling everyone together and saying, "It is *not right* that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables...*we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*"¹³ Rather than assuming personal responsibility for all the church's problems, the apostles were led by the Holy Spirit to delegate. They established the role of deacons in the Church to serve in ways that were *not right* for them to address themselves. All so they could be fully devoted to their God-given ministry tasks: "prayer" and "the ministry of the word." WHAT?! That's it?! Now, the ministry of the word could have involved preaching, teaching, discipleship, evangelism, biblical counseling, church governance, and church discipline. But even with all that, and prayer added on, that is still less than half of what most pastoral job descriptions demand today.

It is no coincidence that we are seeing unprecedented numbers of pastors burning out and quitting the ministry in recent history. It would be easy to say it's because a large number of them aren't called to ministry, to begin with. In some cases that may be true, but it would be inaccurate to generalize in that way. Even in my relatively short time in vocational ministry, I know far too many good pastors with a genuine sense of calling who have been pushed to the edge of quitting by the extra-biblical expectations of their ministry posts.

For those that aren't burnt out or looking to eject from the cockpit of vocational ministry, there is still a danger. The additional burdens of extra-biblical traditionalism drive us toward

¹³ Acts 6:2-4 ESV.

Martha-like lifestyles at the very least. We easily become people who are running all over the place, completing our to-do lists for the Church of Christ, and getting frustrated that more people aren't helping. We are well-intentioned, hard-working, and servant-hearted, but "distracted with much serving."¹⁴ How many anxious pastors are carrying on in a state of emotional and spiritual anemia? All because they are so busy fulfilling their lengthy job descriptions. Meanwhile, they're distracted from the one thing that is "necessary." The "good portion." Being with Jesus Himself.¹⁵

That's not an exhaustive list of examples, but hopefully, it's a helpful start. Once we've identified where extra-biblical traditionalism is evident, and how it is hindering us, the question remains: *what do we do now?* Each situation will call for different courses of action, and unique factors to consider since no two ministry contexts are exactly the same. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to counteracting the debilitating effect of extra-biblical traditionalism. But there is at least one place in Scripture that, I believe, serves to provide us with some universally applicable guidance.

In Hebrews 12:1-2, we are taught to think of ourselves as runners. Although this is a rather individualistic mindset, it could also be applied to the corporate mentality of a local church. We must understand that there is a race to run and we must aspire to run at our very best. In vs.2, we are told to streamline the way we live. As a runner seeks to run their best, they must free themselves of hindrances as an ongoing discipline. They must "lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely."¹⁶ Notice there are two different hindrances identified here. Certainly, the more severe problem is the sin that clings to us and ensnares us. But to run the race

¹⁴ Lk 10:40 ESV.

¹⁵ Lk 10:42 ESV.

¹⁶ Heb 12:2.

well, all believers must also “lay aside every weight”. Weights are permissible things for the individual Christian or the local church. But in the context of racing, they hinder the runner. Like trying to run the fifty-yard dash while carrying dumbbells. It’s not illegal, but it’s not smart if you want to win.

Our extra-biblical traditions are often weights. Unnecessary burdens we put on ourselves, or our churches. And they hinder us from running at our best. To identify these weights, we must honestly examine ourselves and our churches. What are we doing? Why are we doing those things? Why are we doing them the specific way we do? We must expose the basis for the things we engage in. We must test the roots of the traditions we’ve tried to plant in the life of the church to see what is truly rooted in God’s Word, and what is rooted only in sentimentality. If Scripture has given us everything we need for life and godliness,¹⁷ then anything that is not explicitly called for in Scripture is unnecessary if we aim to fulfill the call of God. So, anything that is not grounded in the clear teaching of God’s Word must, at the very least, be held with an open hand. We must be willing to lay such things aside if they stop being helpful for the health and growth of the church. And we must remember, just because something feels meaningful to us, or others, it does not mean it is helpful by God’s standards. If a tradition doesn’t help us become more like Jesus, fulfill the mission of Jesus, or help us abide with Jesus, then we must lay it aside or else we set ourselves up to run a mediocre race.

The most important thing Hebrews 12 calls us to do is look to Jesus. Our Lord needs to be our constant, central focus. It all needs to begin and end with Him because He is the author and finisher of our faith. He is our example of what it looks like to run the race well, free of all

¹⁷ 2 Pt 1:3.

unnecessary weights. He is the ultimate joy that is laid before us.¹⁸ Our greatest treasure that we need to cherish in the present, and eagerly anticipate enjoying in fullness for eternity. The whole Bible is meant to point us to Jesus. Therefore, everything we do individually and corporately should point our focus to Jesus in conformity with God's Word.

I once had a conversation with a staff member who was weary from ministry and said, "it used to be all about Jesus". If we find ourselves in that situation, where a focus on Jesus, and abiding with Him is like some memory from the "glory days" long gone, we need to acknowledge that something is wrong. Such a reality is unacceptable for gospel ministry within a local church and we must actively work with those involved to do whatever is necessary to ensure that everything we do remains all about Jesus.

I had the privilege of going on a short-term missions trip to Hidalgo, Mexico in February 2023. It was such a joy to visit nine different churches, be there to set the cornerstone for two new church buildings, and minister alongside the people. It was also a great opportunity to take a step back from the normal grind of my ministry post in the states and gain some much-needed perspective. All the extra-biblical traditions that I preferred were nowhere to be found. But what was evident everywhere we went was the truth and presence of Jesus. Through those simple means, we saw the power of the Holy Spirit working to exalt Christ, and draw people to Himself everywhere we went. The spiritually dead were brought to life, the broken-hearted were comforted, and those trapped in sin repented in response to the kindness of God. The primary ministry I did for those ten days involved prayer and the ministry of the word. Yet, I cannot think of a more evidently fruitful period of ministry in my life. It was only when the Lord stripped me of extra-biblical traditions in my walk with Christ and engagement in ministry that I rediscovered

¹⁸ Heb 12:2.

the sweetness of just being with Jesus again. It was only when my ministry was simplified to the few things that Scripture calls me to do that I experienced a unique sense of joy and empowerment in my work.

It is difficult not to minimize that with the thought, *that's just a "mountain-top experience"*. But what is a mountain-top experience other than a time when everything that distracts from Jesus is laid aside? When we find ourselves able to more fully devote ourselves to being with Jesus, and doing the work Jesus has called us to do. Could it be that the only reason we don't have more "mountain-top experiences" is because we allow ourselves, and our churches to be preoccupied with things that are just distractions clothed with good intentions? Are we so used to bearing the weights of extra-biblical traditionalism that we only run our best when we can completely escape from the pragmatics of our normal ministry contexts?

Is it too naive, or idealistic to think that the relatively simple, explicit calling of Scripture is the most powerful, effective, and beneficial model for life and ministry in the local church? What if our churches stripped away their extra-biblical practices to free themselves up to more intentionally and effectively engage the unchurched and next generations? What if our churches understood and engaged in true worship as Jesus defines it? What impact would it have on our ministry volunteers if we only did the things that God's Word explicitly calls us to do? What if the expectations for pastors were based on what the Bible says and nothing more? I don't claim to know for sure. But I do find it interesting that whenever local churches function according to the seemingly simplistic commands of Scripture, the church experiences greater health and growth. Around the world, and throughout Church history, the Church has thrived in environments where persecution has stripped them of all but the essential elements of living out their faith. No more buildings with heat and air-conditioning, no more trained musicians, no

more sophisticated infrastructures, no more long lists of ministries for every age and stage. Just Jesus, and what He calls us to do in His Word. In light of that, I can't help but wonder what would happen if we took that approach now and sought to identify and lay aside the weights of extra-biblical traditionalism that hinder us. What if we started to run at our best?