



Article # 1

Sunday Morning Coming Down

That's the title of a song written by Kris Kristofferson. The legendary Johnny Cash popularized it a few decades ago. The lyrics, "*Cause there's something in a Sunday that makes a body feel alone*", describe how much of a misfit the hung-over lyricist felt on Sunday morning. That certainly wouldn't be the description of a disciple's Sunday morning. Or could it be? I have been a believer in Jesus Christ and a church attendee for about half a century. I have attended church in the midwest, northeast, northwest, south, west, and mountains of the US – and in Great Britain, central Europe, and Russia. In many of those places, I have preached and taught the Bible. Therefore, I write the following from more than a casual personal history with today's church. I am whole-heartedly committed to the Body of Christ – and to its assembling of itself together. This writing represents a fictionalized composite of many of my factual and all too real Sunday morning experiences. My history in the church over five decades makes me ask the difficult and uncomfortable question, "*Is there something wrong? Or is it just me?*"

On Sunday morning, I awoke early to start the coffee. Bacon and eggs would follow after a cup of Maxwell House French Roast. My first cup of coffee in hand, I headed into the living room to click on the TV for a shot of the electronic church. Of course, I'd be going to the real church later. The first televised service I came to was from an inner-city church. Almost two-thirds of the congregation were women – the remainder mostly children and old men. They dressed respectfully in keeping with meeting their Lord. Wealth isn't important in the Body, but based on their clothing, it was not an affluent group. The one exception was the pastor. His suit, shirt, tie, and jewelry were obviously high end – very expensive. His message seemed strange for the setting as He stressed the spiritual truth, as he described it, that "*Jesus don't want nobody to rent*". He railed on that Jesus wants all believers to own their own homes - and not "*be subject to no landlord*." In his message, the pastor didn't use, "*And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.'*", Luke 9:58. Self-inquisitively I asked aloud, "*Would Jesus rent, own, or do neither?*" Feeling like an outsider among my electronic sisters and brothers, I clicked on to another broadcast.

The next program was from a huge and packed convention center. Multitudes of people were in the audience. A pompous, internationally renowned preacher pranced about the stage flanked by several large lurking men who looked like bodyguards or bouncers. His message was clearly stated that anyone who believed enough could come forward to be healed. The long line of the physically afflicted meandered from far back in the aisles up onto the stage. One by one, they came forward in front of the camera to the healer. He waved his hand at each. Each one fell back as if struck in the forehead with a mallet. The large lurking men caught each and all before they hit the floor. As the crowd's enthusiasm increased, the preacher took off his expensive suit coat. He began swinging it at a distance toward the lame and sick that approached him. They fell by twos, threes, and fours. It was as if he had a lumberjack ministry and the afflicted were the trees in his forest. Once he even cut down four of the catchers with a sweep of his hand from across the stage. You know, I've really looked for anything like that in the Bible – but never found it. Something about all of this seemed strange and wrong. I felt that I was from some different religion. I clicked on to find something more comforting.

The next show was from a Christian university. Years ago, I had heard the founder preach about God telling him that if his audience didn't send money, then God would take him (the preacher) home. I didn't send in any seed money – wondering who would take over the telecast when he was gone. To my surprise, the money did come in. A non-believer, the owner of a dog track, gave him a huge gift – and I *guess* God spared the preacher's life. I always wondered what he did to thank the dog track owner. Maybe he taught his dogs to heel. However, this Sunday morning I wasn't listening to the founder. I was watching a show hosted by his son. I haven't seen anyone smile that much since, as a young boy, I watched a puppet show on our first TV - an old black and white one. No matter what he said, he punctuated every sentence with an ear-to-ear grin. The healing part of the broadcast began just as I headed toward the kitchen. As I walked away, I heard him instructing people to put the ailing parts of their bodies up against the TV screen so that he could lay hands on them from his side of the camera. I must admit that some amusing possibilities raced through my mind. Could you imagine the Ashdodites of 1 Samuel 5 following his instructions? I wondered if Windex sales would be up on Monday. I laughed aloud – then felt a little guilty. I returned with my refreshed cup of coffee and watched on. The show broke away to a chapel service at the university. The son's wife was preaching to the young men and women of the university. Well actually, she is his second wife – but that's another story. Her message was, *"If you want to get delivered, you got to put yourself under the spout where the glory comes out."* Not having a clue where the spout was, my mind started wandering. I wondered if the son's first wife hadn't understood spiritual plumbing – or maybe she had. I had all of that I could take, so I clicked on.

The next show was from the all-time best church anywhere – or at least that was what the founding pastor said. The scripture reading caught my attention. I knew the passage – but somehow it sounded unusual. Soon, I realized that the order of the verses was rearranged as if God's Word is better when it is shuffled a little. Then there was a secular performance by a well-known pianist – then an interview with a very successful CEO that definitely might be a Christian. Five minutes of a fundraising promotion followed. You know, that little bird statue they were offering as an incentive didn't look too bad. I didn't send in a check – maybe I just respond better to book bribes. As the message started, the name-dropping by the pastor got to me. Maybe I'm envious of a man who has been close friends with Mother Theresa, Corrie ten Boom, Billy Graham, presidents, international heads of state, famous entertainers, sports figures, CEOs, and pretty much everyone of renown. Maybe I just don't like it thrown in my face. Or maybe I just need to get out more. My stomach turned a little when the pastor prompted the audience with, *"And all God's people said..."*, and several thousand bleated in unison, *"Wow!"* I have read that no negatives are ever included in the messages from that pulpit – no reproof, no condemnation, no mention of sin. Maybe the old adage applies, *"People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."* Several statements about how proud he was of his church proved too much – I clicked on.

After a break to cook bacon, eggs, and toast, I returned to my over-stuffed electronic pew. I wasn't sure if I was so wired because of an overdose of caffeine or an overdose of the electronic church. Another famous preacher was on the next channel. He has had a very positive Great Commission influence throughout the world via his organization, books, and radio and TV broadcasts. Recently, he seems focused on changing our society through political activism. I wondered what could happen if all that talent, experience, and resources stayed focused on spreading the Gospel. I clicked on, feeling brief relief when I came to a familiar preacher who teaches the truth well and doesn't act goofy. He seems to be a good man – but I'm just not comfortable with a divorced man in the pulpit. As usual with him, something in his delivery distracted me. I was trying to listen to the message, but found myself counting how many times he told me to pay attention. This Sunday it was about once every two and a half minutes. By my count, I think his record from a few months ago was once every 83 seconds. Unable to focus on the teaching, I clicked the TV off feeling somehow disconnected from the Body. Breakfast was over. I put the dirty dishes in the sink. It was time to drive across town to the real church.

I arrived at church a little early to meet people since I was new to this church. I'd only been attending there for a few months. The parking attendant with the headset directed me to an available parking place. I came dressed respectfully. Noticing the people walking with me toward the church, I felt like a foreigner dressed in my native garb. I just don't understand why

flip-flops, blue jeans, shorts, tank tops, and tube tops are appropriate for church. I've always thought I'd dress up if I were going to meet the President – and that I'd want to dress up at least that much to meet my Lord. I'm probably just old fashioned. My uniform of white shirt and tie labeled me. Four different times, people invited me to the old-timers Sunday school class. When I turned down their invitations, they responded, *"But, you're retired aren't you?"* My response, *"Why, which do you think I am, successful or old?"* drew little more than nervous laughs, a pat on the arm, and their quick exit. Several people on their way into the sanctuary stopped to buy double mocha cappuccinos with sprinkles from one of the food courts in the lobby. I like coffee, but didn't think I could bring myself to buy from one of the moneychangers behind the counter. I sat several rows back from the front – a little right of center. It was a huge, beautiful, multimillion-dollar sanctuary. It sure would make the Upper Room look meager. I looked around at the casual people sitting near me – hoping that the man between the pulpit and me would take off his cowboy hat before the message. I wondered about telling the woman in front of me about the whipped cream on her chin. I kept quiet while watching to see where it would land when it started to melt. The music began with a full orchestra, worship team, and choir of eighty voices. It was *very* loud. Fortunately, it was a short chorus and we repeated it only six or seven times. Announcements and a fundraising speech delivered in front of a large architectural model of the new wing followed. Being somewhat new to the church, I wasn't in on the humor between the well-loved, nationally broadcast pastor and the congregation. Everyone laughed on cue to an array of inside jokes. I was still an outsider. The next worship segment of the service began with vigor. The guitars, drums, and electronic keyboards accompanied an array of repetitious choruses. Then we finally came to a real hymn – a very popular one about worship. The full orchestra and choir really cranked up the volume on this oldie-but-goodie. By the time we were into the third stanza, I noticed something strange. I was singing, but couldn't hear my own voice. The overpowering accompaniment drowned out my voice and the voices of those around me, and those of the thousands in the audience. I couldn't even hear the choir facing me from just 10 rows away. Then my body began reacting to the noise! noise! noise! noise! My inner ear rebelled against the assault – triggering vertigo-like reactions. My hands and forehead sweat profusely. Water was running down my chest as the room began to spin. I was about to lose my breakfast, but my quick exit spared those around me. Fortunately, I had driven the station wagon to church. I put the seats down and stretched out until the sweating and spinning was moderately under control. Shakily I meandered back toward the sanctuary just as the pastor announced that it was time to sing again. He encouraged everyone to be as loud as possible because that's how singing will be in Heaven. I still haven't found the verse explaining that. If he's right, I'm sure my inner ears will be healed by the time I get there.

After returning to the car, I cautiously drove home. All afternoon plans had to be cancelled. Lingering nausea made lunch impossible. I felt somewhat better after lying motionless in bed for three hours. While lying motionless, I recalled a time when I used an aerosol horn to encourage tardy coffee-breakers to return to a Bible seminar I was teaching. Several attendees had to leave because the noise produced their own vertigo symptoms. When I learned of my folly, I felt terrible about what I had done. I apologized and refunded their tuition. After some tea and crackers, I started down a regretful path – deciding to place a telephone call to the music director. Being so young, maybe he didn't know that such loud noise could cause vertigo. His home number was in the front of the church directory. At about four in the afternoon, I made the call. Politely and respectfully, I told him of my experience that morning. I used my aerosol horn story to show some empathy. The conversation didn't go well. He went ballistic – angrily and loudly responding, *"How dare you bother me at home. Being in the ministry, you should know to contact me only during business hours. And who do you think you are to say anything to me about my ministry."* I kindly suggested that I was trying to be helpful. He repeated and intensified his railings against me. My quiet insistence that I was not attacking him fell on deaf ears. I wondered if loud music causes partial deafness – but didn't ask – and didn't raise my voice. I politely, with hypocritical apologies, said goodbye. On Monday morning, I sent a note to him at the church office – hoping it would get there during business hours. I responded to his main criticisms and mentioned that I hadn't noticed the model of *business hours only* in the life of Jesus. I reminded him that I was the one who was quite ill most of Sunday – assuming that might have justified my comments. In addition, I told him that since I was as old as his father was – been a Christian longer than he had been alive – and been in full-time ministry four times

longer than he had – that maybe I had earned the right to be heard. Since all of this happened on the senior pastor's watch, I copied him on the letter. I have not heard from either.

I recovered physically in a few days. However, some effects of that Sunday morning lingered on. It took most of the week to recover spiritually and emotionally. I guess I wasn't completely recovered until I awoke very early on the next Sunday morning. By then, in the cold light of a Sunday's dawn, I began wondering what I should do for church. I couldn't tune into the electronic church. Everyone in their studio audiences, auditoriums, and churches seem to enjoy these tele-preachers – voting with their attendance and checkbooks. Maybe I'm just not a tele-congregant. However, in the real church, I feel strangely out of place too. I have always believed that I should feel better when I walk out of church than I do when I walk in. Is it just me? Or is there something wrong? So on this new Sunday morning, I didn't pick up the remote. I drank one cup of coffee watching the sunrise – and skipped breakfast. I went to the closet to get dressed. Reaching for my Sunday suit, I found my hooded sweatshirt and kacky shorts in hand instead. I dressed and slipped on some old worn tennis shoes. I drove toward the ocean in the opposite direction from the church. Without the help of a headsetted parking-attendant, I found a parking spot a few blocks from the Pacific. Passing a small coffee shop, I stopped to buy two glazed donuts and a big black coffee to carry to the beach. I wondered if all the other customers in the shop were non-believers – lost men and women spending Sunday in the Times rather than in the Word. I walked down to the beach and found an empty bench near the jetty. I felt a lot better than I did the week before. The gentle chorus of the gulls, playing children, and breaking waves wasn't assaulting - it was refreshing. And I knew that I would feel better, not worse, after my breakfast and walk along the beach. But here I was on a Sunday morning with the world instead of with the Body. Somehow, I felt out of place here too. Is it me – or *is there something in a Sunday that makes a body feel alone?*

This article may have irritated you. But please, don't be angry with me. Don't think that I am attacking the church as God intended it to be. I am not. Every event in this story actually happened to me – presented here in a composite form as two Sunday mornings – with no exaggeration. Be angry – but be angry about the right things.

It is important that we as believers meet together as a local manifestation of the Body. You have probably often heard Church leaders quote the phrase, *"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together"* to justify our sitting in rows or semi-circles in well-decorated sanctuaries to listen to performances by talented musicians and sermons from dynamic speakers. That often quoted phrase comes from, *"Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."* Hebrews 10:24-25. What about the other parts of that passage – the seldom quoted ones? Are we doing those things as we sit as spectators in our assemblies? God breathed these words through Paul to us, *"Pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart."* 2 Timothy 2:22. Are we doing those things from our sanctuary theater seats? If we are not doing them (and other directives to the Body) when we gather together, is church really church? Could we, while gaining our perfect attendance awards, be guilty of *"forsaking the assembling of ourselves together"* at the same time?

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