

Life in the Shadow

What could be more absurd than for someone in desperate need of sunlight to come out of a dark building only to remain in the shadow of that building, even though the sun's bright light beckons but a short distance away. I see the Church in America doing exactly this, and loving it. We very much need to discuss this. First, what's the "dark building"? Then, what's the sunlight? And then, of course, what's the shadow?

A bit of history is needed. The Roman Catholic Church was fraudulent from its beginnings. Before Constantine there were about 2 million people in the Eastern empire who named the name of Jesus, about one-tenth of the population. There were at least that many throughout the rest of the Empire. Not all were true followers, for sure. A slew of heretical ideas were being dealt with at the time. Bishops and church buildings had already come into existence. The biblical model of church was being abandoned even in those first couple of centuries of the Church age. Pagans professed Christ and came into the churches. After Constantine, the number of those who attended church greatly increased, but Christianity had already become like a civil religion. Proud citizens of the Roman Empire identified as Christians, and vice versa.

Scholars argue whether Constantine was a true believer, but whether he was or not is irrelevant. That's because Constantine's nephew, Julian, took over after Constantine, and he was not a believer; during his 30-year reign, he introduced paganism into the Roman church. It was the Eastern Church, not the RCC, that cradled Christianity. The Reformers, who gave us Protestantism, really only reformed RCC soteriology. We still have, even in our evangelical churches, that RCC structure controlling our ecclesiology and much, much else. Especially, we have the idea of civic (or "civil") religion.

Germany, for example, had its civic religion in the early 20th century. Every German was a Lutheran, and the government paid the salaries of the pastors and theologians. Not everyone necessarily believed in Jesus, nor attended church on Sundays, but that didn't matter. They all held certain core beliefs about their nation, strong patriotic beliefs, and about God. When Nazis took control of the government, they had the church in their pocket. Because of the identification of the church with the State, most Germans readily embraced Nazism.

We have in America civic religion too. It sometimes goes by other names, such as "folk" religion, or Christian nationalism. Or just, Christianity. It's church attendance, plus patriotism, plus a secular lifestyle, and probably self-righteousness as well. There's the awareness of a God in heaven, but that's a God of love, and kindness, and tolerance; this religion's god welcomes all comers. It's safe to ignore the God of civic religion. There's no personal sacrifice for God; obedience to His will as well as discipleship, sanctification and mortification are assiduously absent. Bibles abound in homes, but mostly as a token of religiosity. The one key – almost mandatory – ritual is church attendance. And it's that which provides a sense of belonging and it, hopefully, justifies or excuses all else. Church attendance also serves as a venue for sharing opinions with each other, especially political opinions. Jesus on a cross is accepted, but in this religion that creates no demands or responsibilities. The one special day is Christmas, although Halloween is a close competitor. Participants in this religion are free [so they suppose] to be what kind of person they wish and to live as they wish.

George Barna recently polled thousands of adult Americans from across the country and found that almost 40% hold to a vague belief in such a moralistic, deistic type of religion as just described. And of these, three-fourths self-identified as Christians! Their beliefs included some Christian elements, but they were not Bible-based, although most said that the Bible was a good source of morality. All believed we're to be good to others and try to do some good in the world. There is, they claimed, a god who wants us to be nice, and that his purpose for us in life is to be happy. Many either did not really know exactly what they believed or how to put whatever they believed into words. Barna, who is a committed believer, called this American religion a "watered-down, feel good, fake Christianity." This is the dark house in America. Lots and lots of people dwell within its walls.

Now, What's the light? Hey, we've discussed it in almost every Sunday School lesson for years. It's all that the Bible describes: Living out the Person and teachings of Jesus. It's a love for God that's expressed in trusting obedience and serving Christ Jesus as He instructed. It's sacrificing self in a life of worship out of gratitude to God for His grace, and gratitude to the Son for His atoning sacrifice on our behalf and His life-giving resurrection. It's having the Holy Spirit indwell us to empower us to be godly and to obey God's revealed will. It's knowing the Word and humbly living it to the glory of God. It's helping others with needs. It's sharing the Gospel with others, out of love for them and out of love for the God who wills it. There's more, but this is enough.

Walking in the light is difficult. It's demanding, and it has risks. There likely will be consequences that may involve shame and loss, being rejected by friends or relatives, or worse. It means selflessness and perhaps even suffering. To walk in the light, to be in there, requires a totally transformed person. The Spirit of Christ will enable that, if we want it and if we work at it. It means new priorities in life, new values, a new worldview, a new relationship, a new purpose – in short, a new life! But it's what we should want more than anything to do if we understand who Jesus is, and what He's done and all that He will do. No one can live in the light unchanged.

What's ghastly to contemplate is, our churches are stuffed with those who want to live in the shadow, that is, in between these two options. They tend toward one or the other from time to time, but mostly stay close to the house –almost always, in fact. Why? Because life in the house—and in the shadow—is so much easier! And because the God of the house can be ignored, probably also in the shadow. Many if not most of these people self-identify as light-dwellers, they see themselves as those who are in the light; but they balk at actually living in the light. Knowing what life in the light is, they (*gasp!*) delude themselves into supposing that that's where they are, when in fact they remain contentedly in the shadow. Having lots of knowledge of the Bible and theology doesn't mean we're actually *living* in the light! Many however don't even want to know what life in the light is like; they only know that they like life in the house and in the shadow. Do we understand this: The shadow exists only because the house blocks the light; it's a counterfeit to prevent people from entering and enjoying life in the light.

But now, let's think. The dark "house" is death. The "light" is life. There's no such thing as something *between* those two polar opposites. There *can't* be. This is why "Life in the Shadow" has to be an absurdity. One either has life, or not. Trying to live in the shadow seems to be just a foolish attempt at ungodly compromise. The real question is, Is shadow life Scriptural? And for this, there's no satisfying answer. There's the parable of the soils, and that of the weeds, but we can't conclude from them anything about the destiny of those in the shadow. So Peter states that, thru His resurrection, Jesus has given us new birth to a (future) salvation, but that we suffer trials in the here and now so as to prove the genuine-ness of our faith, which causes us to love Jesus and to fill us with great joy (1 Peter 1:3-9). Countless such texts about being in the light fill the New Testament, and *none* deal with life in the shadow! This should exclude life in the shadows as a real option. But that's only supposition. We can justify ourselves, our beliefs and values and our reasons for what we do easily enough, but God knows our heart (Luke 16:15). One would however be a fool, in view of the abundant Scripture that's been given to us, to want to be in the shadow, knowing *nothing* of the consequences of remaining there. Logic requires this compelling conclusion: We're house-bound if not walking with God in the light.

Yes, God shows grace. Yes, preachers proclaim assurance of eternal life from our pulpits. And yes, lots of good people occupy the shadow. But we have a standard from God, that is, the Scriptures. And the Scriptures are what we'll be judged by on that future Day of Reckoning. The issue then will be: What did we do with Jesus? Did we merely believe a propositional truth about Him? Or did we seek to know Him? Have a relationship with Him? Did we love Him? Did we obey Him? Did we seek to be like Him? Were we committed to Him? Did we honor God by our life in the light, as He commanded, or did we dishonor Him by indifference to the Son and by disobedience? What matters, what *really* matters (whether we like it or not), is, If we profess Christ, if we claim to believe in Him, we're accountable to God for how we live. And the God of Scripture is to be feared; He is dangerous.

Anyone who reflects on Scripture should realize that God is doing more in this creation of His than just redeeming sinful humanity. We can speculate from Scripture what some of those purposes might be, and we've done just that in other Sunday School lessons. But what this means is, God didn't put us here to pursue happiness, or whatever interests us, or a self-indulgent life, but to participate with Him in fulfilling His great creational purposes. We do that by obeying His will revealed in His Word, trusting in His wisdom and goodness. Indifference to His will, smugly content to be a spectator at church meetings, going thru life absorbed with self, shows contempt for God. If the Word doesn't control us, we're phonies. The shadow-world is no place for anyone who's wise, for anyone who has experienced the Spirit's influence.

God is perfect in all His infinite Being. That includes His beauty, His goodness, His wisdom, His justice and His love. And all His works. That's His glory. He invites us to join Him for an eternity of blessing, being with Him in His very presence. That's what's on offer. So let's respond how the Scriptures say we should, even though it means we must be a radically changed person. **"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"** (2 Corinthians 5:17). I add this, If anyone is truly in Christ, he is going to walk in the light, regardless the risks, consequences, shame, suffering, or loss that it may entail. The joy of the Lord, supernal joy, awaits us there.