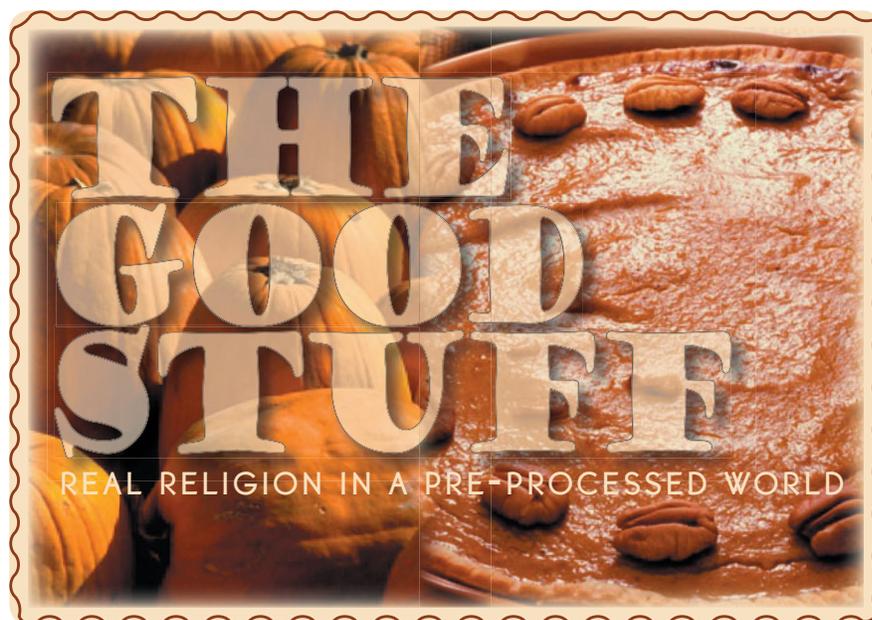


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I WILL MEDITATE ON YOUR PRECEPTS
AND REGARD YOUR WAYS.
I SHALL DELIGHT IN YOUR STATUTES;
I SHALL NOT FORGET YOUR WORD.

(PSALM 119:15-16)



Our search for a church home continues. In our quest to unearth the congregation with which God would have us unite, we have begun considering—or at least visiting—the churches of denominations heretofore not included on our list of possibilities. After all, ours is a God of wit, of good humor, and of a logic not always in-tune with that of mortal man. Perhaps He has in store for us a spiritual dwelling unimaginable before tomorrow.

So last Sunday found us seated in the church house of a venerable and familiar denomination in our small town. In contrast to our visits at most other churches, this

time we were in at least tactilely familiar surroundings. The pews (actual *pews!*) were hewn from oak. The windows were old stained glass, most put in place and dedicated around the time of the First World War. As in other worship centers today, the parishioners were attired in a variety of styles, but in this place more of the women wore a dress, and more of the men wore a tie. The pre-service ambiance was not silent, but it was hushed, a nostalgic and welcome air of reverence.

The first half of the worship service felt to us as if we had stepped back in time, back to an era when worship was serious and respectful, when God was considered someone with whom one did not trifle. The

prelude was played by an organist. The choir (an actual *choir!*), wearing robes, processed down the center aisle to their seats in the loft—where they remained for the entire service. The call to worship was lifted from Scripture, and the congregational singing was from the hymnal (an actual *hymnal!*). There was an offertory, and after the plates were filled, they were presented at the altar to the strains of the “Doxology.”

During the playing of the offertory, however, and confirmed during the sermon that followed, I noticed what was to me a rather strange thing: no one had brought a Bible with them to church. During the reading of Scripture, and the subsequent sermon, we could not find one person that

was even bothering with the convenient pew Bibles. As far as we could tell, we were the only people in the entire assembly that had brought a Bible with them, and that were actually *using* it during the sermon. To us, this was a strange turn indeed.

But then, that curious behavior seemed to be an appropriate companion to the message of the day. I don't wish to be unkind, and certainly would not impugn the pastor's good intentions, but to this old Baptist his abbreviated sermon more accurately could have been termed a "devotional"—and an insipid one at that. With the content of his message, there really was no good reason to refer to the pages of Scripture.

HARVEST

Where we live, this is the time of harvests. Every day (and sometimes into the night) the farmers are out in their fields reaping the bounty of the crops planted last spring. Every day fields that yesterday were brimming with dried and brown soybean plants, or tall golden stalks of field corn, are left bare—bean fields stripped down to the soil, and corn fields left stippled by what is left behind, unused by the harvester.

We all go through harvests of one sort or another. Some people harvest on a daily or weekly basis throughout the year, spending their wages for food picked at the local supermarket. Some buy raw food, and some pay a little more for the kind that takes less time in the kitchen. Most buy some of both.

Then others harvest just a few times per year, from the soil, food that requires more processing than any other. Take pumpkins, for example. When the autumn temperatures drop dangerously close to freezing, it's time to harvest the pumpkins. The orange fruit are snipped from their vines, set in the cart hitched to the tractor, and taken to the house and arranged on the deck. There they are cleaned of garden mud and dirt. Once they have set awhile to ripen fully, each pumpkin is sliced open, the seeds removed, the hard outer skin cut away, and the remaining flesh cut into chunks. The chunks are cooked awhile, then pureed, then cooked some more before being portioned into the canning jars. Finally, the full, sealed jars are placed in the cooker for another three hours.

Around this time of year apples, too, are harvested. They are picked from the orchard and collected in baskets. Back at the house, each apple is peeled by hand and cut into chunks which are cooked in a little water until soft. Then they are mashed, and cinnamon and sugar added. Once the mixture is boiling, the applesauce is ladled into quart jars and sealed.

Most people with whom we come into contact blanch at how labor intensive some of our harvest can be. They much prefer buying their food already prepared. Their applesauce comes in a jar from the grocery shelf, their pumpkin in a can from Del Monte, or even their pumpkin pie already prepared and stacked in the frozen foods case. When faced with all the work involved with our harvest, most demur—and run screaming to the nearest full-service supermarket. Yet, sitting around the dinner table, everyone agrees that Linda's applesauce, her pumpkin pies and bread taste the best, because they're made from the good stuff.

EFFORTLESS CONSUMPTION

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

(2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Some people today prefer the supermarket approach to the things of God as well. They prefer their religion preprocessed and predigested for quick, effortless consumption. Some don't want to be a part of the harvest at all, but choose to pay others to do the work. For sermons, they want their ears tickled; for reading, nothing more challenging than a soothing paraphrase.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction... But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.

(2 Timothy 4:1-2,5)

But God—the whole God, complete and unfiltered—is to be found in His word. Those who insist on getting Him only secondhand—and then, barely so—are missing out on all the *good* stuff.

We all make our choices, and those in this household won't throw any stones regarding where some people obtain their food. Some people prefer to work hard at their chosen profession for the expressed purpose of having sufficient funds to pay others to do the work of the harvest. We, on the other hand turn that around, preferring to work as hard as we can at the harvest, so that we can get by with fewer funds. One way is not necessarily better than the other.

Except when it comes to God. He reveals Himself in His word, whole and ripe for the picking. It may take a little more effort, and it may not always be easy, but what grows there is truly—and only—the good stuff.



*Thy Word is like a garden, Lord
With flowers bright and fair;
And every one who seeks may pluck
A lovely cluster there.*

*Thy Word is like a deep, deep mine;
And jewels rich and rare
Are hidden in its mighty depths
For every searcher there.*

*O may I love Thy precious Word,
May I explore the mine,
May I its fragrant flowers glean,
May light upon me shine.*

*O may I find my armor there,
Thy Word my trusty sword;
I'll learn to fight with every foe
The battle of the Lord.*

(Edwin Hodder)