



Flatlining (Small Print Edition): The Danger Posed to the Body of Christ by Church-as-a-Thing-in-Itself

John Hampton

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“When our focus is on the church instead of Christ, we lose the reality and vitality of both. That’s John Hampton’s theme in *Flatlining*, which is not only a compelling look at the failures and excesses of the church as we’ve come to know it, but also a road map to explore the church Jesus promised to build. If you care about recovering a view of the Gospel and a church experience that is as engaging as it is transforming, you’ll want to read this book.”

Wayne Jacobsen, 'Finding Church' and 'He Loves Me'

Fifty years ago, Billy Graham predicted that a time would come when millions of Christians would reject the institutional church. It would appear that this time has come to pass. For every church-going Christian in the UK, there are two who have given up attending church altogether, while in the US we find growing numbers of ‘Dones’ – Bible-believing Christians who are ‘done with church’.

The subsequent actions of these church exiles are many and varied: some try to regroup in a variety of forms, whilst others give up on fellowship altogether. Those that attempt to ‘do church right’ – including those groups that attempt to model themselves on biblical patterns – often end up looking very much the same as the churches from which they have fled, repeating the same fundamental errors. This being the case, is there any hope for the increasing numbers of believers who, disillusioned with church as they know it, are searching for authentic Christian community?

The author maintains that true body life can only happen when we come to recognise that we cannot equate the Body of Christ with ‘The Church’ because such a comparison is flawed at a fundamental level. The way we perceive the ekklesia, he argues, is far removed from the way it was perceived by the first Christians, and more importantly, it is light years away from what Jesus meant concerning it.

In support of this argument, one only has to make a relatively brief survey of the New Testament in order to realise that most of the features and practices traditionally associated with ‘church’ cannot actually be found there. The author goes on to present a more in-depth study of church history in order to identify how we arrived at the erroneous model we accept as normative today, and he considers whether the enemy has pulled off a coup of the greatest magnitude – one which has crippled the body of Christ for most of its existence. He goes on to pose the crucial question:

In what could be the greatest irony of all, is it possible that Church itself is not biblical?

This would certainly go a long way in explaining why so many Christians are spiritually dissatisfied; it would also explain why the church is increasingly viewed as irrelevant by those outside it. In the meantime, we are in a war, the scale and intensity of which none of us fully understands or appreciates and as a result, the church’s ancient structures are crumbling; the old order is gradually being swept away, with large sections of church-as-a-thing-in-itself looking set to end, not with a bang but a whimper.

All is not lost, however. We need to remember Jesus’ proclamation: ‘I will build my ekklesia, and the gates

of Hades will not overcome it'. Despite the ferocious attacks that Satan has launched against the body of Christ down the centuries, God's people will prevail. The author suggests that there is reason to hope that a growing ragtag army – of a kind not seen since the early Christians prevailed against the might of Rome – is slowly but surely coalescing into a fighting force, one that will rattle the gates of Hell.

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