



# I Am What's Wrong With the Church

by Phil Wyman

**H**aving pastored small churches for the last 21 years, and living in this small and strangely wonderful New England city of Salem, Massachusetts, my concerns for the state of Christianity have to do with how we as Christians gather, and how we relate to this wonderfully strange world around us.

Witches and Neo-Pagans are prominent in my city. They own occult shops, health and herb boutiques, tourist trinket stops and book stores. They work in coffee shops, real estate, public schools and any variety of occupations. They represent much of the post-modern thought today. Many of them are old enough to be parents of those who grew up completely in a postmodern world, but being the early adopters of new thinking, they represent much of the way postmodernity thinks of the church.

My concern is how the church relates to these people, and from dramatic personal experience, I have found that it does not look good.

My friends question the validity of Christianity. They ask about the cruelty of our God, the strict sexual

standards of our faith and relevancy of the church.

They practice a religion misunderstood and demonized by Christian pastors. They understand what it means to be persecuted for their faith, but they have experienced this persecution from evangelical Christians who have believed the tall tales and urban myths about today's Witches. (But that would be a whole other article, or maybe a long, long book.)

The church in the 21st century does not identify with their needs, and the television version of Christianity appears to be no more

money are collected in long drawn-out offerings, which play on the emotions of people and promise a huge blessing by God in return.

I am a Pentecostal, and I believe in the miraculous working of God, but I understand the concerns of my friends in the Neo-Pagan community. I too yearn for something simpler, easier, more natural and honest. I am not sure I see it coming soon.

Large events will probably continue to be the public face of the church in the coming years. A few dramatic (but quite frankly, overly

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than parlor tricks played upon gullible crowds by ministers who are as much magicians as they are preachers. The wave of a hand, and the people fall trance-like to the ground. Declarations of healing are made without the evidence corroborated later. Large amounts of

corny) people will continue to be mocked by the press and by most of the growing unchurched population. Manipulation and greed will be the marks of the "Christian trade," whether it is a warranted critique, or an urban legend about the church.

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My despair and hopelessness is found quite close to home though. I find it in myself.

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I find that I can quickly jump to conclusions about people. The way they look, the way they talk, the style of lives they live; these are the things which cause me to quickly disassociate with people or mark them as a lost cause.

I worry that the church has become too superstitious to see my Neo-Pagan friends as regular people who, like ourselves, were created in the image of God. The church is afraid of their "magic," and refuses to connect with them in any manner except a rebuke, and maybe an exorcism rite. Is this same attitude in me? Is the same superstition filling my heart every time I see the



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tabloid literature of our society. Perhaps I carry the seed of our trouble in my own heart. Even if I may have seen what is wrong with the church.

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I also am concerned that the church has become too proud. Why do we always

television evangelist wave his hand, or push someone down? Have I automatically assumed that they are playing the crowd—and thereby performing parlor tricks for personal gain? Even if it is true of some, my quick assumptions are no different than the person who assumes every Neo-Pagan is a Satan worshiper who sacrifices babies.

So I find that I must purge myself of fearful criticisms about people I have not met, and the stories about Christianity which are the

have the answer to everything and question very little about even the most complicated issues of life? I have heard the Pentecostal blame game:

- "Your sickness is the result of sin or a lack of faith."
- "Your calamities are due to spiritual warfare which you have not recognized—you must battle Satan to overcome."
- "You must accept everything which comes your way because it is the will of God."

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Our answers are naive against the complexities of life. Not only does the church appear to have the answers to life on all issues, we discuss our faith in such a way as to extinguish dialogue before it begins. We do not question others about what they believe without doing it in such a way as to lead them down the path of the smooth lawyer's trap.

We Christians seldom question learning from people. Assuming that open listening is the same as being persuaded, we listen only to win our arguments about faith. My friends know this and feel it when it happens.

Christian leaders have established this approach with their own attitudes. In Pentecostal circles we have even developed a doctrine to support our habit of telling people without listening to them. "Touch not the Lord's anointed," we say, and using the story of David and Saul, we negate the teaching by James that a teacher has a greater accountability. We create a heresy which allows for a church leader to be free of critique, and this sick self-serving attitude runs through the heart of the church. Then it is passed on to the people whose neighbors, and co-workers wonder why Christians are so cocky.

The church does not offer a time for people

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with honest questions to ask them openly. We do not give place to real doubts in any fashion, except perhaps to answer them with our simple platitudes, which make it appear as though we think we understand the complexities of the struggles around us.

Yet again, I must recognize my own little demons of pride (I'm speaking figuratively here, and I am not requesting a deliverance team to come to my door) which rear their ugly heads when I am accosted by the offenses of the church. Do I carry the sick seed of heresy which stands up to say that I am right, and that any questioning of my authority is therefore a "Jezebel spirit," (sorry for the Pentecostal lingo) or rebellion? Perhaps I carry the seed of our trouble in my own heart. Just as much as I



have seen unbearable pride, I find it in me.

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On Halloween Day this last year, *The Wall Street Journal* told the story of our church being removed from a denomination because we were too friendly to Witches. We have experienced what it is like to be on the receiving end of an inquisition of superstition and pride. Our challenge this year is to avoid giving back what we have received.

At our best, sometimes we are still what is wrong with the church today. Just because we talk about being open and relational doesn't mean that we are. Is it possible that we express those terms in a way which fosters a fear of being something other, or a pride about being something better?

*Sometimes we are what's wrong with the church today.* □

*Phil Wyman is currently pastoring The Gathering in Salem, Massachusetts. He has pastored on both coasts of the U.S.—in Carlsbad, California, and now in Salem. He has specialized in outreach to non-Christian spiritualities and new religious movements for the last 20 years. Recently he and his church were removed from their former denomination for being too friendly to Neo-Pagans. His story was on the front page of The Wall Street Journal last Halloween.*

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