



## Conforming and Performing

Just about every day I drive past a huge, sparkling megachurch in a pastoral setting less than two miles from my home. I watched it go up—an impressive effort, largely by volunteer labor. It’s probably not a denomination you’d recognize. Members are concentrated mainly in three areas of the United States, and Southwest Washington State is one. Within 20 miles of my living room there are six congregations of this denomination—each with thousands in attendance.

They profess to worship Christ, yet their traditions deviate from mainstream Christianity. According to former members, rules and regulations include: no TV, no hair cutting for women, no instrumental music, no dancing, no pants for females, no make up (also for females, I presume), no high heels, no Christmas trees or decorations (wreaths are okay), no Internet, no organized sports, no movies—and of course no missing of services. There are more, but you get the idea. While some of these are expectations (not codified rules), failure to conform brings consequences.

Personally, I wouldn’t have a problem with the ban on high heels. I haven’t worn them since my Beatle boots in the ‘60s. But the rest of these rules would be hard to take. The irony is that these folks trust their church to keep them and their kids safe from the spiritual viruses of materialism, greed and immorality. But that same church is deeply infected with the virus of performance-based religion.

Oddball churches are not the only groups obsessed with performance. It can be rampant in any denomination—hardline or progressive. We won’t even talk about the protocol-based religions outside of Christianity. As a graduate of authoritarian, institutional religion, I feel queasy as I drive by this megachurch and see the parking lot filled all day and into the night, three days in a row, for their semi-annual conferences. Such total immersion effectively keeps members from questioning, thinking, contemplating and allowing the Holy Spirit to expand their minds.

Why do we fall into these situations—aside from being born into them? You’ll know why if you’ve ever gone through a season of chaos or confusion. Maybe you made some bad decisions. You think God is upset and you’re looking for a way to “get right” with him again. Your life is a mess and you long for peace, harmony, structure and security.

One day you’re driving down the road and you see a sparkling new megachurch! Obviously, they couldn’t afford it if God weren’t blessing them, so you drop in for services. They’re delighted to see you. They seem so well-behaved and disciplined. Their kids are all under control. This would be the perfect place to get your own life under control. Then maybe God will be happy with you again.

Once you’re in, you cruise along blissfully for a while—with a sense of belonging, close friendships and sincere purpose. But dare to skip a few services, watch a film, cut a rug, strum a guitar, neglect a tithe or question a dogma—and then the social pressure, judgmental gossip and finally the crushing power of church leadership descend on you. Only then do you realize you’re staring into the ghastly face of religious tyranny. Awkward.

*There oughta be a law*, you think. But think more and you’ll realize that state religions—or laws mandating one faith and forbidding others—are in themselves performance-based religion. As long as we have freedom of faith, we will have performance-based religion. We all end up experiencing it in different ways, and ultimately learn the difference between it and freedom and faith in Christ.

So there the church sits amid peaceful trees as the daily drama plays out—of exclusivity, striving to perform, condemnation and guilt. Sad that this painful ordeal is unnecessary for Christians, when Jesus himself offers freedom from all this. *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery”* (Galatians 5:1). □

—Monte Wolverton