

Pagan Christianity

Book Study

Chapter 1

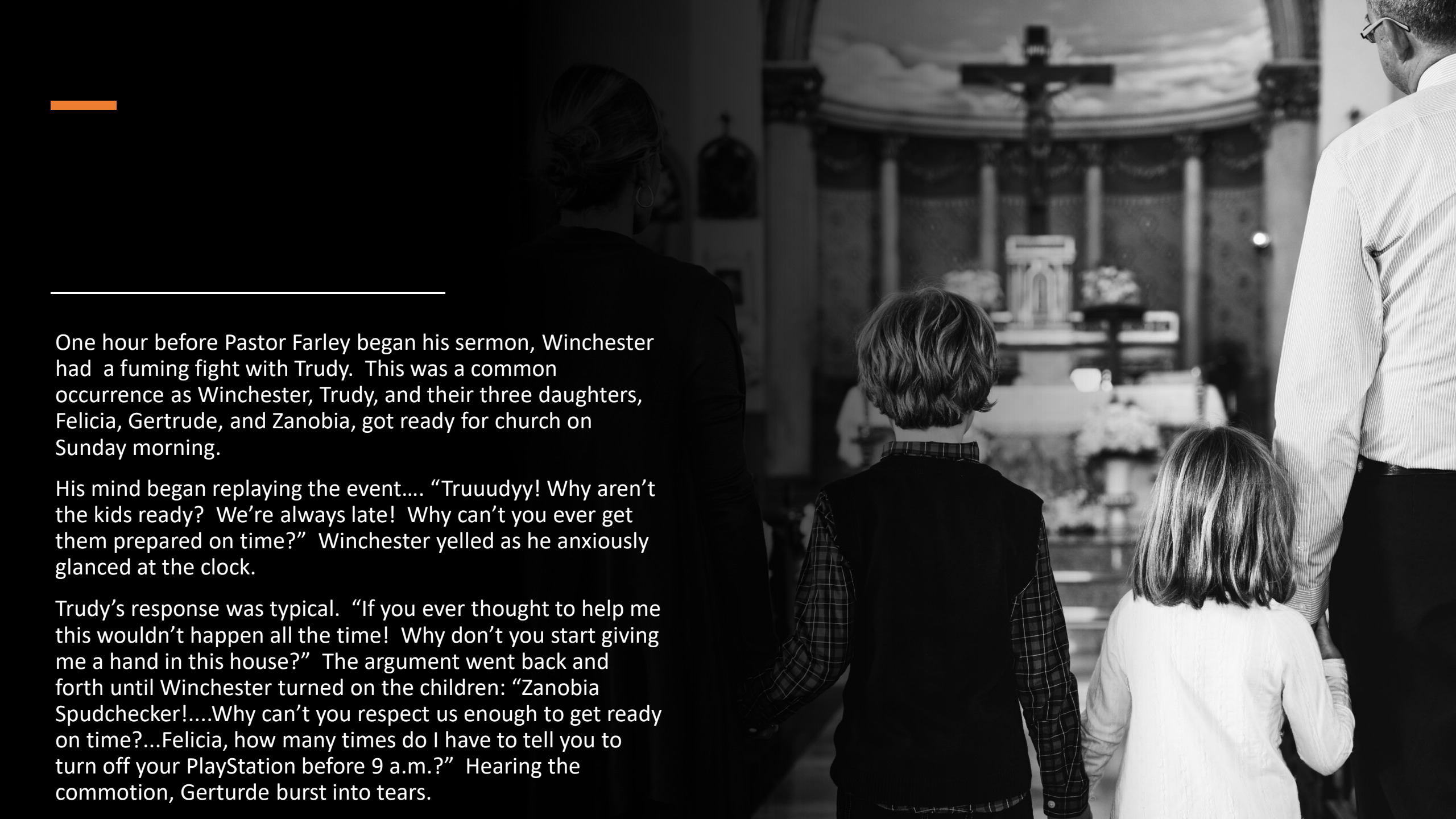
Have we really been doing it by the book?



“The unexamined life is
not worth living.” -
Socrates

“WE DO EVERYTHING by the Word of God! The New Testament is our guide for faith and practice! We live...and we die...by this Book!”

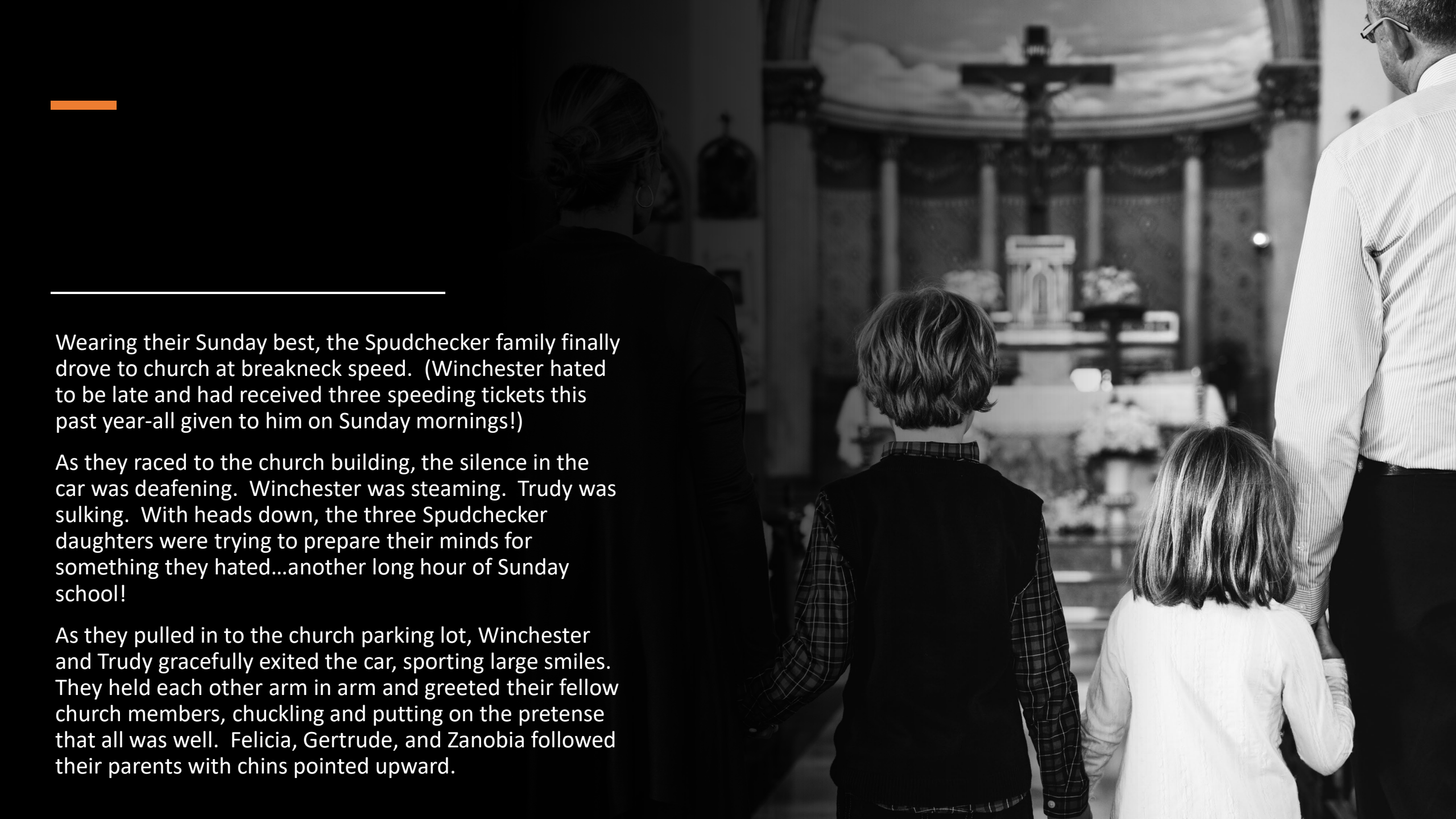
These were the words that thundered forth from the mouth of Pastor Farley as he delivered his Sunday morning sermon. Winchester Spudchecker, a member of Pastor Farley’s church, had heard them dozens of times before. But this time it was different. Dressed in his blue suit, frozen in the back pew with his wife, Trudy, Winchester stared at the ceiling as Pastor Farley continued talking about “doing everything by the sacred Book.”



One hour before Pastor Farley began his sermon, Winchester had a fuming fight with Trudy. This was a common occurrence as Winchester, Trudy, and their three daughters, Felicia, Gertrude, and Zanobia, got ready for church on Sunday morning.

His mind began replaying the event.... “Truuudyy! Why aren’t the kids ready? We’re always late! Why can’t you ever get them prepared on time?” Winchester yelled as he anxiously glanced at the clock.

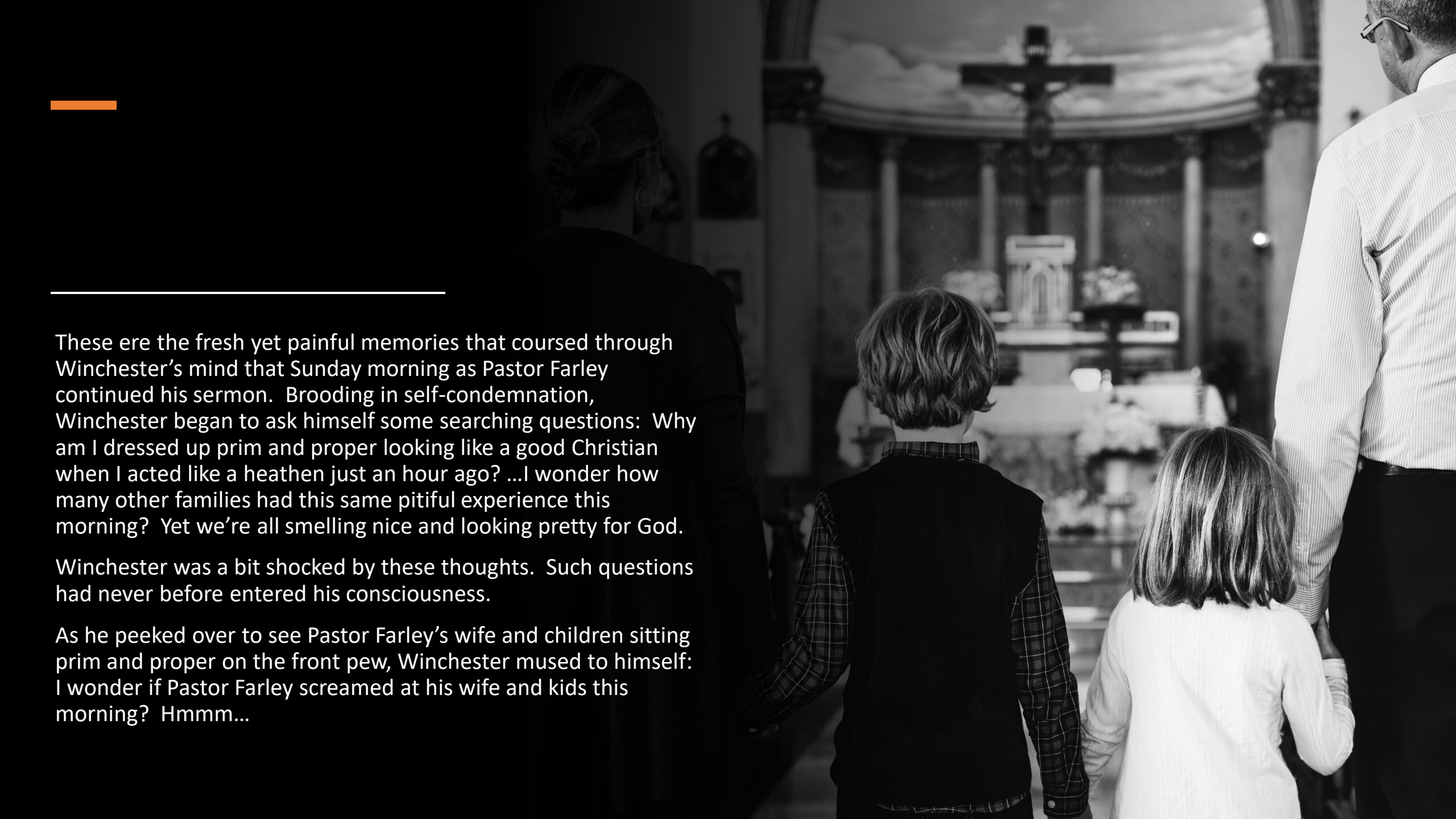
Trudy’s response was typical. “If you ever thought to help me this wouldn’t happen all the time! Why don’t you start giving me a hand in this house?” The argument went back and forth until Winchester turned on the children: “Zanobia Spudchecker!....Why can’t you respect us enough to get ready on time?...Felicia, how many times do I have to tell you to turn off your PlayStation before 9 a.m.?” Hearing the commotion, Gerturde burst into tears.



Wearing their Sunday best, the Spudchecker family finally drove to church at breakneck speed. (Winchester hated to be late and had received three speeding tickets this past year-all given to him on Sunday mornings!)

As they raced to the church building, the silence in the car was deafening. Winchester was steaming. Trudy was sulking. With heads down, the three Spudchecker daughters were trying to prepare their minds for something they hated...another long hour of Sunday school!

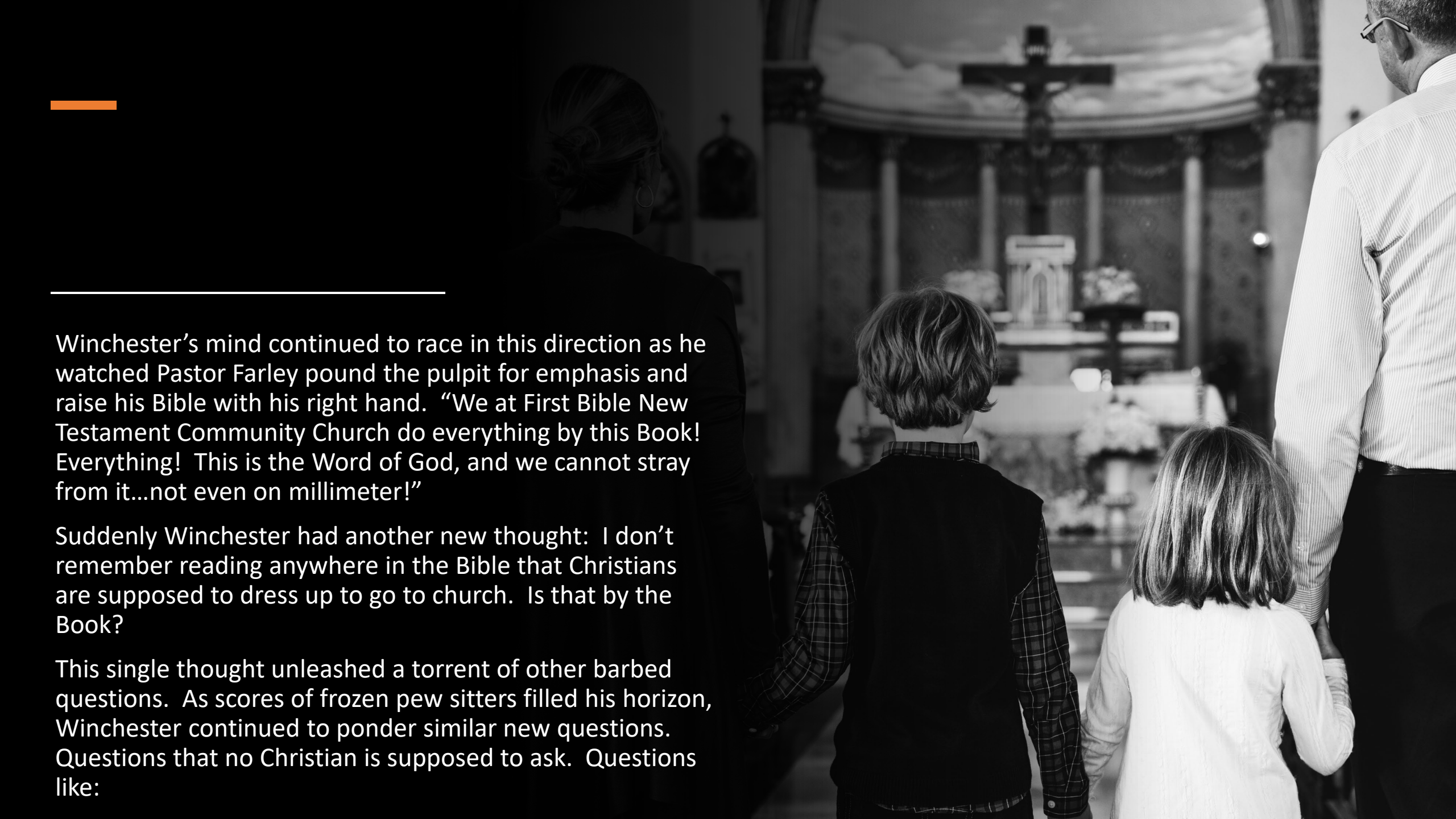
As they pulled in to the church parking lot, Winchester and Trudy gracefully exited the car, sporting large smiles. They held each other arm in arm and greeted their fellow church members, chuckling and putting on the pretense that all was well. Felicia, Gertrude, and Zanobia followed their parents with chins pointed upward.



These ere the fresh yet painful memories that coursed through Winchester's mind that Sunday morning as Pastor Farley continued his sermon. Brooding in self-condemnation, Winchester began to ask himself some searching questions: Why am I dressed up prim and proper looking like a good Christian when I acted like a heathen just an hour ago? ...I wonder how many other families had this same pitiful experience this morning? Yet we're all smelling nice and looking pretty for God.

Winchester was a bit shocked by these thoughts. Such questions had never before entered his consciousness.

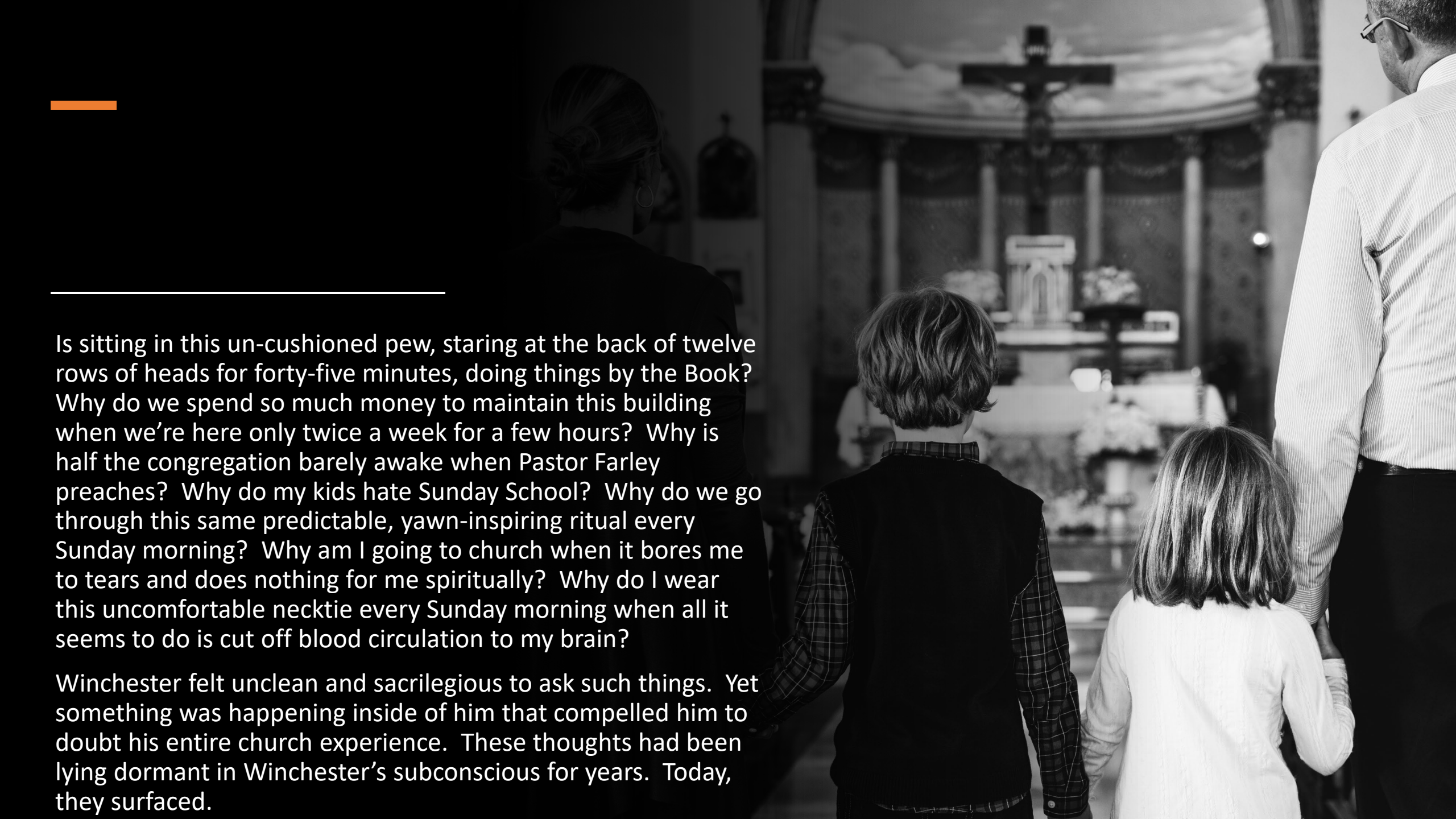
As he peeked over to see Pastor Farley's wife and children sitting prim and proper on the front pew, Winchester mused to himself: I wonder if Pastor Farley screamed at his wife and kids this morning? Hmmm...



Winchester's mind continued to race in this direction as he watched Pastor Farley pound the pulpit for emphasis and raise his Bible with his right hand. "We at First Bible New Testament Community Church do everything by this Book! Everything! This is the Word of God, and we cannot stray from it...not even on millimeter!"

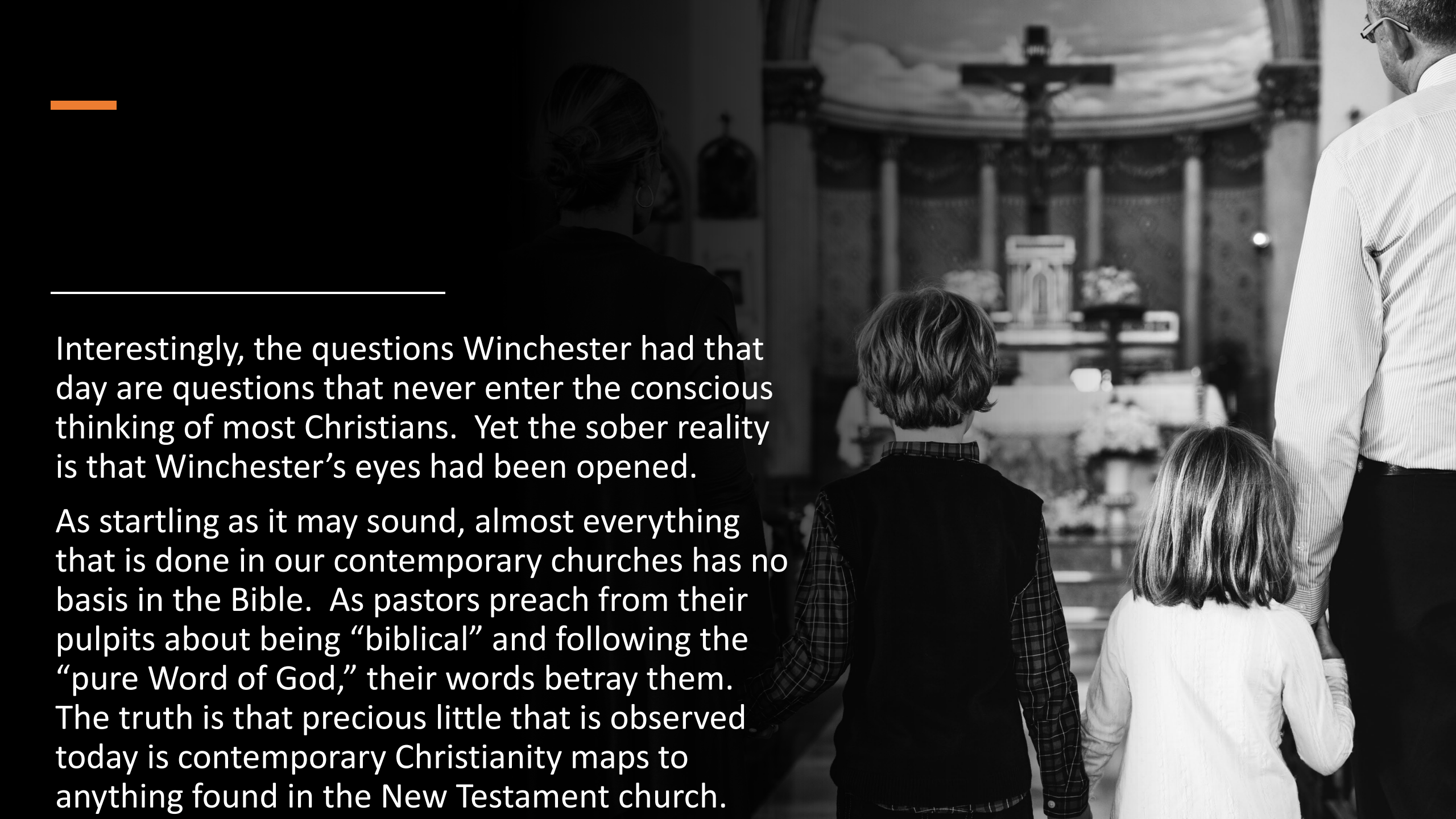
Suddenly Winchester had another new thought: I don't remember reading anywhere in the Bible that Christians are supposed to dress up to go to church. Is that by the Book?

This single thought unleashed a torrent of other barbed questions. As scores of frozen pew sitters filled his horizon, Winchester continued to ponder similar new questions. Questions that no Christian is supposed to ask. Questions like:



Is sitting in this un-cushioned pew, staring at the back of twelve rows of heads for forty-five minutes, doing things by the Book? Why do we spend so much money to maintain this building when we're here only twice a week for a few hours? Why is half the congregation barely awake when Pastor Farley preaches? Why do my kids hate Sunday School? Why do we go through this same predictable, yawn-inspiring ritual every Sunday morning? Why am I going to church when it bores me to tears and does nothing for me spiritually? Why do I wear this uncomfortable necktie every Sunday morning when all it seems to do is cut off blood circulation to my brain?

Winchester felt unclean and sacrilegious to ask such things. Yet something was happening inside of him that compelled him to doubt his entire church experience. These thoughts had been lying dormant in Winchester's subconscious for years. Today, they surfaced.



Interestingly, the questions Winchester had that day are questions that never enter the conscious thinking of most Christians. Yet the sober reality is that Winchester's eyes had been opened.

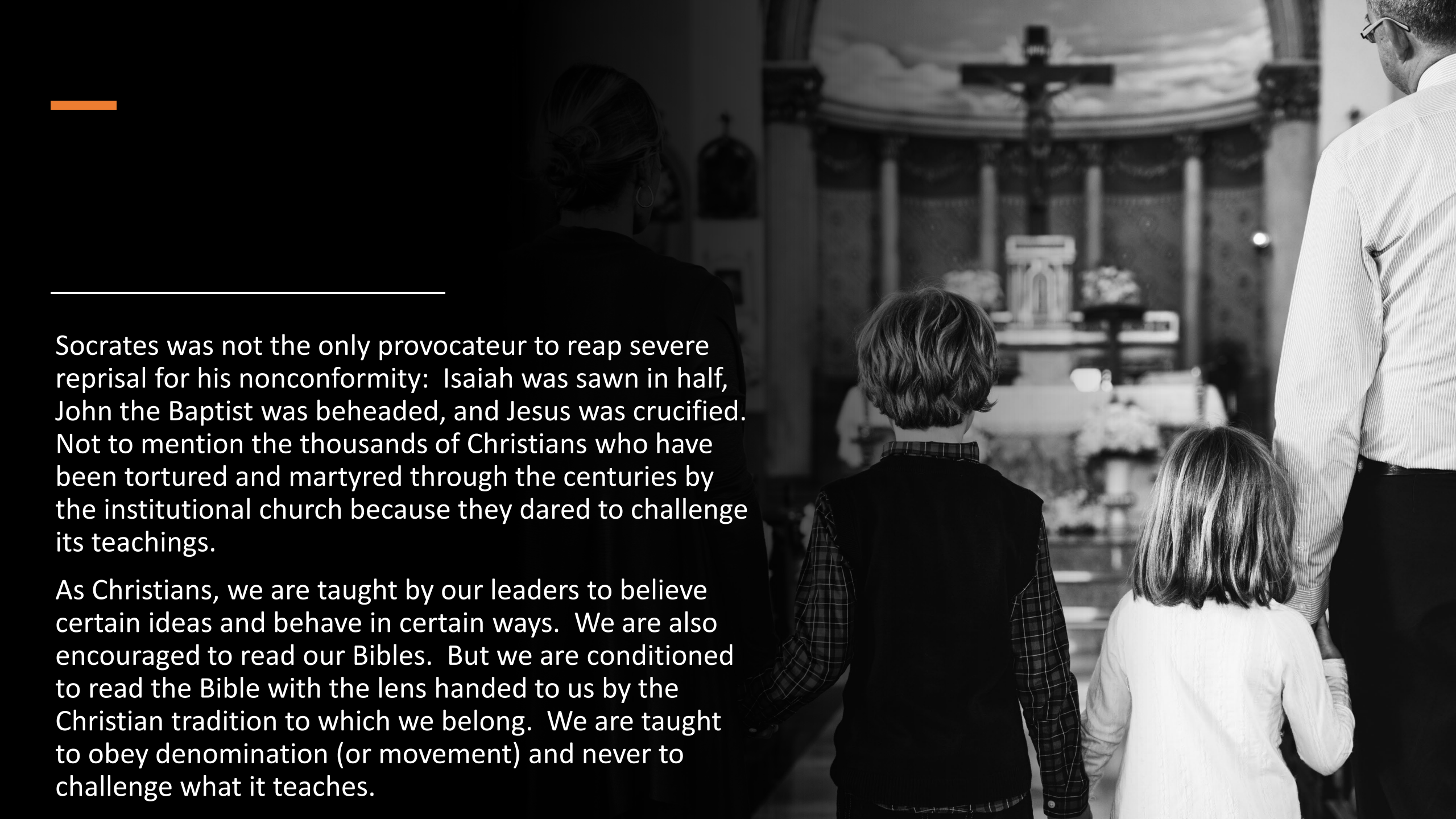
As startling as it may sound, almost everything that is done in our contemporary churches has no basis in the Bible. As pastors preach from their pulpits about being "biblical" and following the "pure Word of God," their words betray them. The truth is that precious little that is observed today is contemporary Christianity maps to anything found in the New Testament church.

A black and white photograph of a family walking away from the camera in a church. A man in a light-colored shirt and glasses is on the right, holding the hand of a young girl in a white dress. A young boy in a dark vest over a plaid shirt is walking in the middle. A woman in a dark top is on the left. They are walking towards an altar with a large crucifix in the background. The church has high ceilings and arched windows.

Questions We Never Think to Ask

Socrates (470-399)BC is considered by some historians to be the father of philosophy. Born and raised in Athens, his custom was to go about the town relentlessly raising questions and analyzing the popular views of his day. Socrates believed that truth is found by dialoguing extensively about an issue and relentlessly questioning it. This method is known as dialectic or “the Socratic method.” He thought freely on matters that his fellow Athenians felt were closed for discussion.

Socrates’ habit of pelting people with searching questions and roping them into critical dialogues about their accepted customs eventually got him killed. His incessant questioning of tightly held traditions provoked the leaders of Athens to charge him with “corrupting the youth.” As a result, they put Socrates to death. A clear message was sent to his fellow Athenians: All who question the established customs will meet the same fate!



Socrates was not the only provocateur to reap severe reprisal for his nonconformity: Isaiah was sawn in half, John the Baptist was beheaded, and Jesus was crucified. Not to mention the thousands of Christians who have been tortured and martyred through the centuries by the institutional church because they dared to challenge its teachings.

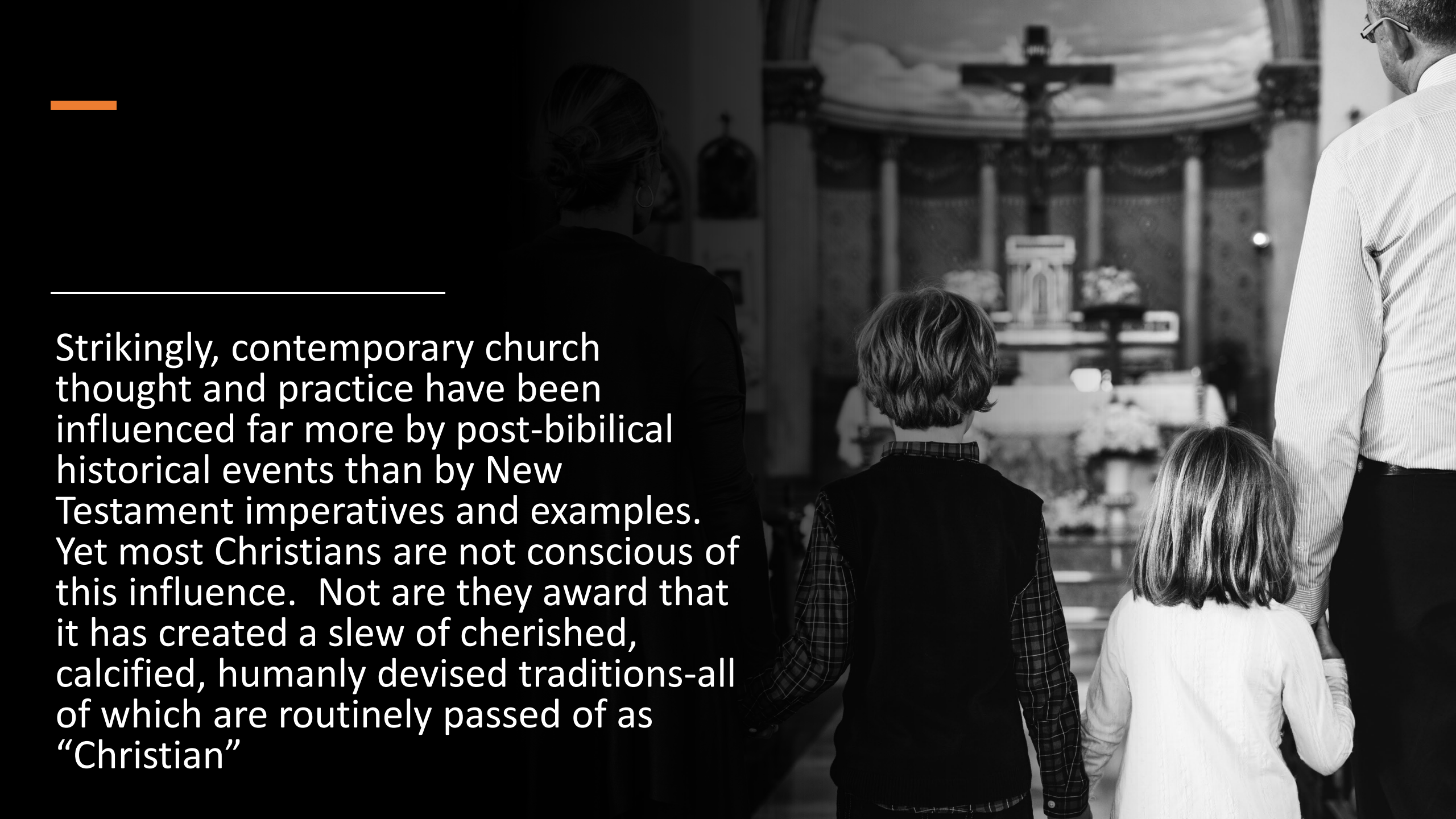
As Christians, we are taught by our leaders to believe certain ideas and behave in certain ways. We are also encouraged to read our Bibles. But we are conditioned to read the Bible with the lens handed to us by the Christian tradition to which we belong. We are taught to obey denomination (or movement) and never to challenge what it teaches.



(At this moment, all the rebellious harts are applauding and are plotting to wield the above paragraphs to wreak havoc in their churches. If that is you, dear rebellious heart, you have missed our point by considerable distance. We do not stand with you. Our advice: Either leave your church quietly, refusing to cause division, or be at peace with it. There is a vast gulf between rebellion and taking a stand for what is true.)

If truth be told, we Christians never seem to ask why we do what we do. Instead, we blithely carry out our religious traditions without asking where they came from. Most Christians who claim to uphold the integrity of God's Word have never sought to see if what they do every Sunday has any scriptural backing. How do we know this? Because if they did, it would lead them to some very disturbing conclusions that would compel them by conscience to forever abandon what they are doing.





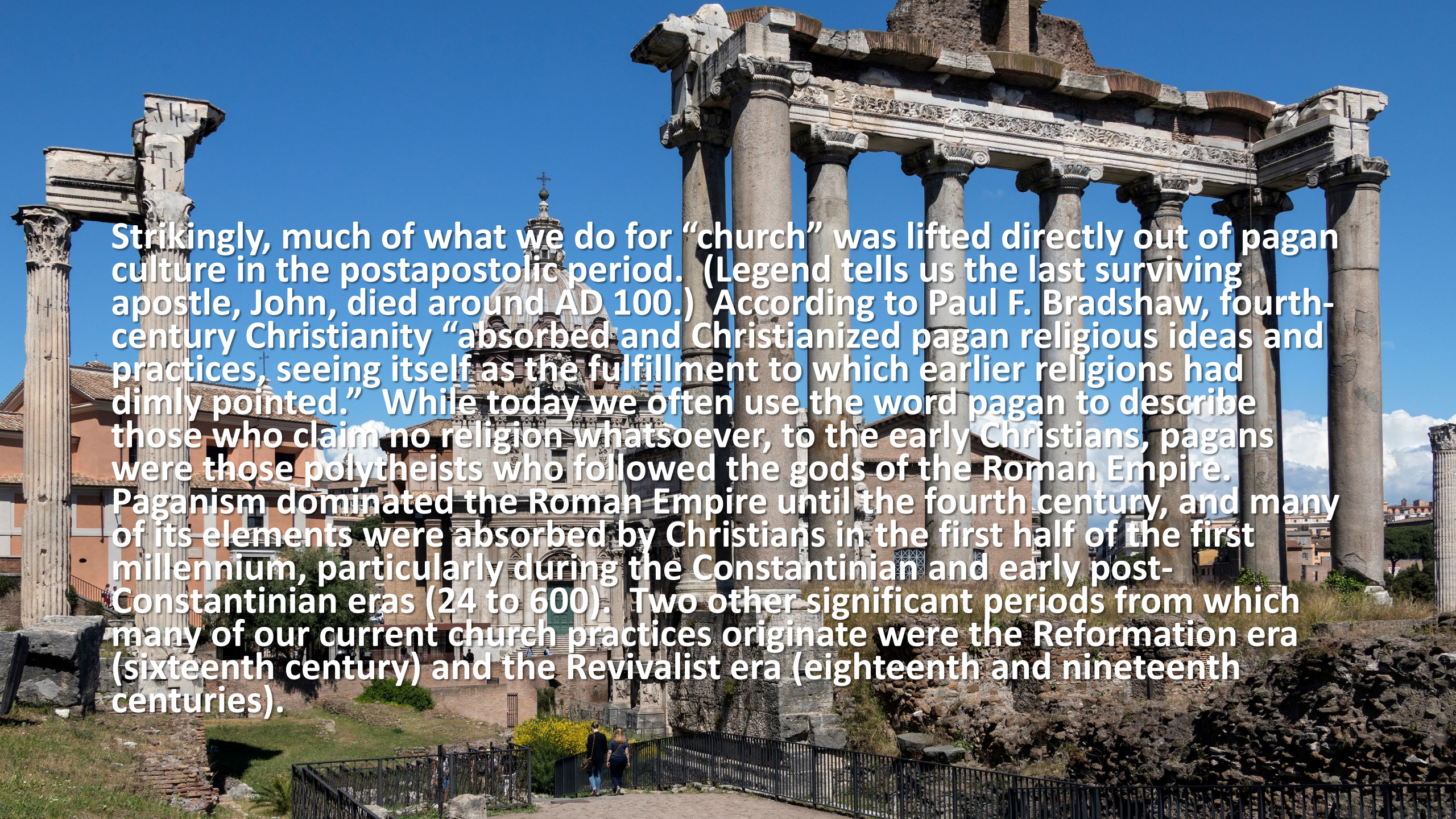
Strikingly, contemporary church thought and practice have been influenced far more by post-biblical historical events than by New Testament imperatives and examples. Yet most Christians are not conscious of this influence. Not are they aware that it has created a slew of cherished, calcified, humanly devised traditions-all of which are routinely passed off as “Christian”



A Terrifying Invitation

We now invite you to walk with us on an untrodden path. It is a terrifying journey where you will be forced to ask questions that probably have never entered your conscious thoughts. Tough questions. Nagging questions. Even frightening questions. And you will be faced squarely with the disturbing answers. Yet those answers will lead you face-to-face with some of the richest truths a Christian can discover.

As you read through the following pages, you may be surprised to discover that a great deal of what we Christians do for Sunday morning church did not come from Jesus Christ, the apostles, or the Scriptures. Nor did it come from Judaism. After the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in AD 70, Judaic Christianity waned in numbers and power. Gentile Christianity dominated, and the new faith began to absorb Greco-Roman philosophy and ritual. Judaic Christianity survived for five centuries in the little group of Syriac Christians called *Ebionim*, but their influence was very widespread. According to Shirley J. Case, "Not only was the social environment of the Christian movement largely Gentile well before the end of the first century, but it had severed almost any earlier bonds of social contract with the Jewish Christians of Palestine....By the year 100, Christianity is mainly a Gentile religious movement...living together in a common Gentile social environment."



Strikingly, much of what we do for “church” was lifted directly out of pagan culture in the postapostolic period. (Legend tells us the last surviving apostle, John, died around AD 100.) According to Paul F. Bradshaw, fourth-century Christianity “absorbed and Christianized pagan religious ideas and practices, seeing itself as the fulfillment to which earlier religions had dimly pointed.” While today we often use the word pagan to describe those who claim no religion whatsoever, to the early Christians, pagans were those polytheists who followed the gods of the Roman Empire. Paganism dominated the Roman Empire until the fourth century, and many of its elements were absorbed by Christians in the first half of the first millennium, particularly during the Constantinian and early post-Constantinian eras (24 to 600). Two other significant periods from which many of our current church practices originate were the Reformation era (sixteenth century) and the Revivalist era (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries).

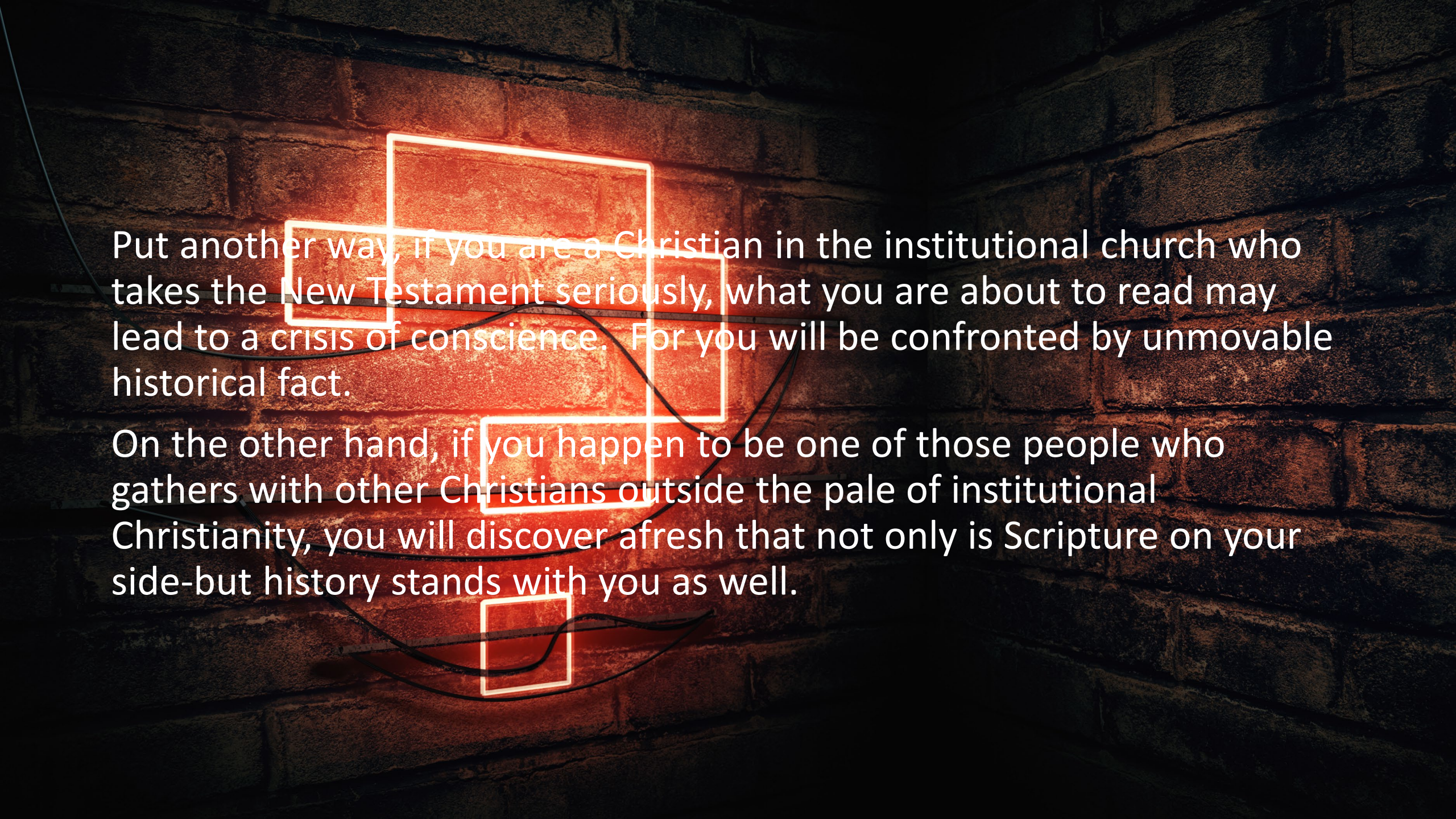


Chapters 2 through 10 each trace an accepted traditional church practice. Each chapter tells the story of where this practice came from. But more importantly, it explains how this practice stifles the practical headship of Jesus Christ and hampers the functioning of His body.

Warning: If you are unwilling to have your Christianity seriously examined, do not read beyond this page. Give this book to Goodwill immediately! Spare yourself the trouble of having your Christian life turned upside down.

However, if you choose to “take the red pill” and be shown “how deep the rabbit hole goes”...if you want to learn the true story of where your Christian practices came from...if you are willing to have the curtain pulled back on the contemporary church and its traditional presuppositions fiercely challenged...then you will find this work to be disturbing, enlightening, and possibly life changing.



A glowing red cross is centered on a dark, textured stone wall. A wavy, black line passes through the cross, starting from the left, curving around the bottom, and ending on the right. The cross is composed of two overlapping squares, one slightly offset from the other, creating a 3D effect. The wall is made of large, dark stones with visible mortar lines. The overall lighting is dim, with the cross being the primary light source.

Put another way, if you are a Christian in the institutional church who takes the New Testament seriously, what you are about to read may lead to a crisis of conscience. For you will be confronted by unmovable historical fact.

On the other hand, if you happen to be one of those people who gathers with other Christians outside the pale of institutional Christianity, you will discover afresh that not only is Scripture on your side-but history stands with you as well.

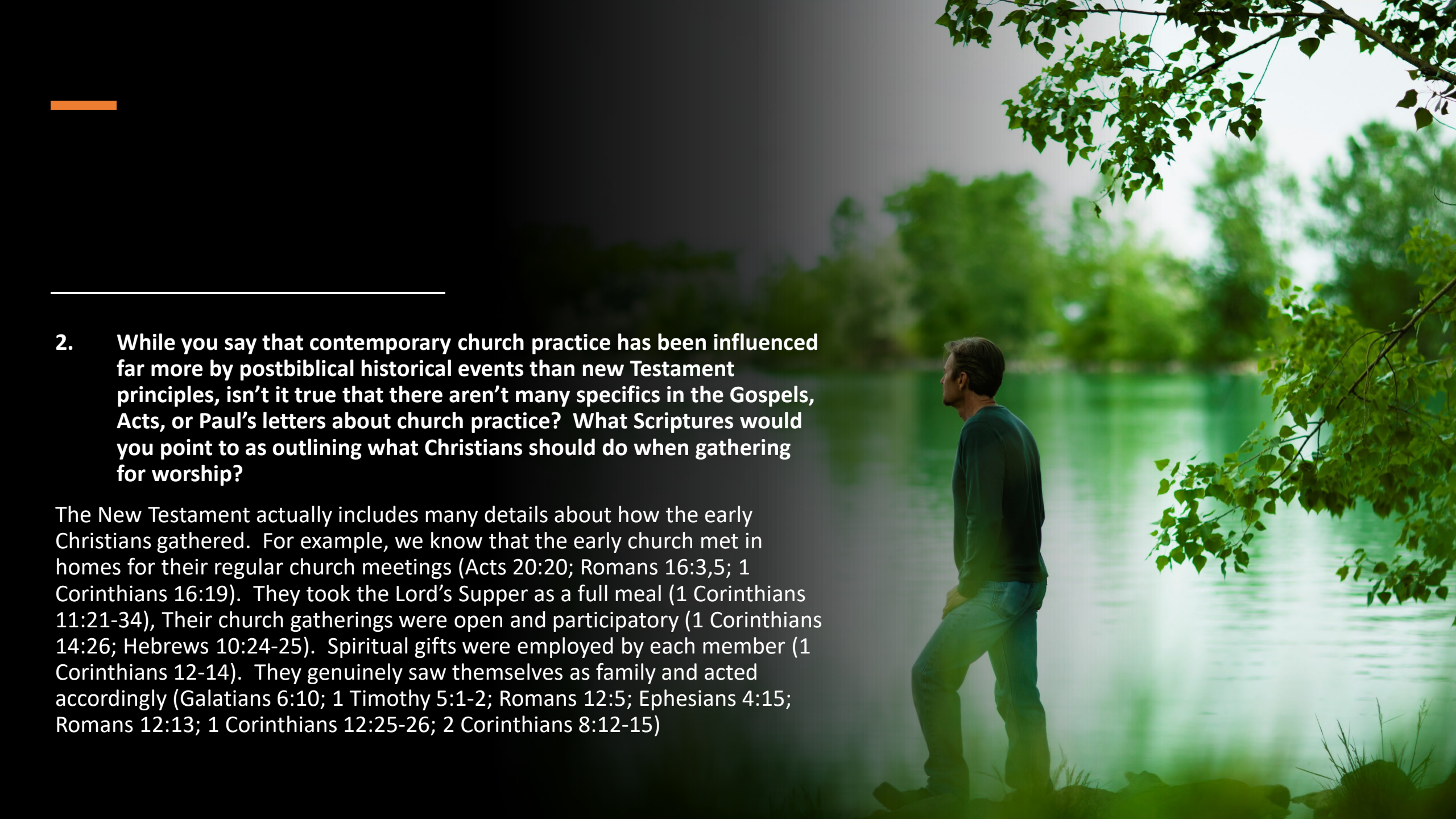


Delving Deeper

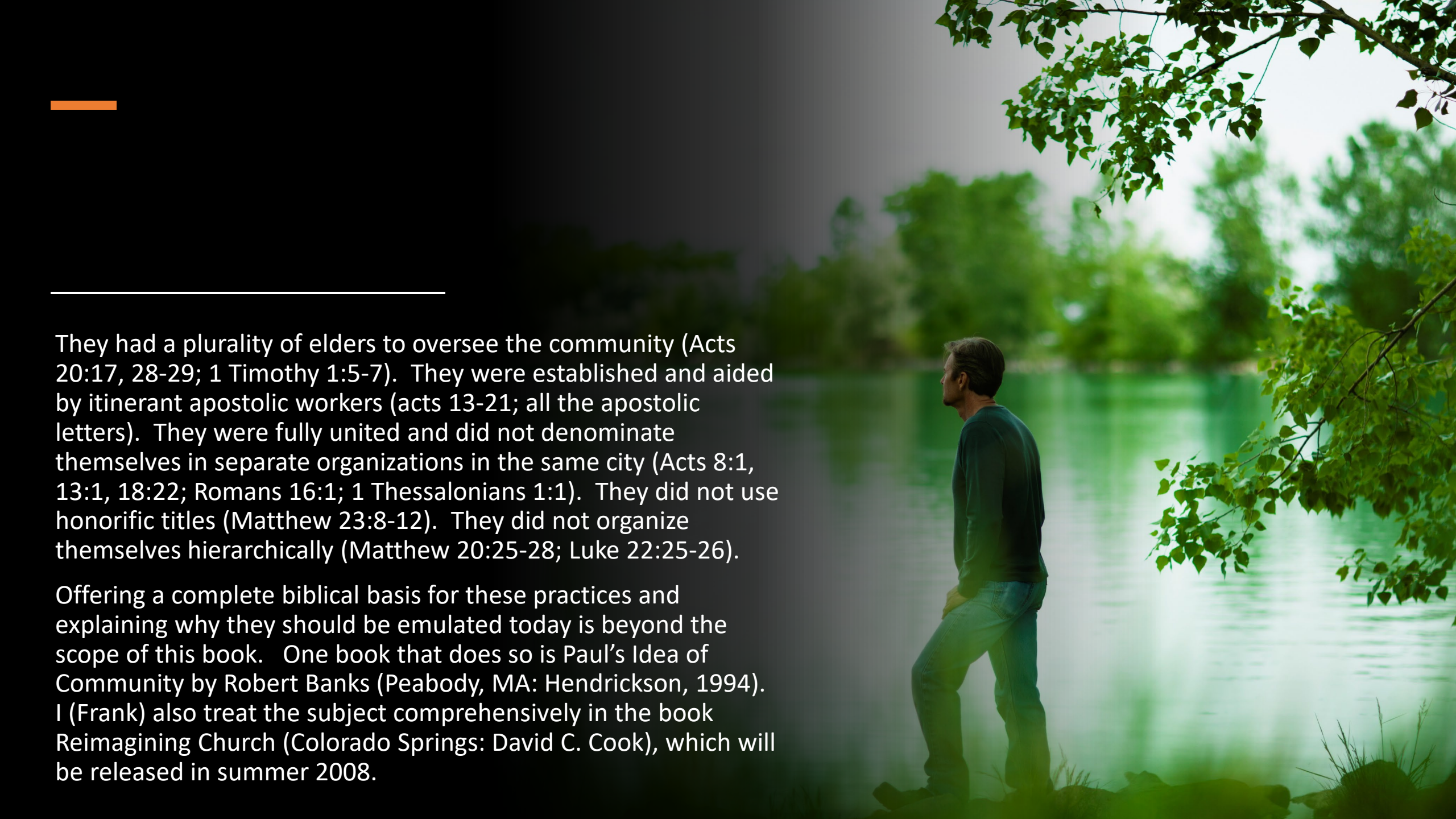
- 1. I don't see how the Spudcherkers' family squabbles before church had anything to do with church itself- other than frustrating Winchester and making him cynical about everything that wen on at his church. Why did you lead off the book with this story?**

You're right-Winchester's Sunday morning troubles were what put him in the frame of mind to question church practices he normally sat through without giving any thought to it at all. The story was simply a humorous way to illustrate how scores of Christians go through the motions on Sunday morning without considering why they do what they do.



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- A man in a dark sweater and jeans stands on a rocky shore, looking out at a calm lake. The background is filled with lush green trees and foliage, with some branches hanging down from the top right. The overall scene is peaceful and contemplative.
2. **While you say that contemporary church practice has been influenced far more by postbiblical historical events than new Testament principles, isn't it true that there aren't many specifics in the Gospels, Acts, or Paul's letters about church practice? What Scriptures would you point to as outlining what Christians should do when gathering for worship?**

The New Testament actually includes many details about how the early Christians gathered. For example, we know that the early church met in homes for their regular church meetings (Acts 20:20; Romans 16:3,5; 1 Corinthians 16:19). They took the Lord's Supper as a full meal (1 Corinthians 11:21-34). Their church gatherings were open and participatory (1 Corinthians 14:26; Hebrews 10:24-25). Spiritual gifts were employed by each member (1 Corinthians 12-14). They genuinely saw themselves as family and acted accordingly (Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; Romans 12:5; Ephesians 4:15; Romans 12:13; 1 Corinthians 12:25-26; 2 Corinthians 8:12-15)

A man in a dark sweater and jeans stands on a rocky shore, looking out over a calm lake. The background is filled with lush green trees and foliage, creating a serene and contemplative atmosphere. The lighting is soft, suggesting a quiet time of day like dawn or dusk.

They had a plurality of elders to oversee the community (Acts 20:17, 28-29; 1 Timothy 1:5-7). They were established and aided by itinerant apostolic workers (acts 13-21; all the apostolic letters). They were fully united and did not denominate themselves in separate organizations in the same city (Acts 8:1, 13:1, 18:22; Romans 16:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1). They did not use honorific titles (Matthew 23:8-12). They did not organize themselves hierarchically (Matthew 20:25-28; Luke 22:25-26).

Offering a complete biblical basis for these practices and explaining why they should be emulated today is beyond the scope of this book. One book that does so is Paul's Idea of Community by Robert Banks (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). I (Frank) also treat the subject comprehensively in the book Reimagining Church (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook), which will be released in summer 2008.