

Dear members and friends of St. John,

It's no secret that the American Christian church is in decline. Almost every denomination has seen losses in attendance since the year 2000. The few denominations that manage to remain flat, or have even seen slight increases are church bodies that actively promote the idea that people should **feel God's presence** as they worship. And they should **feel God's presence** as He speaks to them through visions, dreams, or a still-small voice - on a daily basis. Everything centers on the **heart**, through feelings and emotions, as if the Christian must *experience* God's presence, or else.

The problem with this 'chasing after' God through feelings, emotions, signs, and wonders is that **the Bible clearly opposes it**. Let's examine this. First and foremost, **all Christians sin**. And God has given us a conscience that warns us of the danger of sin. We read from 1st John 3: *"By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything"* (v. 19-20, ESV). "Our heart condemns us" means that our conscience is bearing witness to our sin. **Far from feeling God's presence, we feel alienation from God**. St. John is reminding us of Scripture's promise of God's forgiveness, even when we "feel" condemned! God has died with that very sin on the cross. He's removed that sin from us, as far as the East is from the West (Ps. 103:12). When your heart is condemning you, the focus is on the **objective Truth found only in God's Word**: "You are forgiven, through Christ's shed blood!"

Next, we have Scripture's condemnation of our use of feelings and emotions to elevate (or lower) ourselves before God. From Romans chapter 10: *"But the righteousness based on faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? 'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart'"* (v. 6-8). The true righteousness of God comes from **faith alone**. **Not** from feelings that false Christians pursue to draw closer to Him. **Notice where faith is found? "The word is near you..."** Indeed, child-like faith in Christ is to be prized more than anything in this world (see Matthew 18:1-4). And, little children don't chase after God with emotions and feelings – **they simply believe!** They don't look inside themselves to see if their heart is stirred-up.

Finally, the false Christian's pursuit of signs and wonders, that are titillating to the senses, is condemned by Jesus. From Matthew 12: *"Then some of the scribes and*

Pharisees answered him, saying, 'Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.' But [Jesus] answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah'"(v. 38-39). The pursuit of God-driven visions, miracles, or dreams – stems from an **evil heart that doesn't want to simply trust God's word**. Jesus tells them that the "sign of the prophet Jonah," the resurrection of Jesus after three days in the belly of this earth, is the *only* sign we need.

The problem with these false churches is that **they promote the lie** that *you* must find God through feelings and emotions, signs and wonders - if you're a *real* Christian. Wrong! From John 20: "*Jesus said to [Thomas], 'Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have **not seen** and yet have believed'"*(v. 29). And from Hebrews 11: "*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things **not seen**"*(v. 1). Indeed! Childlike faith simply believes!

Now, we must state that God has given us our emotions, and even some of the gifts of the Holy Spirit are centered on feelings. For instance, the peace that passes all human understanding can sweep over us, as a gift from above. And love that is unselfish, and sacrificial in nature, can come to us as we serve others in Christ's name. We can sense that love – as a feeling! And of course, joy. Joy can come from above, no matter what the circumstance. We may be struggling with a difficult problem, and joy will come to us when we least expect it. So, if feelings and emotions come from above, what is the problem with the false churches' approach to "knowing" God? Dr. Martin Luther has the answer:

Why do you insist on finding [God] **within yourselves**, insist on **feeling holy** and without sin? You will never succeed. All your effort will be worthless.

Do you not know that Christ will be nowhere, nor permit Himself to be found anywhere, except about His Father's business — not in anything that is man-made? This is not the fault of Christ or His mercy. He can never be "lost." He can always be found. Rather, it is your fault because you are **not** seeking Him where you ought—namely, in the place where He should be sought. **You are being guided by your feelings and think you can grasp Him with your thoughts**. Come to the place that is driven neither by your own nor by any human being's business, but by God's business and rule. **So come to His Word**. There you will find Him and hear and see that there is no wrath and disfavor against you in Him, as you fear in your despair. Christ has nothing but grace and warm love in store for you. He acts as your kind and loving Mediator

with the Father, speaking the kindest and best words possible on your behalf. Nor does He send you trials with the intention of casting you off, but so that **you may learn to know Him better and cling more firmly to His Word** and in order to rebuke your unreasonableness. ⁽¹⁾

As Dr. Luther states, people seek God *within* themselves. This is the root of their mistake. “All your effort will be worthless.” **We must always seek our Lord in His word, and His word alone.** Feelings and emotions may sweep over us as we worship and live-out our lives in Christ Jesus. But these are the **result** of childlike faith that has come as a gift from above, **not** the result of our seeking them out. God’s word and His Sacraments are all that we need! It’s where we go when we seek to be closer to Him. For this is the only means that we are given to know Him.

Pastor Travis

⁽¹⁾ Martin Luther, the Writings of; St. Louis Ed. 11:453-455).