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From Church Hopping to Divine Expectancy

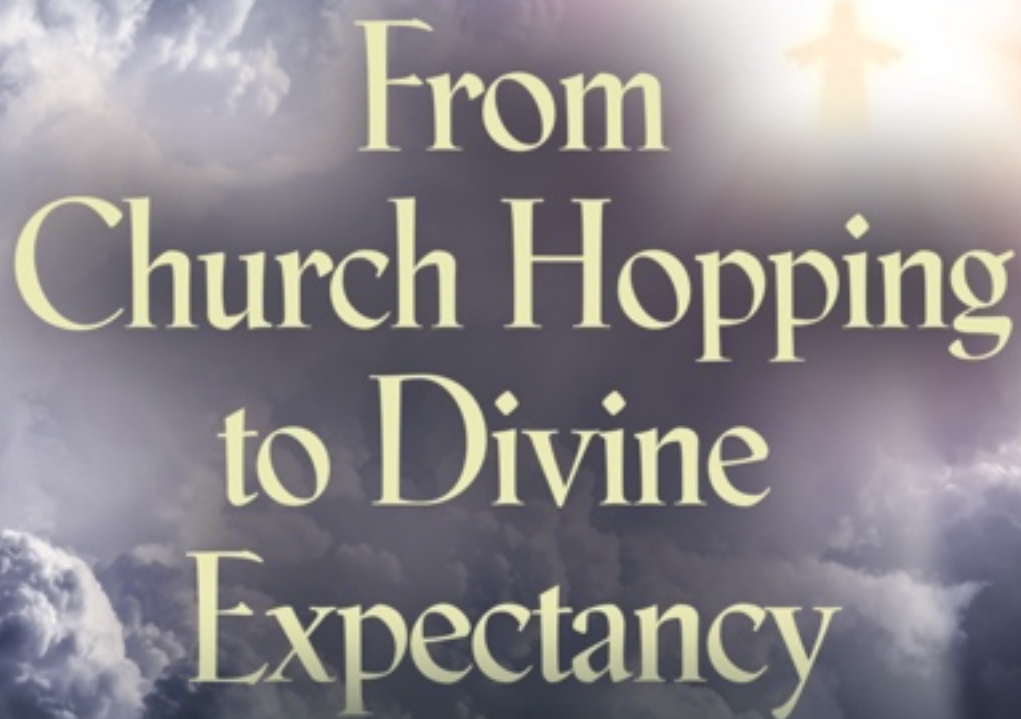
**Transforming “Sunday Best” Church Experiences
into Devoted Communion with the Hope of Glory**

by Emma McCain, Ed.D.

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Emma McCain, Ed.D.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE - Balancing Ungodly Judging Against Godly Discernment	5
CHAPTER TWO - Becoming More Aware of the Challenges That Faced the Early Church.....	11
CHAPTER THREE - Church Hopping or Church Shopping: When Leaving Becomes a Matter of Consumer Protection!!.....	17
CHAPTER FOUR - Extending Grace to the Imperfect Body of Christ in the Face of Intellectual Misconceptions.....	25
CHAPTER FIVE - Exalting Jesus Outside of the Church House: The Body of Christ as the Living Temple of God.....	31
CHAPTER SIX - Maintaining Commitment to Stewardship in an Age of Greed or Competitive Faith-based Entrepreneurship	37
CHAPTER SEVEN - Seeking God’s Wisdom for Bearing the Burdens of the Body of Christ.....	47
CHAPTER EIGHT - Forgetting Those Things Which Are Behind in the Face of Present-Day Segregated Hours of Worship	53
CHAPTER NINE - Delivered From Authenticating a Particular Style of Church Music or Songs of Praise.....	65
CHAPTER TEN - Affirming a Cultural Appreciation For Emotionally Charged Preaching and Teaching as Well as for the Calmly Expressed Discourse.....	71
CHAPTER ELEVEN - Growing in the Knowledge That Christ Loves and Gave Himself for the Church.....	75

From Church Hopping to Divine Expectancy

CHAPTER TWELVE - Learning What It Really Means To be Disciples of Christ Who Are Known by Our Love	79
CHAPTER THIRTEEN - The Greatest Among Us Is the One Who Serves: The Body of Christ as a Servant	83
CHAPTER FOURTEEN - There is Great Joy in Being Unable to Spot a Believer's Life: Holy Living and the Body of Christ.....	87
CHAPTER FIFTEEN - God Calls Us to Bring Others Into the Fold: The Great Commission	91
CHAPTER SIXTEEN - Sustaining the Spirit of Church Life through Prayer and Encouragement for Defenders of the Faith.....	101
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN - We Can Not Be Led Astray When We Keep Our Eyes on The Prize: Uplifting Christ as The Head of the Church.....	105
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN - Awaiting the Return of The Hope of Glory: From Church Hopping to Divine Expectancy	109
BIBLIOGRAPHY	115
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	119

INTRODUCTION

As many readers felt victimized when reading my previous publication, *Delivered and Set Free from the Spirit of Church Hopping*, I was compelled to pull that book from print and present my former intentions with more clarity. I have also become increasingly dissatisfied with attempts by some ministers to use my writings to make church attendees feel guilty when making a consumer choice to leave a ministry that has become a source of bondage or a platform to advance divisive evangelical politics.

I reiterate that there are many in our church world that can boast or feel blessed at having been a member of the same church family for a lifetime. In addition, there are those who leave a place of worship after being ordained to do so by the church leadership for pastoral or missionary work elsewhere. The latter group usually receives the blessings and prayers of the clergy as well as former church members. Similarly, there are some who have to transfer because of military or occupational reassignments and receive prayers from the church family that they might find a suitable church home within their new geographical location.

However, I must also affirm the group of church goers who decide that they or their families must choose, for one reason or another, to begin visiting or decide to seek new beginnings as part of another fellowship. This consumer choice is not an easy task as it often involves determined worshippers beating the pavements--sometimes going miles out of their way--in an effort to find another place of

worship. As a growing disciple of Christ, I admit to experiencing the agony of finding myself a recurring participant among the last category on more than one occasion.

Whatever the reasons that some worshippers choose to depart from certain ministries--which sometimes is never known by previous church members--many in former congregations tend to refer to this latter group of worshippers as "*church hoppers*." Usually, this term is expressed in a condescending manner. I was disheartened to be in earshot of a pastor speaking negatively about one family who had left his church. He shouted out before the whole congregation as if to give all an official warning in case any had inclinations to leave, "Let the back door hit them where the good Lord split them!" Similarly, another pastor made public on his official website a list of tips that he felt would keep *church hoppers* from ever visiting his church.

Many church-goers view *church hoppers* as *unwanted entities* within the body of Christ. Some think of church hoppers as *troublemakers and heretics* who are always finding fault with the pastor, church leaders and church programs. Frequently, some committed church members view them as individuals who will never be satisfied in a church congregation. Some pastors speak of them as folks with *itchy-ears* going from place to place trying to find the *perfect church* in vain. Unfortunately, their desire to visit other churches is often misinterpreted as an act of disloyalty. At times, they are seen as weak potential church members who are "carried away by every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14, NKJV).

Introduction

Whatever brings a genuine worshipper to start over with a new fellowship, departure from the former church has often been a painstaking experience. I am privy to many concerns from individuals who have heartbreaking encounters within their former church organizational structure. Many are on the verge of leaving a problematic or what they deem an *unhealthy, dead, or financially abusive church*. Some choose to stay against their better judgment because of the *stigma* and fear of being labeled a *church hopper*. Some others have admitted feeling torn between leaving for peace of mind and staying because they just want to have a place to have their funeral when they die.

This book seeks to reframe and even affirm the term *church hopper* by removing the stigma that is often attached to this group of worshippers. It is odd that there are consumer protection agencies and lemon-law protection regulations in place for consumers who purchase cars and mobile homes but nothing in place to assist church goers who feel their spiritual souls are neglected or abused. Often the organizational structure in some churches is such that the voice or opinion of the masses must be in total agreement with leadership or elders who have status. If there is any disagreement with business as usual, such opinions can easily be regarded as noise from a transient troublemaker.

In lieu of no other regulations, this book applauds the boldness of worshippers who are in tune with the Spirit of Christ which reveals when it is time to make hard choices that remove themselves from one fellowship for new beginnings in another... *“My sheep listen to my voice and I know them; and they follow me”* (John 10:27). My only warning is that such individuals earnestly seek the leading of

From Church Hopping to Divine Expectancy

the Holy Spirit and resist any urges of isolating themselves from the Body of Christ altogether. As our world faces a current *healthcare pandemic* that temporarily places limits on our physical gatherings, to remain connected to a spiritual Body of Christ remains an essential lifeline and so much more as we await His return.

CHAPTER ONE

Balancing Ungodly Judging Against Godly Discernment



While having come to the realization that God has not made me judge and jury concerning the manner in which many church leaders conduct business, He still calls me to apply His WORD when there seems to be a “fly in the milk” as my Dad would often say. On many occasions, I have had to ask forgiveness for my judgmental upbringing. As early as I can remember, my father was always judging ministers and congregations. My father would say, “*Some preachers were called, some were sent, and some just got up and went!*” He believed that some ministers were too eager and self-centered to wait on the call of God. He thought that such ministers hastily developed a platform and a following out of their need to tell folks what to do while making a buck or two on the side.

Daddy did not mind speaking his thoughts about these so-called “false prophets!” A phrase like, “*You will know them by their fruits*” (Matthew 7:16) was applied to preachers who pastored those small store-front churches that had the same small congregation year after year. My father felt that they were not winning new souls for Christ, but just maintaining their small following as a captive audience to appease their egos, as well as gain a financial profit or livelihood. He also had words for some of those mega-churches that he thought were run by “*ferocious wolves in sheep clothing*” (Matthew 7:15). Sometimes my father hit it right on the money and at other times he was doing some ungodly judging of his own.

I cannot leave my mother’s social impact out of the judgmental scenario, despite my reverence for her total faith in God. However, Mom could be quite judgmental at times. She felt that sinners who did not show some emotional sign of repentance like tears or remorse or who did not even

jump and shout off that mourner's bench were fake. In her eyesight, they did not receive a born-again experience and therefore should never have been baptized. She would say of their baptism, "*They went down a dry sinner and came up a wet one!*"

In the event some readers are not familiar with the concept, *mourner's bench*, let me enlighten you. The practice of placing a sinner on the *mourner's bench* is an old tradition that is being replaced in modern churches by *altar calls* from the general congregation. During my childhood, the *mourner's bench* was the pew or chairs located at the very front of the church. During revival meetings, sinners sat on these seats in clear view of the saved members of the congregation. Preachers, deacons, church mothers, and other church members prayed over these sinners during the prayer meeting and at the end of the compelling appeal, they were invited to give their lives to Christ.

Unknown to us at the time, the existence of the mourner's bench dates back to the time following the *Great Evangelical Awakening* of the 1800's. Charles Finney (1868) referred to such pews as "*anxious seats*," referring to the state of mind of sinners who had the urgent need of repentance. While he did not live to know this, this practice made many a sinner, including me, quite anxious centuries later while we experienced the process of becoming "*born-again believers*." Not all early proponents of Christianity were in agreement with the mourner's bench concept. For example, the Calvinists thought the practice of using a mourner's bench to press sinners toward salvation was wrong, as the Holy Spirit would draw whom He desired unconditionally. This belief was contrary to the latter belief, Arminianism, in that coming

to God required the sinner to repent and choose God of his free will (Finney, 1868).

In addition to the practice of sending sinners to the mourner's bench, a number of churches during my childhood did not allow sinners to stand and sing with the congregation. I later learned that this practice was a misinterpretation of Psalm 1:5. I now know that this passage of scripture is referring to sinners who will be incapable of standing at judgment or on the Last Day with the righteous saints of God (Psalm 1:4-6). Sinners were also not even allowed to sing with the congregation. I remember the words of an old African American Baptist long-meter hymn: "*Let those refuse to sing, who never knew our God!*" The Baptist long-meter hymn is a style of music called hymn-lining. Words of the song are repeated by the congregation after they are called out by the hymn leader. For example, the leader might say, "*A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify*" followed by the congregation repeating the words of the song.

It has been told to me by oral tradition that this practice came about because enslaved persons were not allowed to participate in the worship services of their white plantation owners. Reportedly, the enslaved individuals would sneak and eavesdrop on the songs of the plantation owners and because they had no hymnals, would come back and teach them to the others. They taught them by hymn lining using the *long-meter*, *short-meter*, or *common-meter* style. However, further research has revealed that some Africans were forced to attend church with their plantation owners — just in a different section of the church as second-class citizens (Emerson, 2006). In addition, the practice of hymn

lining was also prominent in white churches before there were enough hymnals for the entire congregation (Finney, 1868). However, I seriously doubt that any style of hymn lining was the same as the melodies used by African enslaved persons. A number of Baptist African American churches, regardless of social standing in the community, continue to use this age-old *long-meter, short-meter, or common-meter style* of hymn lining in their devotional services to this very day.

Nevertheless, my mom strongly disagreed with the methods that preachers and deacons (including my father) would use to invite sinners to Christ. Many preachers during my young church experience did not explain the plan of salvation very well to the unsaved. As a result, many sinners did not understand what they were doing when they left the *mourner's bench* (Hughes, 1940). In my day, the preachers and deacons would simply invite sinners to walk off that bench by saying, "Daughter/Son, give the preacher your hand and God your heart!"

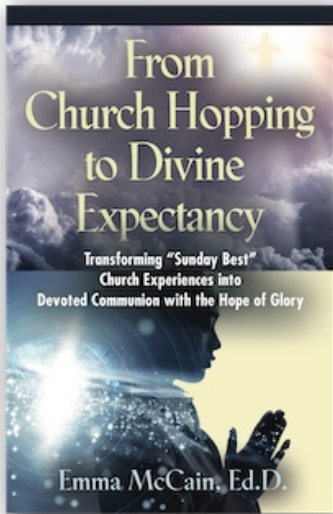
The *mourner's bench* experience caused me to judge myself harshly for many years. I was afraid to offend God by *giving the preacher my hand* and knowing that I was not truly giving Him my heart. As a result, I stayed on that *mourner's bench* for many years at my parents' insistence. I did not accept Christ until I became an adult and understood God's plan of salvation more clearly.

While my parents may have been judgmental about many of the doctrines of our local church, they were adamant about the need to be "born-again" (John 3:3-5). In their simplistic

style, they taught me that seeking and knowing the Spirit of Christ is a relationship that should not be taken lightly.

It took me years to fully understand my parents' views about being "*born-again*" and to independently become engrossed in the WORD of God. The plan of salvation as I know it today has demonstrated what it really means to have the "*God-seed*" as an everlasting presence within the believer. As I continue to yield to the Holy Spirit to transform my life, I allow Him to equip me in balancing how His gifts operate within me to bring Him glory.

I am learning that His compassion for the church body is balanced by His desire for the church to be in a process of becoming one without spot or wrinkle. His Spirit who dwells within us is grieved when sin reigns within the ranks whether through deceitful financial profiting, sexual immorality, or other man-made idols and enslavement. When organizational structure prevents such issues from being corrected, the praying church members are placed in a state of mounting agony.



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