

One of my favorite activities as a child was playing with a model train set. The fun was in creating a model town and pretending the train running through it was real. My dad and I made a pretty good layout on a piece of plywood, and I enjoyed it for many years. The only bad thing about it was that it took up so much space in my room.

It would have been a problem if I had not been able to separate this act of pretending from reality. But sometimes we set up similar structures in our lives and cannot see the difference. Robert W. Lucky describes the “Cargo Cult” construction by South Seas islanders of mock airports after the Second World War. The natives had witnessed people from other places come to their land and build airstrips, which later had airplanes come and land on them! So they built similar sites in the belief that they could attract these flying things, too. They built runways, lit fires along the sides, and made wooded huts just like the originals. It looked like an airport, but no planes ever came. Can you just imagine their hopeful waiting for this magic to occur?

I am reminded somehow of Linus waiting for the Great Pumpkin. Everyone thinks that he is odd to hope in such a foolish thing, and he is always embarrassed when the Great Pumpkin never comes. Mankind has since the beginning hoped for such a visitation by the Spirit of God, but in most cases he did not have the relationship required with God to achieve this. Man would set up a structure, like an idol or a temple, in which he hoped a god would come to stay. But like the South Sea natives they waited in vain. Remember the prophets of Baal in the days of Elijah? They prepared their altar, and then waited all day for their god to present himself (1 Kings 18). They went through all of the motions of worship, but nothing happened. Then Elijah showed them what the true God was like, as fire came down to light his altar.

We can set up something that looks like a church, that sounds like a church, has a name on it like a church, but then we end up not really knowing what we are doing; we haven’t got a clue as to what the real thing is. Unless we have a connection to and a relationship with the real power, nothing is going to happen. We must have more than the outer appearance in place. Otherwise, we are just like the natives, and cannot figure out why the magic doesn’t happen for us.

We may look at another congregation a little ways down the road, and covet the success that they are having. So we put in similar programs and activities and then wonder why we are making the same old progress. We have an “If you build it, they will come,” perception of things. But then we wonder why, after constructing a church like the others, the “Spirit” doesn’t come.

Time after time we have to relearn the lesson that a set of rules is not a substitute for genuine love and the relationship that accompanies it. If our love isn’t real, then it doesn’t matter what programs our church has. Success only comes through relationships.

In the Old Testament, God chose a place in the promised land for His name to dwell (Deuteronomy 12:5-13). But it was not really a physical place that He wanted, but a place in our hearts. He detests the external appearance only; He condemns those who honor Him with their lips but their heart is far from Him (Isaiah 29:13). We must prepare a place for Him to dwell that is not crowded with our own personal junk.

The South Sea natives were confused about what was real, but you can see how logical it was to them. An airfield was created, and planes began to fly in. We have been taught better what it takes to bring God into our lives. We must prepare our hearts in the right way, and let God’s Spirit come and work in us. Those who waited in Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2) had their hearts ready; they had the connection, the relationship to God. And the Spirit came upon them with a great roar.