

It's A Hunger Problem Making Sense of Spiritual Apathy in the Church

gospelreformation.net/its-a-hunger-problem/

Jon Payne

May 11,
2018



A few years ago I was lamenting with a fellow minister about the lack of interest in Lord's Day piety among Reformed believers, especially as it concerns attendance to evening worship. I shared my observation that very few seem to want to round out the Lord's Day with corporate worship; and that many — perhaps most — of our churches in the PCA have scrapped the evening service altogether. Our Reformed confessional heritage emphasizes the biblical foundations and spiritual blessings of the Lord's Day (WCF 21.7-8; HC Q. 103). Yet there appears to be little desire to set apart the Day as holy. Indeed, we often treat it like another Saturday with church in the morning. Moreover, in most of our churches, less than half the congregation attends Sunday school, and prayer meetings are woefully small. How can this be? Why do we possess such spiritual apathy in our hearts and in our churches?

My fellow minister's response to my lament has always stuck with me. "Jon, it's a hunger problem. We have a hunger problem in the church." The more I have thought about his assessment, the more I agree with him. He is right. We are not hungry for God. We are not

thirsty for the living waters of his Word. We are satisfied with too little of God. Our spiritual appetites are weak, and our priorities prove it.

Consuming and Craving

We all know what it's like to develop poor eating habits. At one time or another, we've all been on the "see food" diet and a member of the ice-cream-after-ten-club. We also know that an unhealthy diet produces unhealthy cravings. These cravings perpetuate the consumption of food that is neither nourishing for the body nor good for the mind. Rather than crave that which will make us feel better, think better, and look better, a poor diet generates cravings for that which will do just the opposite on all counts. Alternatively, a healthy diet (with regular exercise) produces a healthy body and a vigorous mind, and it fuels a craving for the kinds of food that will promote healthy living in the future. Here's the point:

We crave what we consume, and we consume what we crave.

The same is true for our walk with God. We crave what we most consume. We desire what we most devour. Our habits and schedules either increase our hunger for God or increase our hunger for other things. While evaluating our desires can be quite complex, it's hard to argue with the idea that we tend to value most that which we set our hearts upon (c.f. Mt. 6:21).

Our spiritual hunger problem is not due to a want of appetite. No, we all have hearty appetites. The problem is that our appetite is for the wrong things. And when our appetite is for the wrong things, it spoils our appetite for the right things. It slakes our thirst for communion with God and His people.

In other words, our unhealthy diet of worldliness hampers our desire for fellowship with God on the Lord's Day. Our craving for entertainment, sports, and social media curbs our craving for the scriptures. Just think of the inordinate time given to these things on the weekends alone. And sadly, for a growing number of professing believers, secret sexual sin (think pornography) dampens the desire for God-centered worship and fellowship. Indeed, it destroys true intimacy with God.

Recovering a Sacred Hunger and Thirst for God

In Psalm 42:1-2a the psalmist writes, "As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." Elsewhere David pens, "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Ps. 63:1). Our Lord Jesus declares, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Mt. 5:6). The common theme in these verses is that of hungering and thirsting for God. The question is

how do we recover and foster a holy hunger for God? How do we regain and cultivate a sacred thirst for Christ? How do we renew in our hearts an earnest longing for God? Here are three simple ways:

Feed on Christ

To solve our hunger problem we must once again return to the unsearchable riches of Christ in the free gospel of grace. We must feed on Jesus, the bread of life, by faith (Jn 6:35). Christ is the true manna from heaven (Jn 6:50-51). He is the living water (Jn 4:10). His body and blood provide life, forgiveness, salvation, and nourishment for our souls (Jn 6:56). As an expression of our union with Christ, we must feast upon him — albeit spiritually — through faith (WCF 29.7). These truths are reinforced at the Lord's Table (Lk 22:14-20), a blessed foretaste of the heavenly marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). In all of these inspired metaphors we are reminded that in Christ we receive all "spiritual nourishment and growth in him" (WCF 29.1).

Therefore, all of our hunger problems are resolved when we feast upon Christ and abide in him by grace through faith. To feed on Christ is to lay hold of him by grace through faith. God sent his only Son into the world to take on human flesh, perfectly fulfill the righteous standards of the law, lay down his innocent life as a substitutionary sacrifice for our wretched sins, and rise victoriously from the grave. The more we actively abide in him through the outward means that he has ordained for our spiritual benefit (Lord's Day, worship, fellowship, preaching, sacraments, prayer — Acts 2:42; WSC Q.88), the more we will desire him. Yes, to abide in Christ is to want more of him. Remember, we crave what we most regularly consume.

Change Your Diet

If we want an increased hunger for the Lord, we must be willing to make some changes to our "diet." We must be willing to consume less of the world and its "word" and more of Christ and his word. We must be willing, unless providentially hindered, to devote ourselves to all of the public gatherings at our local church — prayer meetings, Sunday school, morning and evening worship, weekly Bible studies, etc. (Acts 2:42). We must be willing to get up a little earlier in the morning for the purpose of being nourished upon God's Word (1 Pet. 2:2; Mk 1:35). Our Lord fought off temptation by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt. 4:4). We must be willing to reach out to church members for fellowship during the week. We must be willing to spend a little less time looking at our screens and a little more time reading the scriptures, singing, and praying with our children in our homes. Changing our spiritual diet in these ways will increase our hunger for God, and our craving for his word. A renewed hunger for the Lord will also generate new priorities in our lives and schedules.

Commit to Pray

Dear Christian, you are perfectly loved by God. He sent his Son to die for you, to procure your redemption with his very own blood. He has adopted you by his grace, and all of the armies of hell could not remove you from his loving hands (Rom. 8:14-15; Jn 10:29). He will hold you fast. Your loyal covenant-keeping Father rejoices over you with loud singing (Zeph. 3:17). On your best day and on your worst day, God loves you the same, and he is more committed to your holiness than you are (Titus 2:14). O the limitless depths of the love of God!

Therefore, in light of God's infinite love for you and the grace which he so lavishly pours out upon you in Christ, cry out to him in prayer for a growing spiritual hunger. Go ahead. Do it now. Boldly approach the throne of grace and ask God to change your appetites, to cultivate in you a hunger and thirst for him that is unrivaled by the world. To focus the prayers, you may want to fast as well. A rumbling stomach might reinforce and encourage earnest prayers for increased spiritual hunger.

May the Holy Spirit convict us of our spiritual apathy, and grant us the grace to grow in our hunger and thirst for God. He is worthy.

Since from His bounty I receive

Such proofs of love divine,

Had I a thousand hearts to give,

Lord, they should all be Thine!

— Samuel Stennett, c. 1727-95



[Print View](#)