

Episode 37. "The New Deeper Walk Retreat."

Tuesday, May 28, 2024. 41 Minutes Long.

Show Notes: An introduction to "The Experience," the unique new retreat that Owen and John have developed. This unusual retreat demonstrates with Live Exercises how the Early Christians worshiped in small groups in homes, and how they let the Holy Spirit guide their worship. This episode gives the exciting details.

John (00:00):

John Shields opens the episode by saying:

John (00:12):

Well, hello again to all our friends out in Podcast Land! This is Episode 37 of the "Saving Christianity" podcast. And it is wonderful to be back with you, after these months offline. And we're going to tell you why we've been offline in a moment. But first, you'll remember that we're the podcast for people who want a return of the *peace, healing, and hope* that the first Christians had in the First Century. And you'll remember that we're brought to you by the Christian Family Online, a nonprofit public charity. I'm your host, John Shields. I'm here with our co-host, Owen Allen, and with our producer Shannon Wolfe. Now, I think you're going to find this episode very interesting because we're not going to only explain why we've been offline for a period of time, but we're also going to introduce you to a *Deeper Walk Retreat* that we've developed while our podcast was offline. It's a Christian retreat like no other that we've seen, and we're excited about dedicating this episode to telling you about it. So the title of this podcast episode is "The New Deeper Walk Retreat." (Repeats.) And in this episode, we're going to talk about why we created the new retreat and how it's working so far. But right now, let's bring in our co-host Owen Allen, and get the episode started. Welcome to Episode 37, Owen!

Owen (02:01):

(Chuckles.) Well, thank you, John. And let me offer my own warm welcome to our loyal followers worldwide. We owe all of you an apology, probably, for being out of touch for so long. But by the end of this episode, I think you'll believe with us that the delay has been worth it. You know, John, all of our episodes have been important, I think, and all of them, I believe, have contained facts and principles that many Christians have never heard. But I honestly think that this episode, Episode 37, is one of the most unusual that we've ever recorded.

John (02:41):

And I agree, Owen. I know that this is a side of Christianity that we worked on very hard. And I know this is a side of Christianity that's at a critical place in history right now, this very day. So this episode is needed in Christianity right now.

Owen (03:03):

Yeah, John, I believe that. I mean, like you say, we live this daily. So we know it's true. And for reasons that'll become clear as we talk, I think that our New Deeper Walk Retreat, which we've given by the way, we've given the name "**The Experience**." (Repeats.) And we think it should be of interest to all Christians. Why? And why is that true? Well, because this retreat has Spiritual exercises and techniques. It's not words. It's not theology. Its exercises and techniques that no other retreat we know of has.

John (03:45):

That's true Owen. So let's just "jump in the deep end of the pool," as they say. And let's tell our listeners why we created "**The Experience**" retreat, and what it does for people who attend it.

Owen (04:01):

Okay. Well. Maybe, as I think about it, John, the best place to start is by telling our listeners that we created "**The Experience**" retreat to *solve* a linkage of problems that exists in Christianity today. Now, obviously we've talked about some of these problems in earlier episodes. So, our listeners could look back up the line and see those. But let's repeat that some of those ideas here because the New Deeper Walk Retreat is designed for one purpose. Check this out: To *solve* those problems. Now, what are the problems? Well, the first problem that Christianity has these days is that the national Polls show that *attendance* of Christian worship services is dropping like a stone. Earlier this year, one national study found that only 10 percent of today's Christians still regularly attend weekly worship services. So, a lack of worship attendance is Christianity's first big problem at this point.

Owen (05:19):

And as a sidebar, John. We've talked in earlier podcasts about the hundreds of *church-buildings* that are being boarded up. The hundreds of pastors and priests that are seeking other careers and other work. So this is "ground that we plowed" in earlier episodes. But I'm repeating it here. But now let's go deeper. The second problem is that because of this lack of worship attendance, most Christians today don't have much Christian *fellowship*. They have very little Christian influence in their actual daily lives. In other words, everything they see and everything they hear during the day is Non-Christian. That's a BIG problem. And that links to the final one, number three. The third problem Christianity has today is that because most Christians don't have much Christian influence in their lives – hang on now – we've said this before. But let's say it again: *Today's average Christian is no more Spiritual than a Non-Christian.*

John (06:36):

Which is stunning!

Owen (06:37):

Think about that. It makes you want to beat your head on the wall. Because the whole point and purpose – I think our listeners would agree to this – the only whole point and purpose of Christianity existing is *to make people Spiritual*. And they *were*, among the early Christians. We've talked about that. The first three centuries of Christian history, about the first eight or nine generations of the early Christians, *were* the most Spiritual people walking the earth. But that's gone now. So let's summarize: What these three problems mean is that Christianity is literally fading away before our eyes. And nobody seems to know anything to do about it.

John (07:30):

Ouch. Owen that ... that ... that hurts to hear that. Although, we have to start with the reality, the truth of where we are. And as someone famously said, "Understanding the problem is half the solution."

Owen (07:45):

Absolutely!

John (07:45):

And we've said that from Episode 01. Our podcast, "Saving Christianity," is not to be a rehearsal of the problems with modern day Christianity. But we're here focused on the *solution* to that. And that's why we've taken so much time away from the podcast lately: To work on our *solution*. So now, let's tell our listeners, Owen, how our *solution* works.

Owen (08:19):

Okay. So that's a "deep, deep subject," as the Well Digger said. There's a lot to tell. So I think maybe, John, the best place to start here is telling our listeners the reason why so *few* Christians attend today's worship services. I mean, that was the first problem we mentioned. But now let's go backward. Why does *IT* exist? Because that first link in the chain is where all the trouble starts.

John (08:47):

Yeah. Okay. But that reason is something many Christians understand, I think in the back of their mind somewhere. But, we don't like to talk about it because we don't see an answer. And so we think, well, it's useless to talk about it.

Owen (09:06):

That's right. That's true, John. And, you know, for years I felt that same way. And I think most Christians have at times. I didn't want to talk about the decline in worship attendance. Or should I say, I didn't know *how* to talk about it. So you just don't mention it to people. But now I think we both decided to be brave and to "go public with the truth" about *why* Christian worship attendance is tanking nationally. And actually, I think the reason is simple. All the research bears it out. And that simple reason for the national decline in worship attendance is as follows:

Worship services, as they're conducted today, *don't meet people's Spiritual needs*. Just think about that.

John (10:03):

(Makes agreeing sounds.)

Owen (10:04):

That has to be true, doesn't it?

John (10:06):

Yeah. Sure.

Owen (10:07):

In fact, many Christians – this is the most shocking point that research has shown – many Christians *leave* the worship services more disappointed and confused than they were when they *went* in.

John (10:21):

Yeah, Owen. And that's a horrible tragedy. But I just want to insert here for our listeners: You probably know this from earlier episodes, but this is real-time for Owen and me. I am serving in a local congregation as a "pastor." So I'm in this. I'm experiencing, I'm living it, for ... I'm on my like 35th year in this. And so it is a horrible tragedy. But there's also a simple reason *why* today's worship services don't meet people's Spiritual needs. Or maybe let's say it a little bit of a different way. There's a reason *why* today's worship services *don't* make Christians more Spiritual.

Owen (11:13):

Ouch.

John (11:14):

Yes.

Owen (11:15):

And so obviously, John, if Christians are *not* Spiritual, or even *more* Spiritual than their neighbors and their friends – then why would they want to go right to uh ... spend a day (in a worship service)? I'll never forget years ago, John, I told you this story, (a) lady in my neighborhood was a big golfer. And so we were talking at the mailbox one day. And I said something about, "Why don't you go to church with us?" And her mouth dropped open and she stared at

me. And she said, "Church? Why would I go to church? That's my golf day!" And she was just horrified that I mentioned it.

John (11:56):

How dare you!

Owen (11:57):

Yeah, "How dare you!" But mind you, she was a professing Christian.

John (12:02):

Right.

Owen (12:03):

But she didn't attend anywhere. So the simple *reason* then. Let's get back to *that*. *Why* is all this happening? Why (don't) services today *satisfy* people? Christians and/or Non-Christians? And it's simple. It's because of what researchers call the "structure," or the "format," of today's services is *inappropriate*. That means that no matter how hard pastors, priests, song leaders and choirs work, it won't make their congregations *that much more Spiritual*.

John (12:46):

Wow. And that is such a horrible tragedy, Owen. But since you are one of those researchers you mentioned, why don't you explain to our listeners why the "structure" or "format" of worship services is so important?

Owen (13:06):

Well, okay. Let's wade out into the deep water then, John. Let me start by saying that – some of our listeners may or may not know – that my specialty in school, and my degree, is in the field of Organizational Behavior. "OB" we call it. And one of the disciplines in Organizational Behavior that we've studied long and hard is called *Organizational Structure*. And the point of all of that is that the Organizational Structure that Christians have today ... now let's pause and be sure everybody gets this ... is *not*, repeat not, the Organizational Structure that the Early Christians had. And right there you see there's a mammoth problem. Because I'll go deeper. The Organizational Structure that we see today bears no *resemblance* whatsoever to the Organizational Structure that the Early Christians had.

John (14:14):

Wow!

Owen (14:15):

You know, if people say today, "Well," and I don't like this term because as part of the problem the word "church" is *not* in the Bible, and the Early Christians *didn't* use it. But to communicate, sometimes we have to say it. So, if Christians today say, "Let's go to 'church' tomorrow," what vision do you see in your mind? You see a large brick building with big steps leading up to it. You enter that building in a big lobby. You open some big central doors. You walk down a big central aisle to a platform up front that has chairs, and a pulpit, and other equipment on it. And you sit down in something called a pew. And you watch a performance called a "service." And then you leave and go to lunch somewhere. And you say, "I've been to church." And maybe you have. But you haven't been *to a Spiritual experience*. Now, what's the ... what's the opposite of that in the Early Christianity? It ... John, I wonder how many people know this?

John (15:25):

Yeah.

Owen (15:25):

But it's documented history. It's archeological history. It's museum history. There's all the proof you could want of it. And we've written about that in our books. And we've written about it in the new retreat. But, lest I wander (chuckles) ...

Owen (15:45):

In the First Century, all Christians *met in small groups in private homes*. There were never more than 12 or 15... 18 maybe ... people, men, women and children all together. Usually those groups were formed by a couple of neighbors, a couple of families, who were neighbors – maybe three families who were neighbors – saying, "Well, let's just worship together." And so they formed a group. And they started meeting. And sometimes they rotated homes, so that one family didn't have the burden of everything that went with it. If they were going to have snacks after worship, or something like that, not one family was required to host it. We call it being a "host." And so, I'll say this, John, before I pause.

Owen (16:39):

There are a lot of small groups today. Most Christians have experienced them. Most Christians have seen them *fail*. The small groups that are started today by institutional congregations usually fail within 90 days. And there's a reason they do that. And that's part of the problem. It's because they *structure* them like the *parent* congregation. They structure them with a human leader; a songbook; a musician, *et cetera, et cetera*. And they follow an agenda. And so they fail for the same reason that the big congregations fail. So it's a tremendous, tremendous mess, frankly, John.

John (17:30):

It is. And recently, recently, Owen, I was trying to tell someone about the retreat and the book, *et cetera*. And in that conversation, I said something about the necessity and the value of Spiritual, worshipful, small groups. And the person I was talking to, eyes kind of crossed

(chuckles). and they said to me very sincerely, they said, "Oh, well, now tell me about small groups." And this is what he said, "Who leads it? And what book do you use?"

Owen (18:07):

There you go!

John (18:08):

And so it was just this template of the *institution* of all that we've said now for these 36 previous episodes. And, but because that was all he ever knew. That's all he knows. And so "you don't know what you don't know." And as a result of that ... so I would just like to throw in, Owen, here's something that ... let's think about this.

John (18:36):

We're coming up on July the Fourth, soon. So we've been the freest, most prosperous nation in the history of the world – and the freedom of religion here in the USA. So having said that, then *why* is every measure that you can think of in the *negative* numbers? With the morality the opposite of all that Christianity is, and offers, and brings to the table? If in that context, we have had little or minimal *effect* on a culture, on a society, then it's ... doesn't it seem that perhaps we should look at this and say, "Well, maybe this isn't working." (Chuckles.) I mean the soil for this was there: Freedom, opportunity. And yet, here in the south where we are, there is a "church-building" about every 100 yards. And so, if it was working ... from in this little recording studio that we are in right now, within a five mile radius ...

John (20:04):

... there are, I can't tell you, innumerable "church-buildings." And on any given Sunday morning, you can visit them. And you'll walk in to a 90 percent *empty* space, with maybe 20 people sitting there. So if what we've been doing for all of these many years was working, and having the effect that Jesus intended for it to have, on what Christianity is, what it's about, what it's supposed to produce, *et cetera*, then where is the *evidence* of that? So that's where all of this comes back to the book *Saving Christianity*, the podcast, and now the retreat.

Owen (20:56):

Yep. Yeah. Well, I think what a lot of people don't realize, John, because you know, normally Church History – Christian history – is not taught today in most schools, or even colleges, or (chuckles) maybe not even in some seminaries. But the point is, people don't realize that we've now had 1700 years of what we call "sediment" [*inappropriate habits*] settling over – deeper, and deeper, and deeper, over – how the Early Christians lived. Until now, nobody knows or remembers how they lived or what they did; except what they might glean from reading the New Testament. But to go back and mention some of our earlier podcast episodes, we can remind our folks that the worm turned ... the pivot point ... was the Fourth Century. For the First, Second and Third Centuries of Christians, there was some persecution. We know that some of them were fed to the lions, and so on.

Owen (22:06):

But scholars believe that that was rare. They were not persecuted day and night like they are in movies. Most of them lived very happy, productive, lives for the first eight, nine, or ten generations. And then something really horrible, I guess I could say, happened. And that was when Constantine came to power as the Roman emperor of the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century. And we're not going to repeat all those lessons, because that's in an earlier episode. But anyway, he decided to *institutionalize* Christianity. And he passed 300 new laws during that 25 year period before he died to *change* Christianity from an informal, happy, small group type religion – to a legalistic, formalized, institutional type religion. Why'd he do that? So he could *control* it.

John (23:16):

Control it, yes!

Owen (23:17):

See, institutionalism, bureaucracy, is a system for *control*. To make people *powerless*. And then he (Constantine) died. And one of the emperors following him was named Theodosius. And he drove the final nail in the coffin. Because he actually *outlawed* Christian Small groups in the Roman Empire in the late Fourth Century. And since that time, the institution has grown ...

John (23:50):

Right!

Owen (23:51):

... and fought, and split, and divided, and carried on, for century after century. But today, John, if you take a pad and pencil and make a comparison, your typical "church-building," and your typical "congregation," right this minute while we're sitting at this table, is *fashioned* after, *structured* after, *formatted* after, a Roman courthouse, and the structure that Constantine and Theodosius developed.

John (24:25):

Right. That is (laughs) ... I don't, I don't hardly have words for that.

Owen (24:30):

There *are* no words! (Chuckles.)

John (24:31):

When you, when you think about that, that is actually ... and how we could possibly, when we're talking about Christianity, which at its core is a *supernatural* deal ...

Owen (24:46):

Amen. (Laughs.).

John (24:46):

... with the God of the universe breaking into history, and coming, and living, and dying, and rising. And then saying to his early followers that it is advantageous that I go back to heaven, that I go back to the father. Because I'm fixing to do something *in* you that you've never known or experienced. I'm going to *indwell* you with the Holy Spirit. So how can we take something that is so magnificent? So wonderful? So powerful? So life-changing? And turn it ... and allow it to be turned into ... it's hard to even contemplate that we find ourselves in this place here in the Twenty-First Century.

Owen (25:48):

When people are smart as they are (laughs). We have all the equipment that we have, and social media, Internet, all of these things. And now A.I. [*Artificial Intelligence*] is coming online, and all this weird stuff. And yet we can't see, we can't remember. And I sometimes say that this retreat, our New Deeper Walk Retreat called "**The Experience**," is a *back-to-the-basics* type experience. In other words, what we're trying to do – and we need to tell our listeners, I guess, a little more (chuckles) about how it's structured when we'll get into that.

Owen (26:34):

But, we called it "**The Experience**" because for one brief weekend, we want today's Christians who are seeking deeper growth – who want to grow Spiritually, who want to have more Spiritual experiences – we're giving them a chance to come for one weekend to a small group retreat, and actually *experience* some of what the Early Christians experienced. Then our hope is they will go back to their home, or wherever they came from, and form a small group, and continue *experiencing* that – regardless of what else they do in their career, whatever they're doing, in a secular fashion.

John (27:26):

Yeah. And the thing we did in our pilot group early in 2024, and quite honestly ... while we believe completely in the material, and the book, and the podcast, and everything else ... there was a little uncertainty going into this in how people would respond. And Owen, being a participant of this, and sitting there and listening and watching people's response to it, we at the end of it, we were like, "Okay!" (Chuckles.) This is ...

Owen (28:10):

Bingo! We hit the target!

John (28:11):

Yeah, exactly! Right! This does have *impact* on a person's life.

Owen (28:17):

And you quoted one man, John, that said – I've forgotten his name – but one man said to you, "I've been a professing Christian all of my life. And I never heard any of this! And why *not*?" Isn't that interesting.

John (28:32):

Yeah. It's very interesting.

Owen (28:34):

Well, the "structure" that we're talking about, the "format" that we're talking about in our new retreat is that it's two-and-a-half days. It's Friday, Saturday, and half a day on the Lord's Day. And we meet from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm on Friday. And then the folks are free that evening to go back home, or wherever they want to go, a hotel room, or whatever. Then we meet again from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm on Saturday. And they're free that evening again. And then finally, we meet from 8:30 am to 2:00 pm on the Lord's Day. That's the day that most people call "Sun Day," which was Constantine's term, and I don't like to use it. The Early Christians called that first day of the week "the Lord's Day." So we meet from 8:30 am until 2:00 pm on the Lord's Day. And on that particular day, the third day of the retreat, we actually *do* Worship in the Spirit, and give them the chance to *experience* everything that we've talked about leading up to that.

Owen (29:51):

We have 18 different Live Exercises that they do. Some alone. Some with another person. Some with three people. And some with the entire group. So you can imagine. In fact, at one point we called it (the retreat) a "Boot Camp." A Spiritual boot camp. Because they're thrown in head first, and experience the gamut from the first morning all the way through. And John, the beautiful thing about it is that, you know, we did some *measuring* of their experiences. And we found when the retreat was over, that some of the participants had grown Spiritually 10 percent. Some 15 percent. Some 20 percent. And one person grew 40 percent in that one weekend in Spiritual growth. Now, how many pastors or priests can say that's happening in their congregation, in their institutional structure?

John (31:03):

Yeah, exactly. I think Owen, my wife comes from 35 years in corporate America. So she's been to a fair amount of weekend training sessions and retreats herself. And even though she's somewhat on the inside, and had heard us talking about all of this. She was just blown away by it. She said it was the best ... the way, the flow, the format, that was used. The whole thing was the best that she had ever experienced. And so she was looking at it from, you know, this corporate model. And how it just was ... you know ... kind of kept you on the edge of your seat. And

you weren't looking at your watch, wondering when this was going to be over (laughter), because you knew that God was in this. And that's very, very exciting. And Owen, I just want to reiterate this. As a pastor myself for so many years, it may seem a little ironic that I'm so much a part of this.

John (32:18):

But I came to understand years ago that ignoring the problem and acting like there wasn't one, was just disingenuous. It was just having your head in the sand. And I just said, "Okay, let's just see this for what it is. And let's work towards a *solution* to this." So I think if you are in ... we're not seeking in this podcast, the book, the retreat, to throw anyone under the bus here. We're just trying to say, "Hey, what we've done and been doing now for 1700 years, is obviously not working. And as Dr. Phil says, "How's that working out for you?" And our experience is not too good. And we just want people – particularly in this point in history, with all that's taken place – to experience Walking in the Spirit. Living the Christian Life. And understanding the foundation of all of this. And just being what God purposed this to be, really is the bottom line of that. And then just the difference in our life. God knows that we need it. And the world certainly needs it. And so that's really the premise of where all of this originates and comes from.

Owen (33:56):

That's right, John. And at this point, I think we need to say probably the most important thing that we'll say on this Episode 37. And it's this: What we're talking about ... how should we phrase this? ... is not an *opposition* to, or as an *enemy* to, Institutional Christianity – which as we've said, has been around for 1700 years. Here's the difference. We call our retreat a "para-group." And that word, "para-," which I guess we hear our term "parachute" and other phrases. But it's from a Greek word, *para* [pronounced "puh-RAH"], which means "alongside," or "parallel to." So what we're saying is, some of our people in this wonderful retreat, what we had recently, the first one, are active members of institutions. And that has not changed anything in their life. They're still attending loyally their institution. But – and it's a big but, as the old joke goes – they are also meeting *parallel* or *alongside that* in their small group. And they're sticking firmly to the Early First Century principles that they learned in the retreat. So now they've got both. They still have their social connection with their institution and they go to its programs. But then on the side, they're meeting in homes, which they're rotating. They're meeting in homes, and *experiencing* First Century worship on top of it. So the two can operate together. And we have explanations and descriptions of how to *do* that actually present in the retreat.

John (36:08):

Yes. It's something, Owen, it's just one of those things that honestly, you want anyone and everyone to have the *experience*. And we invite you to look more into that. Owen, I think we're kind of coming to a close here with our podcast 37. I'm glad we're back at it though.

Owen (36:38):

Yeah, and let's just mention then to our listeners, John, that right now the retreat is being presented on the campus of Elon University, in Elon, North Carolina – one of the top-rated universities in America. We simply ask a simple tax-deductible donation of \$339.00 dollars for the

whole weekend retreat. And our next one, by the way, is in October. So there's plenty of time to get ready for that. It'll be on October 4th, 5th, and 6th this year, 2024. And they can contact us in one of two ways, or both: They can go on the Internet to: www.ChristianFamilyOnline.org/experience. Or they can just email me direct at: Owen@ChristianFamilyOnline.org.

John (37:45):

Right!

Owen (37:45):

And so, John, as you say, in wrapping up: I think that the point of this Episode 37 is to tell our friends that there's *hope*.

John (37:57):

Yes.

Owen (37:58):

Christianity is just as powerful, and effective, and wonderful, and exciting, as it was in the First Century. But – *only* if we live it correctly, in the correct structure, in the correct format.

John (38:16):

Absolutely. And in closing, Owen, let's make one final point. The Early Christians taught that there is ... or that there *can* be ... a Kingdom of God on earth, just as there is in heaven. But many Christians don't see much of it. (Chuckles.) And we think that Christians *can*, and *should*, see more of it. And that our New Deeper Walk Retreat, "**The Experience**," can help bring that about. So we hope that many of our listeners will inquire and enroll in our October retreat. It'll be a beautiful time there in the fall, on the Elon University campus.

Owen (38:59):

That's absolutely true, John. And I pray that this episode has opened many people's eyes. And has answered many nagging questions that our friends worldwide may have about the struggles in today's Christianity. Because it doesn't have to be. There is *hope*. There is an *answer*. But John, I can see on the big clock on the wall, that our time is up.

John (39:28):

Yes, Owen, I see that too. So friends, this is Episode 37, just to remind you. There is a *re-cording* and a verbatim *transcript* of this episode on our website at www.goSCpod.com. That stands for "go to the Saving Christianity podcast.com," our website. www.goSCpod.com. Go there and look at everything that's there. And probably some of your questions can be answered by just visiting the site.

Owen (40:05):

Yes, yes. This is ... well, I think, John, this has been an amazing show. I know we're both praying that the information we've shared will inspire, encourage, and uplift many of our friends worldwide. Many of them will hopefully enroll in "**The Experience**," our New Deeper Walk Retreat.

Owen (40:27):

But, John, in the meantime: This is Owen Allen ...

John (40:31):

... and this is John Shields, along with Shannon Wolfe, our producer ...

Owen (40:35):

... and we're all praying together: May the God of our fathers bless you, and keep you, and guide you, and protect you, until we meet again.