
BIBLICAL ECCLESIA

IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM



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THIS ESSAY EXAMINES THE FIRST CENTURY prototype used in establishing local churches in the Roman Empire and how it compares to the models used today. Special attention has been given to the cultural forces acting upon the contemporary church as it exists today.

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I. THE JEWS OF THE DIASPORA AND THE ECCLESIA OF JESUS

The term *Ecclesia* is a Greek word that began being used in the Greek world sometime in the Seventh Century BC. It describes a gathering of citizens in Greek city-states who were responsible to legislate policies and laws for the city.

This is the term Luke used to describe a crowd of people in **Acts 19** who were frustrated with the negative economic impact of so many of their citizens turning to Christianity in Ephesus.

V-32: *Some therefore cried one thing and some another, for the **assembly** (ecclesia) was confused, and most of them did not know why they had come together.*

V-39: *But if you have any other inquiry to make, it shall be determined in the lawful **assembly** (ecclesia).*

V-41: *And when he had said these things, he dismissed the **assembly** (ecclesia).*

The Kingdom of God and the New Ecclesia of Jesus

Matthew's gospel is largely concerned with the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God describes *the rule of God through His subjects*. Matthew's focus is to explain how the rule of God shifted from being executed through National Israel to being carried out through the church.

In **Matthew 13**, after the Jewish rejection of Jesus was wholly demonstrated in the previous chapter, Matthew records a series of parables given by Jesus to explain the new form of the Kingdom of God He was establishing.

- The Parable of the Sower and the Seed
- The Parable of Wheat and Tares
- The Parable of the Mustard Seed
- The Parable of Leaven
- The Parable of Hidden Treasure
- The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price
- The Parable of the Dragnet

Using these parables, Jesus explained how the Kingdom of God would start small in the hearts of individuals and expand into a worldwide movement. But what kind of people would God use to expand His Kingdom on earth if National Israel had rejected their Messiah?

Three chapters later, Jesus reveals the kind of people who will be responsible for extending the Kingdom of God in the nations. He used a familiar term to His listeners – *ecclesia*. In **Matthew 16:18-19** Jesus described a group of people bound together by a common confession of His Lordship, who would be given legislative authority to align heaven and earth. He said it like this,

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church (ecclesia), and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Finding the Prototype for the Ecclesia of Jesus



The Jews of the Diaspora hold the key for understanding the First Century Ecclesia of Jesus. When the Jews were carted off to Babylon, they took **Jeremiah 29:5-7** seriously.

“Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city where I

have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace.”

Indeed, many Jews built houses, planted gardens, raised families, and prospered in Babylon. When Nehemiah led a group of them back to Israel to rebuild their nation, many

Jews chose to stay behind in Babylon. They were thriving as a religious community among a foreign people.

This started a five-century migration that saw the Jewish people spread across the breadth of Western Europe, first among Greeks and then later amid the Romans. These two empires created environments of tolerance and freedom where the Jewish people could thrive.

The Jews of the Diaspora created enclaves in city-states where Jewish customs and culture were practiced. By the time Paul visited these cities five centuries later, he was able to find Jewish people practicing their traditions and worshipping in synagogues in all of them.

The Jews of the Diaspora were successful in creating mechanisms by which their culture was preserved in an ocean of paganism and polytheism. This was largely achieved by these four strategic social mechanisms:

“With no physical temple to visit or animal sacrifices to offer, Jews instead gathered in synagogues weekly and studied the torah excessively as an offering to God.”

Synagogues were cultural centers of worship and education.

Torah was the central legal document responsible for theology, doctrine, and lifestyle.

Rabbis were respected leaders, given authority to teach and legislate Torah.

Sabbath helped structure their society by configuring weekly activities around a singular set of values.

With no physical temple to visit or animal sacrifices to offer, Jews instead gathered in synagogues weekly and studied the torah excessively as an offering to God. Rabbis were experts in the law and governed the people by the Torah. Serving as local and international judiciaries, rabbis connected Jewish communities around the world that traded with one another, practically creating the Merchant Class in Medieval Europe.

Paul established churches in his day by visiting local synagogues and inviting those who believed in Jesus to join him in establishing a local ecclesia. The people who had

already lived under the influence of Diasporic philosophies were perfect examples for the new Gentile believers to follow. Paul used the same time-tested Jewish model when he (1) hosted gatherings, (2) appointed elders, and (3) established Christian doctrine, reinforced by his writings. These three elements were perfect for establishing an alternate culture in a foreign world.

Evidence of Paul's use of the Jewish pattern is found in places like **I Corinthians 6:1-11** where he encourages the church to settle their disputes within the ecclesia instead of civil courts. In **Acts 14:21-23**, Paul appointed elders in every church and reinforced proper doctrine before leaving Galatia. Soon, he wrote the letter to the **Galatians** and other churches to give them authoritative documents comparable to the Torah. This was the pattern given to him by the Jews of the Diaspora which he passed on to **Timothy** and **Titus** for all the churches under their care.

The Alternative Culture of the New Ecclesia

Once established, the alternative culture created by the Ecclesia of Jesus became attractive to people in the Greco-Roman World. Slaves and Freedmen alike were drawn to a society that offered personal spiritual experiences and provided meaning and purpose for life. Roman elites sat beside their plebian brothers and sisters, sharing communion with Christ and each other.

The early church was a community within a community, a people within a people, a nation within a nation, and a Kingdom within a kingdom.

This new community of faith, modeled after the pattern of the Jews of the Diaspora, created a movement strong enough to fulfill the prophecies of Jesus about the Kingdom of God growing across the nations of the earth. Over the centuries, the Kingdom rule of God, working through the church, became the single-most powerful influence in human history.

What have we done with that prototype?

II. THREE POWERFUL FORCES ON THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

(1) Mass Media

Nothing was more impactful than the rise of mass media in the Twentieth Century. Its ability to capture people's imagination, manipulate public opinion, change national perspectives, and realign cultural values in such a short time by such a small group of people was previously unimaginable.



In the decades preceding the Twentieth Century, people admired great generals, industrialists, explorers, politicians, educators, and clergy. These heroes reflected a value system that included virtues like courage, duty, honor, nobility, valor, and loyalty. These were the values that united a diverse population and gave them the fortitude to build a new nation that eventually found its place alongside existing global powers.

In those days, performers and entertainers were thought to be frivolous and unnecessary. Relegated to side shows and carnival acts, showmen were considered inconsequential by those moving into an uncertain frontier, where simply surviving was first and foremost on their minds. There was little time and money for trivial things like carnivals and theater productions.

As the Twentieth Century dawned on the world, the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. It not only manufactured railroads, textiles, automobiles, and structural steel, it also mass-produced wealth that was feeding a growing middle class. This eventually became the dominant demographic in Western Society. For the first time in history, people could work acceptable hours to provide for their families and have spare time and money for such things as vacations and entertainment.

Coinciding with this era of disposable time and money, advancements in communication technologies like radio and motion pictures gave the public a new distraction. People became enamored with celebrity performers on radio and the silver screen. Over time, attitudes towards performers changed. Those who previously looked down on entertainers as little more dancing bears and court jesters, grew to admire them. People looked up to these personalities and made them some of the wealthiest and most influential people in the world.

The Power of the Masses in the Hands of a Few

“More and more Americans were being influenced by people across a broad social and moral landscape.”

No longer were people exclusively influenced by their neighbors, relatives, friends, educators, politicians, and preachers on a local level. More and more Americans were being influenced by people across a broad social and moral landscape. As networks of radio stations and movie theaters began dotting the landscape of America, whole populations could be influenced overnight by a small number of people - just like Orson Wells demonstrated in his 1938 broadcast of “War of the Worlds.” It also didn’t take long for political leaders to capitalize on these new technologies as unscrupulous men like Adolf Hitler used mass media to mold the attitudes of entire nations, sweeping them up in their ideological dogmas.

When televisions became readily available in the mid-Twentieth Century, it created a whole new category of celebrity. Entire families not only heard their favorite celebrities every night on radio, but they also saw them on TV. This put an even greater emphasis on external beauty, glamour, and fashion in the culture - just as the 1960 Presidential debate between Kennedy and Nixon affirmed. This became a watershed moment demonstrating that physical features trumped intellectual content in the new world of television. People who listened to the debate on radio thought Nixon won while those that saw it on television, influenced by the good looks of the young Kennedy, believed the opposite.

This had a profound impact on the values of Americans. Gone were the days when generals, industrialists, explorers, politicians, educators, and clergy were the most admired people in the culture. Movie stars, television actors, athletes, and musical performers took their place. This represented a change in values that shifted from things like courage, duty, honor, nobility, courage, and loyalty to a celebrity culture that valued things like talent, physical appearance, personal charisma, high fashion, and the ability to move people emotionally.

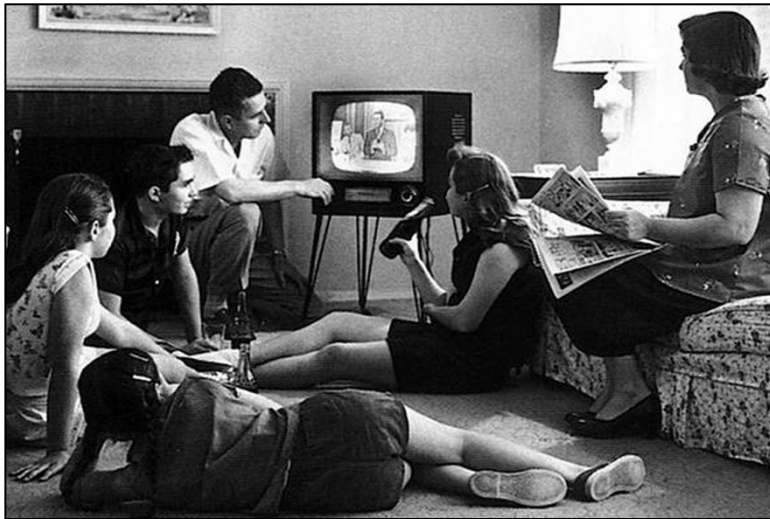
The Church Follows Suit

Swept up in the Twentieth Century entertainment and showmanship, Christians developed an appetite for performance. Opportunistic leaders created parallel Christian industries that tracked alongside the entertainment industry like this...

- When theaters and auditoriums were built to host the great orators of the day, eloquent preachers followed suit.
 - When those same venues showcased the latest in vaudeville acts and jazz music, faith healers and gospel singers brought their own extravaganzas to town.
 - When circuses began traversing America on the newly built railroads, pitching tents that attracted thousands, traveling evangelists pitched gospel tents with matching exhibitions and fanfare.
 - When radio celebrities broadcasted from coast to coast, preachers were soon heard on those very same airways with similar results. Not only were celebrity preachers born, but a gospel music industry developed alongside the country-n-western music creating a whole new genre of Christian entertainment.
 - When television brought the world into people's living room, preachers with a flair for the extravagant joined in. Pentecostal and Charismatic preachers were especially successful with this new media since their modes of worship and preaching styles were far more demonstrative and entertaining than most traditional preachers and teachers in mainline denominations.
 - As the internet became a millennial sensation and overnight social media fame became accessible to anyone with a smartphone, ministers started evaluating themselves by the number views they garnered, *likes* they received, posts that were shared, and followers they attracted.
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Christians in America slowly began adopting a value system that prioritized entertainment over integrity, performance over piety and glamour over Godliness. Biblical virtues like humility, faithfulness and holiness couldn't contend with the excitement of Christian extravaganzas held in auditoriums, circus tents, theaters, and the growing number of church buildings large enough to seat thousands. Christian leaders became celebrities as showmanship, production, and performances became a priority.

By the 1970's, families could be serenaded in their homes by professional quartets and energized by flamboyant preachers whose talent and charisma rivaled



anything that Hollywood could offer. This made what most Christians experienced in the local church seem drab and boring.

This had an acute impact on the way that American pastors started leading churches in the last half of the Twentieth Century. The public demand for talent and showmanship forced them into a place of compromise. Church leaders felt pressured to recreate on their platforms what their congregants were seeing at

concerts, crusades and on television. This meant that leadership qualities like those describes in **Titus 1:5-9**, **I Timothy 3:1-7** and **I Peter 5:1-4** took a backseat to more important qualities like talent, personality, and charisma.

(2) Big Corporations

Mass media was not the only force reshaping America at the time. Big business and giant corporations also had a powerful influence. In a sentence, *bigger became better!*

As corporate giants and retail chains began dominating the economic landscape of the United States, the church again followed suit. In 1970, there were only about 20 churches in the United States that averaged over 2,000 people in weekly attendance (John Vaughn, Church Growth Today). By year 2,000 that number had ballooned to over 1300 (Hartford Institute).

What people witnessed from the TV shows these giant churches produced became the standard of evaluating every local church and pastor. The new science of *Church Growth* took shape during this time to explain the phenomenon of so-called *Mega-churches*.

Studying their techniques and discovering their secrets became an obsession. These findings were published for the benefit of pastors and local churches still struggling with less than 100 people. “If you would just duplicate the formulas and models provided by big churches,” we were told, “your church could grow, too!”

Mega-churches became the example for everyone to follow. In their wake, a single criterion for success was born - *getting people in the building*. Attendance was king. Bigger was better. Filling seats by whatever means possible was evidence you were doing something right and that became the primary indicator of fulfilling the Great Commission.

This created a new set of demands on pastors. Along with the pressure of being evaluated qualitatively on their preaching performances and music production, pastors were now being judged quantitatively by the number of people they were able to attract. This created a whole new model of doing church in America - one that was unashamedly called the *Attractional Model*.

This took the game to a whole new level. Social scientists and marketing geniuses created a model for church planting that by one leader’s assessment, “didn’t even need God to work.” Providing Americans with a soft landing in church where hard truths were avoided, controversial issues were skirted, and doctrinal orthodoxy was locked in the back room somewhere with the Holy Spirit, became popular. Singers and speakers performed on world-class stages for the delight of eager fans anxious to experience consumer church.

(3) The Charismatic Renewal

The Charismatic Renewal was largely the result of two converging movements - Pentecostalism expressed in traditional denominations and the Jesus People Movement.

For the first half of the Twentieth Century, Pentecostal churches were not embraced by mainstream evangelicalism. However, in the 1960's, Pentecostalism found an unlikely ally in traditional mainline denominations. Through the next decade, a whole new brand of Pentecostal Christianity was practiced within the fellowship of Anglicans, Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians. These groups were liberal enough to be open to many experiences, including those considered heretical by most conservative evangelical denominations.

Meanwhile, a second group of people began experiencing similar manifestations of the Holy Spirit. They were called the *Jesus People*. Fresh from the Summer of Love in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, these young people were open to getting high on Jesus alongside any number of drugs with which they might be experimenting.

As detailed in his book, *God's Forever Family*, author Larry Eskridge recounts how these young people brought their music to church with them. While creating youth culture in church for the very first time, the Jesus People were responsible for creating a whole new genre of music called, *Praise and Worship*.

The unlikely convergence of these two movements was profound. The traditionalists and the hippies shared an affinity for highly sensational experiences as they both

sought to escape religious constraints. Old authority structures and orthodox beliefs were abandoned as both groups enjoyed new and exciting manifestations of the Holy Spirit.

“What followed was a practice of demonstrative Christianity without much accompanying doctrinal revelation.”

What followed was a practice of demonstrative Christianity without much accompanying doctrinal concerns. The mainliners transcended their doctrinal

structures to embrace new spiritual expressions while the hippies didn't even know they needed them. Both groups defined themselves and their movements primarily by personal experiences reflected in a new type of contemporary worship. For the first time in history, a revival movement had no defining theology.

Churches Today

Churches that were either planted or reinvented after 1970 were significantly shaped by these cultural and spiritual forces. Mass media made personality and performance a necessity. Big business and giant retail chains convinced us that bigger is better. Anti-establishment bias nested in contemporary culture reinvented the church with no traditional encumbrances.

What we did not know is how dangerous it is to build a structure without the doctrinal foundations we considered dead, irrelevant, and passe'. We didn't understand the importance of tradition, theology, doctrine, and orthodoxy. So, we abandoned them. We took them for granted and didn't even know it...

...until they started disappearing beneath us...

...until the world began to fall apart...

...until we saw the church adrift in an ocean of relativism just like society...

...and then the words of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* became clear, "*Some things that should not have been forgotten were lost.*"

III. THE RESULTS

(1) Less People Attend Church

While more and more churches were growing into megachurches, built largely on celebrity pastors and musical talent, the number of people attending church simultaneously dropped. Within a decade of the first Christian television networks, church attendance began to fall. And the trend is accelerating according to Gallop. For the first time in the 80-year history of keeping such records, over half of the population of America say they do not belong to any church. This is a 70% increase since 1999.

Based on this data, it seems that people in a community might have been better off being served by 20 churches of 100 than one church of 2,000. More people attended church in America before the mega-church era than after. It

seems the culture was more greatly influenced by Christianity when attendance numbers were not the final evaluation of a successful ministry. This seems to be reinforced by church architecture of the time. Before 1970 nearly all church sanctuaries were built for congregations of 200 people or less. *Bigger is Better* didn't seem to be their rule.

In his 1996 groundbreaking book, *Natural Church Development*, Author Christian Schwarz used extensive data worldwide to demonstrate that the healthiest churches for families to attend throughout the world is between 100-150 people. According to Schwarz, these churches are large enough to accommodate the needs of the family while small enough for personal interaction, something he believes is necessary for true Christian discipleship.

Sociologists have long identified that homogenous groups max out at about 75 people. This means that most individuals will have no more than about 75 friends at any given time in their lives. This seems to be the best number for social interaction. Interestingly, most tribal villages

“In those days,” he said,
“we would grow churches
to about 150-200 people
and then hive off and
plant another church.”

growing beyond about 75 people will hive off and create another village. It's also interesting that Jesus sent out 70 disciples in **Luke 10**, apparently from a second tier of people with whom He had some acquaintance.

My father, who began pastoring in the 1940's and was a District Superintendent before his 30th birthday, told me that they

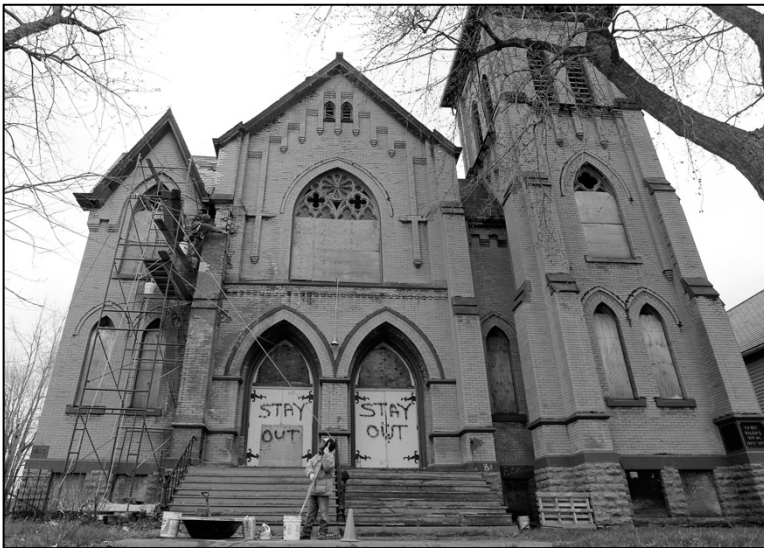
intentionally tried to keep churches around the 100 to 150 people back in the day. “In those days,” he said, “we would grow churches to about 200 people and then hive off and plant another church. We never let them grow above 200. We did this time and time again.”

Intuitively, they understood the organizational infrastructure of a church above 200 people must change. Both physical and human resources are focused on working *on* the ministry instead of working *in* the ministry. Senior Pastors must transition from shepherd to manager. Making budgets would take more time than making disciples.

Congregants would become a number more than an individual. This was an exchange my father and his colleagues were not willing to make.

(2) Churches are Closing

More churches are closing today than are opening in America, according to Lifeway Research. This study found that 4,500 churches closed in 2019 while only 3,000 new congregations were planted. This continues a decades-long trend that is expected to accelerate in a post-pandemic world. The Center for Analytics puts the current church



closures rate even higher at 7,700 a year – a whopping 150 closures a week! This is a trend they expect to double or even triple in the next 10 years.

While the reasons for churches closing are complex, and many of these studies are taking data exclusively from traditional denominations without considering the simultaneous rise in unaffiliated churches during the same time span, most people would affirm from anecdotal evidence that

churches are disappearing. Those unable to reach the triple digit mark in attendance conclude they are failing and not worthy of staying open. When negative attitudes towards one's own church reaches a critical level, self-fulfilling prophecies make it easier to quit rather than continuing to work in such a negative environment. Much like mom-and-pop stores falling prey to corporate giants like Walmart and Costco, one must wonder if the public is truly being served in such an environment.

A person who owns a local insurance agency, bakery or diner can serve his/her customers for 40 years in the same location and retire feeling successful in business and meaningful in the community. For a pastor to do the same and feel good about himself/herself, is unlikely. After 40 years in the same location without ever having built a bigger sanctuary to accommodate growth, they would likely feel like an utter and complete failure. Which leader to...

(3) Pastors are Quitting

About 1,700 pastors a month leave the ministry prior to retirement according to Lifeway Research. A recent 2022 Barna survey found a staggering 38% of pastors indicate they have considered quitting ministry within the past year, up a full 9 points since they first asked the question in 2021. Younger pastors are especially prone to discouragement as 46% of them under the age of 45 are presently considering leaving ministry. Barna also found that 2 out of 3 pastors consider themselves spiritually, mentally, and emotionally inadequate to continue leading a church.

It has been known for a long time that about two-thirds of pastors will not retire as ministers. What other industry do you know of that loses two thirds of its leaders before they retire? Hardly any other career path has this kind of attrition. The demand to perform like celebrities, keep the energy level high, and maintain the appearance of numeric growth has reached a breaking point in many leaders' lives.

This has led to another severe problem in the church...

(4) Moral Failure is Common

The Christian celebrity culture in America is mimicking the tragic lives and moral failures of our favorite Hollywood icons. The same problems that plague celebrities from the entertainment industry have now come home to roost inside the church. Nested deep within the Trojan Horse of the entertaining spirit are the seeds of immorality.

Worship leaders that were hailed as anointed cherubs are now deconstructing their faith. Celebrity pastors continue to fall with such rapidity that it has become old news. Maybe it's the pressure to perform. Maybe it's the self-imposed burden of maintaining high energy and excitement. Maybe it's the letdown after the show. Maybe it's a lack of true accountability. Maybe it's living in a world of make-believe. Maybe it's all the above. Regardless, church leaders are increasingly living secret lives in personal sin where they find a counterfeit comfort at the expense of their own souls.

Which brings us to the fifth result...

(5) The Church is No Different than the World

The Christian love affair with the world has made the American church a cultural chameleon. The same attitudes, perspectives, conclusions, and problems that plague society are also found in equal proportion in the church. We have largely traded our Biblical worldview for cultural relevance. If the subject is too hard, we avoid it. If the truth too tough, we water it down. If the criticism is too intense, we hide from it. If the standard is too high, we make excuses for lowering it. We are inviting the lost onto a sinking ship that is flailing in the same moral quagmire of immorality in which the world is descending.

Picking a church today is no different than picking a movie to watch. One form of entertainment is as good as the other, I suppose. People take their kid's sports team more

“People take their kid's sports team more seriously than they do the church.”

seriously than they do the church. Having a gym membership requires more dedication and commitment than church membership. When getting people in the building is tantamount with fulfilling the Great

Commission, when entertainment is the core attraction, when standards become practically nonexistent, the exclusivity of the Bride of Christ melts into the fabric of the common culture. In this environment, being a member of the Body of Christ has little significance to people who come only when it's convenient and leave whenever a better show comes to town.

Following Christ necessitates carrying a cross (**Luke 9:23**). Being a member of a church should be the most serious commitment a person can make outside of marriage and family. The best influence that the church can have on society is to remain unapologetically Biblical and hold a moral standard so high that only those who are fully surrendered to Christ and walk in the Spirit can achieve it. Pastors and church leaders should not apologize for raising the bar and acting like it's an honor to be a part of the Body of Christ.

Because it is!

IV. TRENDS MOVING FORWARD

Here are some trends that seem likely to materialize over the next decade.

(1) The Church Will Become More Local

If retail trends mean anything, get ready for boutique churches. In many small towns and quaint neighborhoods across the U.S., boutique hotels and retail stores are gaining traction. While exact numbers are hard to come by, many experts estimate the number of boutique stores to be anywhere between 100,000 to 200,000, creating a 25-billion-dollar industry that is growing at nearly 10% a year.

Exchanging the cookie cutter experience at giant corporate retailers, people are opting for a smaller, more customized experience. According to Ashley Anderson who wrote an article for *Forbes* magazine, some of the reasons why people shop small is because (1) they enjoy the unique experience, (2) they receive personal attention, and (3) they discover a tribe of customers with whom they can connect.

Isn't this exactly that what church should be?

Instead of impersonating celebrity pastors and simulating megachurches, healthy local churches should provide a human connection built around more traditional Christian values like prayer, fellowship, family, accountability, and discipleship. By necessity, many of these churches will be smaller but very healthy. They will meet in various locations that will include rented spaces, older church buildings and homes. Their focus will be almost entirely on making disciples, building strong families, and raising up leaders for the church and the workplace. This will once again empower smaller churches to thrive in their communities.

Increasingly, people will desire to restrict the bandwidth of voices vying for their attention. The more personal and down-to-earth a church becomes, the more attractive they will be for a population starving for truth. People will progressively want to hear time-tested wisdom from familiar and trusted voices. This is exactly what local churches and pastors can provide.

(2) The Church will Focus More on Biblical Doctrine

Biblical doctrine has largely fallen out of favor in the pop-church era. Instead, people have been spoon fed hyped-up motivational messages full of cute stories, jokes and shallow antidotes that glaze the surface and skirt tough issues. The doctrinal underpinnings that supported the church and



Western Civilization for centuries has been almost completely ignored. The structural components of Western Christianity have fallen prey to the need to keep people amused with shiny new objects.

As a result, much of Western society is floating on a sea of moral relativism. Those time-tested foundations that provided identity and direction have been replaced with a nebulous array of personal opinions and feelings.

The idea of moral absolutes is now considered phobic, backward, close-minded, bigoted, ignorant, and even dangerous. What else would we expect from a society in which the guardians of Biblical morality have been more concerned with being culturally relevant than biblically accurate for over half a century?

The prevailing wisdom in the church has accepted the notion that people's attention spans are getting shorter, thanks mostly to television where the action is interrupted about every 15-20 minutes for a commercial. In the 1980's when I was in college, professors instructed us to keep sermons at about 20 minutes and include as many visual aids and physical illustrations as possible. We assumed that Americans were dumb and getting dumber. So, we dumbed down the gospel to accommodate them.

Then, something happened. The Google generation came of age. My children grew up devouring what seems like a wealth of worthless information. I noticed as young adults they were better informed and thought more deeply on subjects than I did when I was their age. They seemed attracted to ancient ideas and deep conversations about a

variety of topics. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis became popular, thanks to movie producers who sensed a growing hunger in the population for ancient truths applied in a contemporary setting.

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Then, podcasts and streaming services became popular. It seems people love being engaged in long form storytelling where complex plots and multilayered characters play out in winding storylines that take 32 episodes to unpack. Binge-watching became a thing! People are now devouring interviews that commonly last for two hours uninterrupted by commercials. They listen to intellectuals like Sam Harris, Jordan Peterson, Steven Pinker, Dinesh D'Souza, Dennis Prager, and Ben Shapiro debate and lecture for hours on philosophy, religion, sociology, and psychology. Theologians like John Piper and N. T. Wright

are becoming the preferred teachers of many young people who are searching for something deeper and more meaningful than the entertainment they've been spoon-fed at church for most of their lives.

Rediscovering the ancient writings of the church fathers will be an unlikely source of inspiration for many believers moving forward. Great thinkers like Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas will provide insight into the world today. Just as the writings of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien have inspired a new generation of people, the writing of Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, Jonathan Edwards, Karl Barth, Soren Kierkegaard, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer will also offer timeless insights for people searching for truth today. Pastors should not be afraid of going deeper!

(3) The Church Will Place a Higher Value on Teachers and Elders

As strange as it may seem, the instability and insanity of the world will help the church in these times. The church was birthed in such an environment. The Roman Empire was in moral decay resulting in political, social, economic, and racial instability. The old stoic values of wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation were disappearing. They were replaced with the same moral breakdown we see in the Western world today. What attracted people to the church of the First Century were the moral and social structures they found. These constructs provided some semblance of order and predictability in a volatile world.

Pastors who teach from the Bible, helping people create a moral and theological framework for their lives, will be extremely attractive moving forward. So will the elders of the church who oversee it. Many governing structures that were formerly thought of as oppressive and unnecessary coming out of the 1960's will be a surprising means of attraction for many. Mature spiritual leadership will bring encouragement and reassurance to people disillusioned by the church in recent decades.

Deep Biblical teaching and solid governance will be a surprising source of attraction and comfort in the future. People who come to Christ in the next decade will do so largely because the world is offering them nothing but confusion and anarchy. It will be the stability and truthfulness of the church that will appeal to them.

(4) Many Pastors will be Bi-vocational

Being raised in a parsonage in the 1960's and 70's and coming into ministry in the early 1980's gave me a good perspective on *full-time ministry*. I quickly noticed a trend in casual conversation among ministers when they talked about ministry. Those who were in *full-time ministry* were the elites and those in *part-time ministry* or *bi-vocational ministry* were commoners. It was like separating the varsity players from the JV team. I heard pastors proudly using the prefix *full-time* whenever they talked about how many years they had worked in ministry. It was an obvious status symbol.

This always bothered me, especially when my father told me that he and other pastors back in the 1940's and 50's had career paths outside church. Pastoring was not their only

income. They didn't depend solely on the church to feed their families. My dad, for instance, was a contractor, worked in the Carpenter's Union, owned a dump truck, raised cattle, and even drove a school bus for a while. I guess that's why our family didn't struggle financially like so many other pastor's families. Many leaders exchanged lucrative careers, taking severe pay cuts, just to be on the varsity team and tell people they are now *full-time*. Many of these ministers soured their families on church altogether and wound up with little or no retirement income at the end of their lives.

In the days to come, many pastors will follow the steps of Paul in the marketplace and make tents while leading churches. Their status as *full-time*, along with the size of their churches, will mean less to them than having influence in the community where they pastor. This will happen as the definition of success shifts from being the size of a congregation to making disciples and creating influence in the community.

Which naturally brings us to the next trend...

(5) Making Disciples will be the Main Objective

Success can no longer be defined solely by attendance numbers. Making disciples must be our objective. Leaders must develop the ability to establish deep, long-lasting relationships with people who can duplicate such relationships in the lives of others. Empowering spiritual moms and dads will be necessary to create the kind of family environment where genuine spiritual growth can happen. Disciples cannot be manufactured. Creating a culture where authentic personal connection can thrive must be an intentional act. The good news is that the core values of the New Testament provide everything to make this happen.

(6) Success will be Defined by the Condition of the Community

In his book, "*Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*," author Tom Holland suggests that one of the things that made Christianity so appealing to the Roman World was their compassionate treatment of the sick and

poor. While wealthy citizens and city officials often fled metropolitan areas during plagues, Christians stayed behind to care for the sick. They also made it a point to gather the unwanted infants left to die on the streets of Roman cities. This led to the establishment of the first hospitals and orphanages in the world.

Christianity also introduced the concept of the intrinsic value of the individual. Western Civilization was built on this uniquely Christian ethic. In one exchange, Holland records a conversation where a particular bishop is imploring a city official to help the poor. The official replies, “*We do help the poor. We enslave them!*” This single statement exposed the profound difference between the moral framework of Roman culture regarding the poor versus the Christian view of the same.



Churches are embassies of Kingdom culture, tasked with bringing society into alignment with the priorities and values

expressed in the Bible. Therefore, the best definition of success we can use for evaluating the effectiveness of local church is *the condition of our community*. How can a church claim success by counting attendees if the community around them is deteriorating and falling apart? In days to come, a great number of pastors and congregations will be more attuned to making the world a better place than making their own place better.

(7) The Church will Be a True Alternative Culture

It didn't take long for the newly empowering church in the Book of Acts to coalesce around one another and create a community. It may have been Luke's intention to draw Theophilus' attention to this fact. In both chapters where the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the Jerusalem church, Luke writes two conclusions that practically mirror each other.

In Acts 2:42-45 he said,

42 And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, 45 and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

Then again, in **Acts 4:32-35** he writes,

32 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. 33 And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. 34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.

What Luke describes in both places in the wake of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the creation of a new kind of community. A person might even conclude that the very reason for Holy Spirit's outpouring is to empower individuals to create such communities.

Everywhere Paul went in the Roman Empire, he planted churches. He made sure they were rooted in solid doctrine and overseen by mature elders. These churches were more than places where people got saved and were encouraged.

They were a culture within a culture. They were a city within a city. They were a nation within a nation. They were a people within a people.

There is no better example of this reality than the exchange between Paul and a slave owner, Philemon. In this short letter, Paul explains how Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus, had come to him in Rome. During their interaction, Paul suggests that he return to Philemon. Paul sends him back with a letter of explanation. This letter is the book of Philemon.

Many people focus on the fact that Paul sent a runaway slave back to his owner as proof that Paul and the early church were either supportive or ambivalent towards the

institution of slavery. Nothing could be further from the truth! Upon closer examination, one can see the emerging Christian culture formulating in this letter. Yes, Paul believes the best thing to do in this situation was to send Onesimus back. However, he instructs Philemon to view Onesimus no longer as slave. Instead, Paul refers to him as “*my son*” in **V-10** and tells Philemon to receive him back as a “*beloved brother*” in **V-16**.

The point is this: The early church changed the culture of the Roman world by establishing an alternative culture, one where social status was redefined, economic divides were demolished, and living by a moral code was expected. It was a culture modelled after the Jewish Diaspora where synagogues were central, rabbis were respected and torah was followed. They truly practiced being *in* the world but not *of* the world.

Before we can change the cultures of the world, we must first establish a true Kingdom Culture within each local church that is so attractive that people who truly desire light will want to escape darkness and be a part it (**John 3:19-21**). This culture needs to be an alternative to the corrupt and decaying cultures of the world. This represents a shift from the contemporary model of church, where getting people to attend church services is replaced by a Biblical model of creating a unique and redeemed people who live by the ancient codes of the Bible.

Many people in Western societies will increasingly be attracted to those forgotten pathways and ancient foundations upon which Christian civilizations were built.

And therein lies the seeds of the next great awakening.

THE END