

LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

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IS TODAY'S CHURCH REPLACING CHRIST?

The "church" in Scripture is a translation of the Greek word *ekklesia* and is defined in *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* as "an assembly, any gathering or throng assembled by chance or tumultuously (Acts 19:32, 41); In the Christian sense, an assembly of Christians gathered for worship." The church, then, is not a place where people assemble, it is in fact, the assembly of people gathered together. Individually they are called the people of "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14,22). The attitude today is if we get them in church we will get them in Christ, in Scripture if they got them in Christ they got them in Church. However, being in church today does not mean they will ever be in Christ. Many churches today, in the words of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, are "amusing goats" instead of "feeding sheep." That is, they are providing amusement for those who do not relish the gospel. Providing amusement is in direct antagonism to the teaching and life of Christ and his apostles. Is the church today "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13, 14)? Or is it just the place where we have our membership and attend on Sunday morning? To ascertain the spiritual status of a person today, they are asked, "of which church are you a member? Or "do you attend church?" This is quite the opposite of the question "Did you receive the holy spirit when you believed?" that Paul asked the Ephesian disciples in Acts 19:2. James D.G. Dunn in *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* makes the following comment on this passage: "That which was ascertainable was their possession of the spirit; that was the primary factor from which their relation to Christ would be deduced. Their Christian status was recognizable from the fact that Christ's agent was evident in their life." This is not to say we can use the same criteria when determining if one is a Christian, but it does say just being a church member does not reflect our relation to Christ. A person can join the church, be a faithful church member, and never have a real relationship with Christ. This is the danger the modern church growth movement and church plant emphasis in stressing church attendance and membership to the neglect of genuine repentance and conversion. Whether we admit it or not, the call to get the unbeliever to attend our worship services, and sometimes to join our church, is contrary to Scriptural teaching and example.

In the majority of churches today, from the traditional, the contemporary and the mega-church to the "fundamentalist Bible believing" variety, the Sunday morning "worship service" has been turned into an evangelistic service. However, in today's churches the "evangelism" is not structured toward an effort to bring sinners to repentance and the remission of sins, rather it is an effort to increase the membership of the church. The emphasis is on church growth, not conversion. In I Corinthians 14:23, 24 Paul shows it was unusual for an unbeliever or outsider to enter the place of worship. He states: "If therefore the whole church should assemble together and all speaks in tongues, and ungifted men or unbelievers enter, will they not say you are mad? But if all prophesy and an unbeliever or ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all; he is called into account by all." It would have been very unusual for an unbeliever to attend a Christian worship service in Paul's day.

However, today most of the church's membership increase takes place by unbelievers being brought into the worship of the church. The result: the worship has been turned into a recruiting for membership service with most of the sermons and teaching being directed toward bringing the unbeliever into membership of the church. Most contemporary as well as traditional services are centered on the "needs" of "seekers" and non-believers. This, many times, neglects those already in the fold. This accounts for the rank immaturity of so many Christian people today. In the book of Acts conversions took place in the open air meetings, in homes, on the highway, in the desert, in jails and prisons, by the riverside, in the market place and the synagogue. There is no record of unbelievers being converted in worship services. "Worship services" as we know them today were unknown to the early church. They met in homes and rented facilities. The pattern seems to be that the unbeliever was converted then brought to worship services not brought to worship services and then converted.

Let's look at the Biblical pattern of evangelism and worship in the early church. The modern church's sincere efforts to see the church grow have established a form of religion which is foreign to the teaching of Scripture on the purpose and conduct of the church. J. Harpe Gillis, professor of History at Grove City College, in an article in *Touchstone* magazine entitled *Mall Christianity* wrote: "There is no biblical warrant for turning Sunday worship into an evangelistic meeting. The transformation of the main Sunday service actually began in the early nineteenth century. It was evangelist like Charles Finney and his successors who turned church worship into a revival meeting. In some respects, 'seeker sensitive' advocates are simply extending the logic of this earlier innovation. The New Testament church did not show confusion about either the nature of evangelism or the proper setting. It did not provide 'excitements' other than the excitement of the Good News. The church gathered on the first day of the week to hear the word of God, for corporate prayer, and for the breaking of bread (Acts 2:42; 20:7). Significantly none of the evangelistic preaching in Acts occurs in the context of the church gathered for worship. To be sure, the early church was involved in aggressive evangelism, but it kept the gathering together for the edification of the 'faithful and for God's covenant people to praise the covenant God." Nowhere in Scripture is it stated that a non-Christian has any obligation to "attend a church service." In fact, there is no mention of a "church service" or a "worship service." The meeting together was a gathering of Christians. We are told that this modern generation is not interested in "church stuff," and cannot be reached unless we appeal to them on the level of their materialistic life style. So what? The world has never been interested in spiritual things. God has ordained that the gospel, not an appeal to a life style, is the power to reach people of all generations. "But we must have these expensive facilities in order to reach young people." However, it is the home, not the church, that is responsible for the spiritual condition of young people. "That will not work because so many young people come from broken homes." Then our effort should be directed toward making the homes Christian not offering programs comparable to what the world offers.

THE CULTURE DRIVEN CHURCH

If we ever entertained the idea of following the precepts and examples set forth in Scripture concerning the church it would mean a radical change in the church culture that could be compared to the difference in what Christ taught and advocated to the existing religious system of the Jews in his day. His teachings were radical. His actions unheard of. His ministry rejected by the religious system. But note: this religious system, held on to so tightly and defended so strenuously by the religious leaders, was brought to an abrupt end in seventy AD while the rejected teachings of Christ brought about a world revolution which continues to this day and will continue until he returns. Anyone advocating even a partial attempt to bring the church today into the practices revealed in the New Testament would be castigated as a religious fanatic and a radical trouble maker. In fact, if the church today returned to the pattern the New Testament it would destroy most of the religious system today which is thought of as “the Lord’s work.” Perhaps if we returned to the simple pattern of the early church, and divorced ourselves from the world (a divorce that would have God’s unequivocal blessings and is long overdue) we would have to forego the raising of money for a new sanctuary to seat thousands on Sunday morning, or the plans for a family life center and recreational facility to attract and compete with what the world is offering our young people. Perhaps preachers would once again become preachers and forget about being administrators, and CEO’s. Preachers would once again emphasize simple holiness, genuine love and cross-bearing. Gone would be the light, bouncy, simple, engaging, uplifting and fun spirituality in a cocktail party atmosphere where pleasantries are served up in twenty-minute pep talks and all unpleasantness, such as sin and Christian responsibility is never mentioned. “But that would give credence to non-Christians who say they don’t go to church because it is boring.” Why should the church uncritically accept the diagnosis of fallen men and women? Understanding how the unchurched are thinking is important; letting them set the church’s agenda is dangerous. The prevailing attitude today is that the church must gain the respect and acceptance of the world in order to grow or to be heard and accepted. The aim many times is to make the transition from life in the world to life in the church as painless and invisible as possible. Some churches are careful not to make outsiders find anything alien or intimidating in their services.

When Jesus said in Matthew 16:18 “Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hades will not overpower it” he was not speaking of an organized religious system that has been thrust upon the world since Roman emperor Constantine was said to be converted and declared Christianity to be the official religion of the empire over three hundred years after Christ made the statement that he would build his church. Remember the word *ekklesia*. Christ did not build an organization, but an *assembly*. In the book of Acts, we see how Christ built his church. He empowered with the Spirit a few men he had chosen and through them called out of the existing religious system and the world a great number of people who were being “built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Christ himself being the corner stone.” He called those responding, “a building” that was being “fitted together and was growing into a holy temple of the Lord in which God was to dwell in Spirit” (Eph. 2:19-20). These people were called “the house of the Lord” (Eph. 2:19; Heb. 3:6; I Tim. 3:15). God’s people when in obedience to Him are His representatives upon the earth because He is dwelling in them. They have become His house. When the church began to build special houses the idea of God dwelling in it was lost.

Author Reggie McNeal in his book *The Present Future* states: “The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the money and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money gives out (80 percent of money given to congregations come from the people ages fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutionalist loyalists die off or both.” We hear a lot today about a post-modern world, meaning the world is rapidly changing. This is also true of the modern religious system. We hear talk of a post-Christian, pre-Christian or modern church. There is no doubt that the world is experiencing a drastic change in attitudes and actions. This is true also of the church. The church Jesus founded will continue until he returns. History records the birth, life and death of many cultures. Our own modern society is not exempt from dying and as it dies so dies the church culture the society has produced. The dictionary defines culture as: “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior that depends upon man’s capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations. The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a religious group.” The scriptures would define culture in the terms of the “Great city, Babylon.” Described in Revelation 18, or in John’s definition of the world in I John 2:16

The world has long looked upon the church as being moss-backed and archaic and out of touch with the culture. Thus, it has been spurned, neglected and ignored by worldly culture, which feels it has no need of even recognizing the church as being a viable factor in the everyday affairs of men. Part of the reason for the low estimation of the church by the culture of the world is because the church has always been something outside the accepted norms of culture. Culture has therefore dismissed the church as being of no real importance. In our modern day and age the church has looked at this prevailing attitude of culture and decided it is time to do something about it. The result has been to make the church more relevant and acceptable to the world’s modern way of thinking. The watchword of the religious world has been “modernize”! The focus is upon the church being based upon new and modern methods and managerial strength. As a result, the church of today lays little emphasis on the past and has dwelt upon future and renewal.

As believers the modern church has tended to measure success by the same standard as the culture of the world. Rather than living out the gospel before the world most Christians have patterned their lives after the world’s culture. We have forgotten the words of Paul to the church in Corinth: “God has chosen the foolish things of the world and the despised that He might nullify the things that are” (I Cor. 1:27, 28). Far from being despised by our culture, we expect and often receive the praise of the culture. Paul’s instruction to them was to uphold the truth of God in every domain of life; marriage, money, the spiritual gifts, attitude toward unbelievers, harmony between believers, worship and discipline. There is an infinite supply of power available from God. He has “blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3), and has “in His divine power granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence” (II Pet. 1:3). With all this going for us why do so many churches depend so much upon the culture of the world as their method of operation?