

Shifts to Help the Church become Missional

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Here are six transformations the church must undergo to be faithful to God in contemporary urban cultures. The transformations address the subtle mixture of Christian forms and beliefs with the contemporary culture—especially modernity. It seeks to answer the question, “What does the church look like if it truly reflects the nature and ‘passion’ of Christ?” How does the church Christ died for and established touch the modern world?

1. From a Cognitive Cathedral to a Holy People Walking with God

Churches developed during the modern era generally exist to dispense information. Unbelievers become Christians by receiving new information; they grow in Christ to become leaders through enhanced understandings. This is intellectual change, the role of the preaching minister or pastor is that of *teacher*, dispensing information to the flock.

Thus, churches define themselves as cognitive groups ascribing to a set of teachings and meeting for a few hours each week in a palace of bricks and mortar to receive additional teaching. God expects more. He desires that his people not only know about him but that they also walk personally with him.

Envision churches full of people whose lives exist in relationship with God, where members passionately, whole-heartedly pursue full devotion to Christ. As Christians look toward the glory of God, they are “being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18). Like the early Christian church, they devote “themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

2. From Individual Attenders (passive) to Community (active)

People “go to church” for many reasons: It is their duty. It is a place to meet people of influence. Their children receive moral instruction. Attending church assuages guilt and declares to self and others that they are religious. The church fulfills what Maslow calls “self-actualization needs.” All is well because a responsibility has been discharged.

Turning to God, relating intimately with him in Christian community, discovering his will, developing the discipline to implement a Christian lifestyle are frequently secondary motivations. Church is considered “a place” to go rather than a people of God in community.

Imagine churches where Christians are not merely spectators but live in community, Christians who practice the “one-another” relationships descriptive of Christian fellowship in the Bible. They are God’s holy people “clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” They “bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances [they] have against one another. [They] forgive as the Lord has forgiven [them]” (Col. 3:13). Love “binds them all together in perfect harmony” (Col. 3:14). The *church* is a community of God on a pilgrimage through life helping each other to continue as Christ’s disciples and encouraging others to join them on the journey to reach heaven.

3. From Members to Ministers

Frequently church is equated with a “place” to attend rather than a fellowship for equipping God’s servants for works of service. Church strength is naively gauged by church attendance. The result is that hundreds are mere spectators! Many “Christians” have merely “placed membership” by publicly declaring their affiliation or following a few easy steps to become members. Such understandings of membership have little to do with genuine Christian discipleship.

Too many churches experience spiritual SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome). We understand this concept with physical children; the concept has not been applied to “baby Christians.” The focus continues to be placed upon initial conversion with less emphasis placed on nurturing new Christians to walk with God and equipping them as participating ministers in the kingdom of God. The sad result is that less than 20% of the Christians in a typical church do more than 80% of the ministry.

Imagine churches where all members have a place of ministry within the body, where leaders focus on training Christians for works of service as the church reaches into the world. Ephesians 4 says that Christ is the prime mover of leadership development since he has provided, by his grace and power, specific gifts to the body (vv. 7-9, 10). He gifted apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors/teachers “to prepare God’s people for works of service.” No task is more important for leaders. Note the progress in the text: The small initial body planted in a locality must be “built up” until it reaches “unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God” so that it becomes “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (vs. 13). The church, then, is no longer composed of “infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their scheming” (vs. 14). “Instead, speaking the truth in love” enables the church to “grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (vs. 15). The result is *a body “joined and held together by every supporting ligament” which “grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work”* (vs. 16). Ephesians 4:16 describes a mature body, equipped by its leadership for ministry. Doug Murren reports that churches that grow 25% or more each year always have 60% of their attending adults serving in some form of ministry.

Christians must be nurtured to become Christ-focused, Spirit-led participants in the kingdom of God.

4. From the Strong to the Weak

In Western culture with voluntary associations of individuals, churches strive to gain the loyalty of searchers and to maintain the loyalty of members. Churches often opt into this market-driven culture by becoming “vendors of religious goods and services.” The focus is on the rich and powerful who have the ability to create and maintain expensive church structures. The church, consequently, looks and sounds more like a business enterprise. Christian leaders begin to view themselves as jars of gold, silver, or bronze rather than simple clay jars or lamps through whom the light of the gospel shines to demonstrate the “all-surpassing power of God” (2 Cor. 4:7).

Imagine churches whose theme is authenticity, where all confess their weaknesses and acknowledge God’s sovereign leading. Envision churches reflecting God’s nature by caring for the weak, i.e., the children and the poor, those with no means to survive on their own.

Imagine children of unbelievers feeling excitement about God and Jesus, excitement that then ripples into the family leading to the conversion of mother, father, and other relatives. Barna records that 85% of those who come to Christ do so before the age of 15, and that human spiritual foundations are largely formed by age 9. Parents have a natural inclination to be involved in their children’s activities. These parents are invited to help with the children’s ministry and willingly “do it for the kids.” Searchers are then incorporated as helpers in the youth program because, “The best way to learn something is to teach it.” An evangelistic children’s ministry provides relationships that serve to incorporate these searchers into small groups on their journey to know God.

Envision churches with Jesus’ compassion for the poor. At the inception of his ministry, Jesus quoted Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, and release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). Acts of kindness done for the poor are in actuality done to Jesus because he lives among the poor (Matt. 25:31-46).

Much growth comes from the margins of society because of the church’s concern for the weak. In biblical ministry Christian leaders must posture themselves as fragile jars of clay (clay lamps) through whom the light of the Gospel shines. Never should they portray themselves as prestigious, powerhouses, jars of gold, silver, or bronze.

5. From Cultural Accommodation to Kingdom Participation

Many churches, influenced by Enlightenment thinking, have been molded to think in rational, propositional categories and have neglected to spiritually form followers of Christ to think of themselves as participants of God’s mission and instruments of his kingdom. A syncretism, a blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture, occurred so that Christianity spoke with a voice reflective of its culture. The church

began to lose its moorings and was swept here and there by the ebb and flow of cultural currents. This process continues today with devastating results.

Many Christians are practicing Deists. They diligently study the Bible without expecting God to act in the same way he did in Scripture. They pray for the sick, yet expect God to work only through doctors' hands. God—who created the world, selected Israel to become his chosen people, and gave resurrection power to his Son—is viewed as a clockmaker: "God wound up the clock of the world once and for all at the beginning, so that it now proceeds as world history without the need for his further involvement." In these churches God's "truth is too distant, his grace is too ordinary, his judgment is too benign, his gospel is too easy, and his Christ is too common." Thus, Christians who seek to be faithful to the God of the Bible must break from their Enlightenment heritage to believe that God is "majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders" (Ex. 15:11).

Church Growth practitioners also absorb this Modern stance. Assuming that they can chart their way to success by their ingenuity and creativity, they focus on what humans do in missions rather than on what God is doing. Although they advocate faithfulness to God, decisions are based upon anthropological analysis and pragmatic strategies. Formative theological frameworks are not intentionally developed to guide ministry. They assume the gospel rather than intentionally allow gospel to shape their identities and methodologies.

Thus their illustrations and video clips frequently affirm the connection of the Gospel to popular culture by emphasizing similarity rather than diversity. Hesselgrave, "A method of communication that is over dependent on the discovery and utilization of similarities is open to question. In the long run, the *dissimilarities* between beliefs and practices may be more important and utilitarian... If one's objective is to convert and disciple, the number and importance of these differences will far outweigh the number and importance of supposed similarities."

Because of the church's propensity to accommodate to the prevailing worldviews of popular culture, the church must consistently define itself in itself biblical terms. The church, although contextualized for the contemporary situation, must seek to restore God's intentions for the church in every era.

Imagine churches who perceive themselves as part of the mission and kingdom of God. Church leaders base their identities upon scripture and then move from these theologies to practice. Their terminologies change. They do not "set the DNA" of churches, "build" the church, or "establish" the kingdom. Rather, they "enter into" the mission of God; they "serve" as participants in the kingdom of God.

Their understanding of the church also changes. The church is depicted in theological rather than human terms. The purpose of the church is to reflect the glory of God rather than to provide "religious goods and services." The church is understood to be "a unique community in the world created by God through the Spirit as both holy and human" and as "a distinctive community formed by the calling and sending of God and reflecting the redemptive reign of God in Christ." The church is composed of living stones built around the chief cornerstone to become "a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Pet 2:4-5).

In Ephesians 2:19-22 Paul uses multiple metaphors to describe the nature of the church. The church is a *new nation*: Newly converted Christians are "no longer foreigners and aliens" but "fellow citizens" in a community of faith (2:19). The church is a *family*, or "God's household" (2:19). The church is a *holy temple*, well constructed with each part joined together and built around Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone. This fellowship comes into existence through conversion: Those dead in sin (2:1-3) are made alive with Christ (2:4-7) by God's grace (2:8-10). Paul stacks metaphors one on another to illustrate a redeemed fellowship "brought together under . . . Christ" (1:3-11) and existing "for the praise of his glory" (1:12). These perspectives form an inspired picture of God's divine community.

6. From Mono-cultural to Multi-cultural

Despite the foundational Christian belief that "God does not show favoritism but accepts people from every nation who hear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34-35), 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning continues as perhaps the most segregated hour of the week in North America. The social distances, the alienation, and interracial suspicion in popular culture are also in the church. Christ, however, is "our peace" who brings together the nations, destroying the walls that divide them (Eph. 2:14).

Imagine fellowships where there is no “Jew or Gentile, bond or free.” All are accepted in their rich cultural diversity within the church. Envision churches which borrow aspects of many cultures and incorporate them in unique ways. These churches draw from a collage of cultural metaphors, motifs, and parables from various world cultures to creatively draw and illustrate a Christian worldview. The diversity of God’s kingdom is also reflected in the multicultural nature of lay and full-time Christian leaders. George Yancey’s *One Body, One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches* is a practical guide to help churches sensitively enter other cultures within a city and intentionally become God’s community of nations in urban, multicultural contexts. To facilitate this transition, Christian leaders must view themselves as missionaries to the nations in urban North America.

Missional Transition

Churches rooted in modernity will continue to stagnate and dwindle. Most are in the maintenance mode. They look inward, taking care of their own immediate needs. They seldom perceive themselves as God’s people on the journey through life helping fellow travelers to be God’s disciples and encouraging others to join them on this God-directed and Jesus-inspired journey.

God, however, is working through both church renewal and church planting. This article defines some of the major transitions that the church must undergo to faithfully reflect the kingdom of God in this generation.

Churches must focus on

spiritual formation

community

equipping members for ministry

caring for the weak

their missional, kingdom identity

multicultural ministry

. . . . to restore God’s intention for his church.