

The Western Church: A Call to Justice

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Abstract

Justice is of great importance to God and should be of equal importance to His followers. Unfortunately, this concern for justice has been lost in much of Western Christian thinking. Consequently, Christians miss out on a lifestyle Jesus and the early church lived out. This lack of concern for justice has taken away a central mission of the church: to care for the needy and seek justice for our communities. This paper focuses on three factors in the Western world that take away this central mission, arguing that they hinder the Christian's call to be carriers of justice in their own communities. The three factors are the following: 1) A poor theology on what it means to know and live for God; 2) The Cartesian Split, a Western philosophical tradition that separates the spiritual and physical; 3) the Institutionalization of Church.

Preface

What does it mean to know God and what does it look like to live for Him? I have asked myself that question many times when I have reflected upon my life and measured it against the Bible's teaching. Like many growing up in America, a country that is statistically 83% Christian (Langer, n.d.), I often thought that knowing and living for God was simply a matter of going to a church service and participating in the life of the church institution. After all, that was where I gained knowledge of God by hearing sermons, participated in corporate worship and interacted with other follower of Christ. But, as I began to study the Bible apart from my church led studies I realized an important fact about my life: I did not know the God of the Bible and did not live for him in the way I should. The lifestyle that Jesus, his disciples, and the early church lived was frankly a lifestyle I was unfamiliar with. Their concerns were beyond just committing to be regular church attenders. Serving the people within my church was one thing, but the early church I read about in scripture seemed to be concerned with something I was not: caring for the poor, vulnerable and seeking justice in their communities.

For a man who grew up as a part of the church, this realization came as a shock. My eyes were opened to a theology about Jesus and His church that would lead me to seek more involvement in the lives of those in need as well as become active in the pursuit of justice. I have come to think that seeking the justice and well being of all is not an option that the Christian can or can not choose without consequence, but an obligation that must be fulfilled when one has the means to do so (Matthew 25). This epiphany led me to a series of questions: Why had I not seen these values emphasized growing up in the church? Where were the calls to be directly with the people in need? As I became more self-aware

of my own shortcomings in this area, I realized that these shortcomings were representative of a bigger problem. I realized that my lack of concern for justice was highly influenced by cultural factors. Growing up in the West, I had assumed that certain Western church traditions and values stemmed from scripture. Now I began to question them. Had Western culture somehow changed the way I think of living unto God? Ultimately, I realized that these cultural factors had a strong influence in what I thought to be the Christian life.

I became motivated to seek a degree in community development to be more directly involved in areas of justice in my community or whatever community I find myself in. I began to look at developmental needs across the globe and was presented with the harsh reality that we live in an era of extreme paradox. In an age marked by scientific discovery, advancement in health care, and the ability for millions of people to access information through the net, one sad reality still remains: socioeconomic studies show that the gap between the rich and the poor is the greatest its ever been in recorded history, and the need to seek justice is greater than ever (Groody, 2007). I read that the world's 500 richest individuals have a combined income greater than the poorest 400 million, and 40% of the world lives on \$2 a day; the poor only make up 5% of global wealth (Watkins, 2005). In such a world of "advancement", it is no wonder Nelson Mandela felt the need to comment on our world's disparity: "Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times- times in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation- that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils" (Human Development Report 2005, p. 4).

But, would there be any benefit in being bothered about a social evil if nothing tangible came out as a result of that? Was seeking justice something that should be part of

the Christian life? My understanding of what being righteous was changed. Seeking justice for those in need seemed to be a true mark of faith. As John Tilloston (1722) stated, “Righteousness, in the more proper sense of the word, signifies the virtue of justice; and very frequently in the Old Testament is used for charity to the poor” (p. 276). This is where the journey to discover how Western culture had affected the Christian life began.

Introduction

Western cultural factors embraced by many Christians prevent multiple aspects of the Christian life outlined in scripture that lead to seeking justice. Those in non-Western countries have viewed the Bible more so in terms of God’s narrative of justice that in the West (Hug, 1983). First, Western culture has a general misunderstanding of what it means to know and live for God. This is mainly because we have viewed scriptures through a “flawed paradigm,” and have cut the narrative of justice from scriptures. Western theology emphasizes the gospel of grace without teaching a gospel about the Kingdom of God, which is the gospel that proclaims “Good News to the poor” and promotes a life of generosity and equality for all. While the former is a true aspect of the Gospel, the latter is a crucial part of Jesus’ teaching that emphasized a Christian life of visibly demonstrating His Kingdom on earth- a kingdom that valued justice and care for the poor and needy. We would do well to include both sides of the Gospel in our Christian framework, for God has a special concern for justice (Isaiah 41:17).

In addition, many Western culture views faith as an intellectual exercise and have reduced Christianity to an intellectual faith and therefore removed the notion that *works justify faith*. Faith is simply a matter of a conscious choice rather than associate with one’s actions. This stems from the western philosophical tradition known as the Cartesian Split,

in which spirit and body are seen as separate. Physical matters are not necessarily seen as spiritual matters. However, the biblical authors thought it impossible to separate the role of spirit and body and thought of Christian living as an active pursuit of glorifying God by demonstrating His kingdom in very tangible ways. Hence, James' famous argument in the Bible, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:20). Unfortunately, in the West faith without works is still viewed as faith.

Thirdly, the Western institutionalization of church makes participation in public life difficult. Without that participation, deep relationships with the community have become non-existent to many Christians. The institutionalized church is a Western church tradition creation that stemmed from the Roman pagan religion and has changed the dynamic of relationships within the church as well as the church's relationship with the world. This change has reduced the way the church currently expresses justice for the poor. While the early church led a lifestyle that led to organic ways of meeting the needs of their community, the institutional church reduces the meeting of needs to a programmatic response that does not stem from directly engaging those in need but rather becomes a response to the institution's call to serve a population. This model has also created a culture of Christians whose idea of church goes no further than attending the traditional Sunday church service. That of course has led to a lack of opportunity to be face to face with the needs represented in our own neighborhoods. Without a model that naturally leads to engaging our neighbors, loving our neighbors as ourselves is difficult.

The following will explain how these cultural factors have impacted our churches and have prevented much justice the church could enact in society. This analysis is not

meant to catch every nuance of each problem, but is rather a way by which people can be made aware that these issues exist.

One: A Flawed Paradigm

“The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.”

Isaiah 41:17

The Bible makes it clear that justice is important to God. In both the Old and New Testament there are about 2,000 verses that speak about justice (Stearns, 2010). That includes talk of helping widows, orphans, the poor, the marginalized and sojourners, and challenges toward the social and governmental systems and structures that create these injustices. Therefore, to not be concerned and act on issues of justice is to subject us to an incomplete missiology as the church (Stearns, 2010).

This incomplete missiology starts with what is called a “flawed paradigm,” a term coined by Wilbert Shenk (1993). This flawed paradigm causes the church to emphasize only a part of the Bible rather than the whole, thereby leaving out certain ideologies concerning what it means to live for God. These paradigms include: 1) a flawed understanding of what it means to know God; 2) a flawed understanding of the early church culture and mission; and 3) a flawed Gospel message that emphasizes the forgiveness of sins through Jesus yet leaves out the part concerning Jesus’ establishment of the Kingdom of God, which is the part of the Gospel that proclaims “Good News to the poor” and promotes a life of generosity and equality for all. These three flawed paradigms have prevented many Christians from seeking.

To Know God

In the Bible, knowing God is much more about human action in relation to God and humanity than it is about knowing scripture or acknowledging that God is Lord of all (Haugen, 1999). Scripture makes it clear that human action that reflects God is the indicator of whether or not one knows Him. However, in much of the Western church, knowing God is equated with having knowledge of Him (Ruthruff, 2010). Rather than committing to establish God's will on earth, the goal of many Christians is to further their biblical knowledge of God. While that pursuit is warranted, to think of it as the Christian's main pursuit in life is purely a Western way of thinking (Hug, 1983). In the Jewish understanding of what it meant to know God, *action* concerning God's command was a sign of genuine relationship with Him.

Many scriptures point to the fact that genuine relationship with God is more than accepting a set of presuppositions about Him. One cannot simply accept the claims of scripture intellectually but not act on them and still claim to know God. For example, the prophet Jeremiah made an indictment against King Jehoaikim of Israel who used his power unjustly, ultimately stating that because of his unjust rule—his illegal tax levies and use of slave labor of the underclass—he did not know God (Brown, 1984). Jeremiah compared Jehoaikim to his just and righteous father King Josiah and explicitly stated that taking up the cause of the poor and needy like his father was a true indicator of his relationship to God: "He [King Josiah] judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? Declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 22:16-17). According to God's own declaration, knowing Him was intertwined with one's obedience to Him, which included

His command to be bearers of justice by caring for those in need. As Coffman's commentary noted:

Knowing God, whether in the times of Jeremiah, or at the present time, does not consist merely of having heard of him, or having read his word, or having been associated with God-fearing people. It is the kind of knowledge that is exhibited in a pious and godly life, and in the strict obedience of his holy commandments.

("Coffman's Commentaries on the Bible")

James' famous scripture, "Faith without works is dead," is another clear indicator that knowing God is more than just having faith in His Lordship. In fact, James stated that faith alone does not justify a man, but rather works justify his faith: "You see that a man is justified by works and not faith alone" (James 2:24). This is not to say works save Christians, but rather that works are clearly a signal of true faith. Works do not save, but Christians are saved to work. If we come to know God through faith in Jesus, we must be sure that our faith is actually biblical. Good works of justice—taking care of widows and orphans, feeding the hungry, etc.—is the type of faith the Apostles and disciples promoted.

However, if there is any man whose words make it clear that works are necessary to knowing God, it is Jesus Himself. In describing the Final Judgment, Jesus indicates that the Christian's relationship to Him is connected with their deeds toward those in need: "For I was hungry and gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (Matthew 25:35-36). Jesus counted the actions His followers had towards those in those circumstances as action toward Him. Truly knowing God is a matter of how we treat others, especially those in need. The connection between justice

and knowing God is clear. Therefore, to ignore this would be to challenge God's own declaration of what it means to know Him. Furthermore, not including the relational aspects of justice can lead to the rejection of God himself (Torre, 2007).

While this may seem like an obvious fact, this is contrary to the popular Western notion that knowing God is a matter of what we *believe*. Yes, we should believe in Jesus, but belief is not what the Bible equates to knowing- and therefore living-for God. In the epistle of James, James wrote, "Even the demons believe and shudder" (James 2:19). James was addressing a culture in where the people of the church began to reduce their faith into merely a system of beliefs. To simply accept a set of presuppositions about God- Jesus is Lord and savior- was not enough. James argued that knowing God could only be shown in our loving actions toward people.

The Early Church

The connection between justice and the early church is not often talked of in contemporary Western churches and as a result many Christians have a skewed understanding of the early church lifestyle (Sider, 1993). The book of Acts makes it clear that the early church was comprised of a people whose love for God caused them to promote justice for their community.

In the first five chapters of the book Acts, the early Christians are depicted as having lived a lifestyle of generosity, doing things like selling their own possessions to give proceeds to other Christians in need (Acts 2). From resource sharing amongst fellow Christians to calling down unjust forms of governmental oppression, the early church was known for seeking the well-being of their communities (Conn & Ortiz, 2001). In other words, the culture of the early church was one that organically produced development

efforts—a true grassroots movement of justice (Viola, 2007). For example, the church was a people so committed to meeting needs that Acts stated that “there was not one needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). That type of culture is unheard of in many of the churches today.

These actions by the early church set the methodology by which Christians should live. Throughout history, the church has lived according to this lifestyle of seeking justice. As Edgar Elliston reflected in his book, *Christian Relief and Development: Developing Workers for Effective Ministry*, “In summary, virtually all missionary movements during the history of the church have been concerned about and involved in what is called community development. They have seen it as a part of their ministry of communicating the gospel” (Elliston, 1989, p. 18). All the focuses of community development as we know them, seeking justice for the needy and vulnerable or advocating for just government systems, have been an historical focus of the church. The early church understood that their commitment to Jesus was a commitment to His ways and not just an acceptance that He was Lord.

Many theologians have also noted that the early church was responsible for many forms of social action because the church understood that justice was central to God’s teaching. Jonathan Edwards, who lived from 1703-1758 and is widely known as America’s most important theologian, stated in a sermon “It is mentioned in Scripture, not only as a duty, but a great duty. Indeed it is generally acknowledged to be a duty, to be kind to the needy. But by many it seems not to be looked upon as a duty of great importance. However, it is mentioned in Scripture as one of the greater and more essential duties of religion” (Edwards, 1732, section 2). He concluded that statement by saying that this duty is actually

the most indispensable of Christian duties throughout the Old and New Testament, “I know of scarce any duty which is so much insisted on, so pressed and urged upon us, both in the Old Testament and New, as this duty of charity to the poor” (Edwards, 1732, section 2).

Interestingly, evangelizing was less of a concern for early Christians as much as a *lifestyle* of being servants to fellow Christians and society. The way in which the Gospel was communicated was through the words *and* lifestyle of the church. From caring for the troubled and the poor (Acts 9:36; 2 Cor 9:8-9; 1 Tim 5:10; 6:18) to opposing unfair and unjust treatment of women and children (Col 3:19, 21), justice was established wherever the early church lived. Therefore, to not be doers of justice is to separate us from our early church brothers and sisters. To them, it was essential to enact justice. It was a part of who they were and a part of their understanding of what it meant to be the church and display God’s heart for humanity.

The Gospel of the Kingdom of God

So, why did the early church respond to the Gospel by incorporating practices that promoted justice and equality? As mentioned before, a half-gospel has been presented in many churches. Many Christians do not realize that the Gospel Jesus proclaimed and that the early church responded to is different than the one many Western churches have been presented with. The half that is missing is what Jesus preached the most out of any doctrine—the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. Jesus claimed He had the authority to forgive sins, but He also stated that the good news of the Kingdom of God was the reason He was sent (Farnell, 2012). In the gospels, all who proclaimed and lived for God had to place the Kingdom of God at the center of their lives (Sider, 1993). Jesus mentioned the Kingdom of God 92 out of the 122 times the Gospels mentions them and He said that the reasons for his

miracles were often tied with proving His claim that the Kingdom of God had begun (Matthew 4:23-25). In fact, His actions served to transform the environment around Him to showcase what the Kingdom of God was like and therefore present how people should interact with others in His Kingdom. It is unmistakable that the Kingdom was the central part of His message.

To understand what the Kingdom of God refers to, a brief look at the Old Testament is in order. In the Old Testament, one of God's planned for Israel to be "a demonstration of God's will for all" (Sider, 1993, p. 52). God gave them the law and showed them to do justice by sharing their land and resources, legislate fair laws and uphold strong families. The people of Israel were to live justly and therefore demonstrate to the world God's will for society. This society would reflect the way God wanted the world to operate. Unfortunately, Israel had a hard time living up to such standards and preferred to indulge in idolatry and unjust practices because of their hard hearts.

God's prophets saw beyond these destructive practices and had a hope that one day God would send a Messiah who would "pour out the Spirit in a new way," which would make possible that original hope of a community that would visibly demonstrate God's heart for all (Sider, 1993). The prophets longed for a restored order of things, in where just relations between God and man as well as man and neighbor were restored. This hope included not only the forgiveness of sins but included transformed relationships between people as well as a transformed social order in where just social practices were lived out. This is why Jeremiah had so many social justice undertones in his book (Pleins, 2015).

Jesus stepped into this contextual understanding of the biblical narrative and proclaimed not only that he had the authority to forgive sins, but also signified the

inauguration of this new social order- a new, just government that He was King of. He claimed to be establishing His Kingdom on *earth*, demonstrating through his word and deed what that original prophetic hope looked like. Hence, his instruction on prayer in the book of Matthew, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, Here on earth as it is in Heaven” (Matthew 6:10). The Kingdom of God had broken into the Kingdom of Earth, and He was fulfilling the prophecy of dying to redeem His people from sin while at the same time fulfilling the prophetic hope of establishing a restored order. His disciples were commanded to live under His Kingship by living according to the values of Kingdom, promoting those values and lifestyle choices that showed what His kingdom was about.

What actions demonstrated His kingdom? Jesus taught His disciples to be giving, to turn the tables of an unjust religious establishment, and to identify with the poor and marginalized. He even claimed that the kingdom belonged to them (Matt 5:3). That being the case, Christians should seek to live in a way that demonstrates this Kingdom. However, the Western lack of understanding the full Gospel has caused Christians to not live under the Kingship of Jesus but instead just acknowledge His Kingship and wait to be taken to an otherworldly heaven once they die. With this thinking, the goal in life does not include bringing God’s justice to earth. Professor N.T. Wright (2011) commented on this Western way of thinking:

The western tradition, catholic and protestant, evangelical and liberal, charismatic and social-gospel, has managed for many centuries to screen out the central message of the New Testament, which isn’t that we are to escape the world and go to heaven, but rather that God’s sovereign, saving rule would come to birth “on earth as in heaven.” The story of all four gospels is not the story of how God came in

Jesus to rescue souls for a disembodied, otherworldly heaven. It is the story of how God, in Jesus, became king on earth as in heaven. (2011, para. 6)

Moreover, in his book *Good News and Good Works*, Ronald J. Sider (1993) brought up two questions that accurately address this Western understanding of the Gospel: “Is the core of the Good News that God forgives and regenerates individuals through the cross of Christ? Or is it that the messianic kingdom foreseen by the prophets broke into history in the ministry and person of Jesus, creating a new redeemed community in which all the evils of the world are being corrected?” (p. 30). In many Western churches the former more so than the latter is thought to be the full of Gospel message (Stearns, 2010). Christians must learn to bring about justice in their communities because it fulfills the command God gave His people to be a visible demonstration of His will towards all. Figure 1 below is a diagram that illustrates the biblical understanding of the Gospel as the Kingdom of God according to the book of Matthew.

So, how should the Western church address these three misconceptions? Advocating for a correct viewpoint on these matters is essential because a faulty theology expresses itself in very practical ways (Beck, 2011). If our relationship with God and being the church is showed in our action toward others, the Western church should actively seek to redefine what it means to know God, be the church, and establish a holistic gospel. Changing these paradigms could simply mean bringing these viewpoints up in conversation with others. I have found that simply talking with other Christians about this topic leads people to adopt different ideologies and lifestyle. A conversation could start with a simple question such as, “What if the church thought of building a relationship with God not just in personal terms but in terms of clothing those who have no clothes?” or “What did the early church do for their communities?” The Christian who

knows that our action indicates his relationship with God and that the early church sought justice can invite others to question their ideas of what it means to know God and be the church.

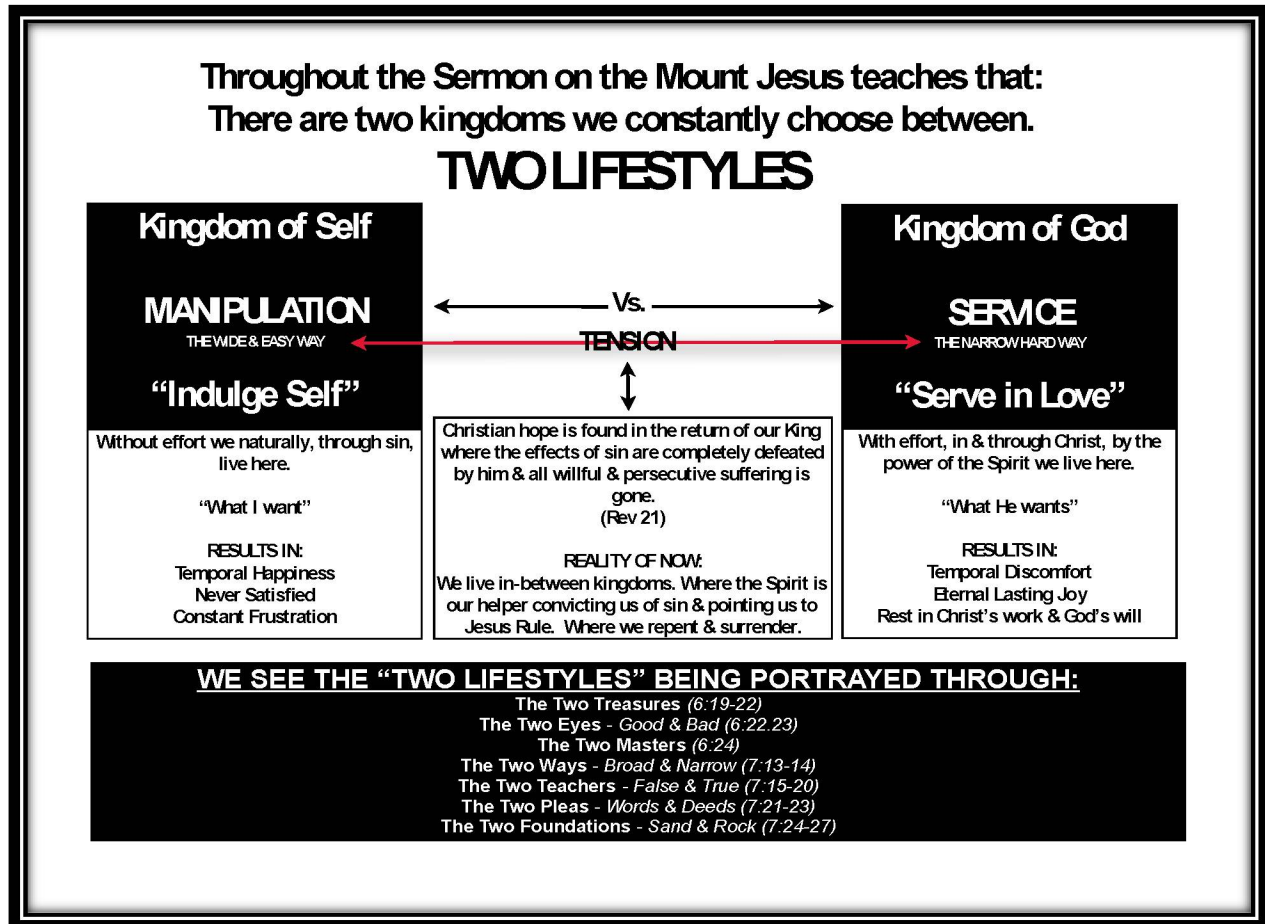


Figure 1 The Kingdom of Earth vs. The Kingdom of God. Courtesy of Love is Not Lost®

In addition, The Gospel of the Kingdom of God must be emphasized in environments where it is lacking. Since the Gospel of the Kingdom of God is central to the Christian life, the Church should stay very centered on demonstrating Jesus’ Kingdom. As the Bible indicates, this happens in very practical and tangible ways. Demonstrating the Kingdom means that we should seek to serve others in love by benefiting them in ways they need and seeking their well-being (Jeremiah 29:4-11). Applying Jesus’ call to carry out the ways of His Kingdom is very applicable

to contemporary Western society. For example, in the Kingdom of God, everyone is provided for and therefore the church should seek to provide for all (Matthew 25:35-40). In Acts, Christians sold their resources to use the proceeds to help those that were needy (Acts 2:42).

Contemporary Christians can display the Kingdom of God in their own context in similar ways. Reach, a church that meets in Kirkland, Washington, seeks to display the Kingdom of God by meeting the needs of its city. Reach has partnered with multiple development organizations that are currently serving the Kirkland population. It also encourages members to seek the welfare of their own neighbors.

Another notable example is Love is Not Lost, a church in Capitol Hill, Seattle founded by Zac Gandara, is a church family located in Capitol Hill, Seattle that seeks to “follow the ways of Jesus and to live out his ways by loving our neighborhood” (Z. Gandara, personal communication, February 21, 2015). Zac left an institutionalized church to seek a lifestyle more similar to the early church by following its home-based church model. Zac and his church family seek to incorporate meeting the needs of Capitol Hill as a way to demonstrate the Kingdom of God and bring the Gospel to their neighborhood. For example, because of the rising cost of living in Capitol Hill, some struggle to meet their own needs. By simply planting a community garden to grow produce, Love is Not Lost met a need for cheaper food as well as brought a community of people together. This simple act of generosity helped the church to show God’s generosity by tending to the needs of its community. The Love is Not Lost family constantly seeks justice for its community by actively seeking to display the Kingdom of God.

Two: The Cartesian Split

“Long-held habits do not die easily. It will take intelligent thought and a great deal of reverent prayer to escape completely from the sacred-secular psychology.” -A.W. Tozer

The lack of concern for justice in the Western church is also due to a detrimental Western philosophy that has infected church thinking for centuries- the separation of mind and body, subject and object. These distinctions stem from the Cartesian split, named after the famous Greek philosopher Descartes, but is also traced back to Plato (Robinson, 2003, section 1.) They surmised that the realms of the spiritual and the physical were separate. Most Westerners take these distinctions for granted, but this Greek tradition passed down to the contemporary Western world is just a worldview and has actually had a profound impact on Christians—the theological separation between the physical and spiritual and the sacred and the secular.

In the West, Christians have taken on these separations and have incorporated them into their ways of thinking about “spirituality,” and have thus privatized Christian life from that which is outside the church (secular). This view emphasizes the spiritual and sacred to be more important than their perceived opposites. In fact, these emphases have become the *only* focus or pursuit of many Western Christians precisely because of these dichotomies. Ronald J. Sider (1993) asked a brilliant question about these dichotomies: “Is the essence of a person her immortal soul that lives for a time in the body and then is realized to live in an immaterial heaven? Or is the person a body-soul unity destined to live on a transformed earth? If the soul is the most important aspect of persons, then presumably, “spiritual” things are vastly more important than “physical” or “secular” concerns. Is that distinction biblically inadequate?” (Sider, 1993, p. 30).

The Physical-Spiritual Divide

How do these dichotomies affect the Christian life in practical terms? Plato thought of the natural world as inferior to the noumenal world- spirit was higher than the body, essence higher than appearance, and form higher than matter (Wright, 2011). Western Christians have adopted this thinking for centuries and think in terms of these dual realities, in where the spiritual realm contains that which is “higher,” while the physical realm contains that which “lower” and has been distorted and therefore inherently not something to be as concerned with. With this thinking, the Christian looks forward to the day they can escape this reality by leaving their bodies behind as to not deal with this troubled world any longer (Wright, 2011). Therefore, the Christian has no sense to be a part of the active healing and correction of that troubled world, for their goal is to simply live piously until they can one day depart from earth. N.T. Wright, a renowned theologian, explains how this way of understanding the biblical narrative is wrong:

The New Testament is deeply, deeply Jewish, and the Jews had for some time been intuiting a final, physical resurrection. They believed that the world of space and time and matter is messed up, but remains basically good, and God will eventually sort it out and put it right again. Belief in that goodness is absolutely essential to Christianity, both theologically and morally. But Greek-speaking Christians influenced by Plato saw our cosmos as shabby and misshapen and full of lies, and the idea was not to make it right, but to escape it and leave behind our material bodies. The church at its best has always come back toward the Hebrew view, but there have been times when the Greek view was very influential. (As cited in Weidel, 2012, para. 7)

This dualism denies that creation and the physical are worth restoring and are therefore not worth caring for here and now. That unfortunately includes caring for the issues of the poor, needy, and marginalized. This misconception about spirituality has hurt the church in that they do not experience or give others a taste of the reality that Christ and the early church set forth on earth. Furthermore, it means that working to establish a redeemed community by seeking the well being of all creation, especially when it comes to well being of the poor and needy, is not seen as inherently spiritual. If being a part of the affairs of the world is not seen as connected to our spiritual lives, then being spiritual is no longer associated with our actions for the physical world (Buckser and Glazier, 2003).

A great example of how the Cartesian split has had great pragmatic effects on the Western church is given in Buckser and Glazier's book, *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. In an account of Western missionaries proclaiming the gospel to the Papuans, a society not affected by dualistic thinking, their acceptance and response to the Gospel was observed as having a different transforming effect in their society than in Western society:

Religious truths incarnated in Melanesian lives could not help but be public, made by real performance. As noted, Papuans received the Word about heaven and eternal life, *but not the Cartesian split inherent in post-Enlightenment Western epistemology*. Whereas Western Evangelical mission theology highlighted personal transformation stemming from a personal relationship with Jesus, Papuan Christians emphasized Jesus' religious pragmatism in feeding the multitudes, healing the sick, and turning the tables in the temple. (Buckser and Glazier, 2003, p. 65, emphasis added)

In the case of the Papuans, an emphasis is seen on the reality of here and now.

While meeting the needs of the poor, seeking healing for the sick, and opposing unjust systems of oppression highlighted the Papuan understanding of what it meant to live for God and respond to the Good News, it also highlights the fact that the Western gospel has been reduced to a religion that does not prove to be holistic. So, to dichotomize spiritual living from that which goes on in the physical removes the idea that God is involved in redeeming every aspect of creation and is rather only involved in saving our spiritual lives. That ideology makes us believe that our job is to save the spiritual lives of others rather than seek justice for that which is wrong in the physical world. This is wrong, for Christianity does not posit that reality is something to be escaped one day, but that our current reality should reflect what God wants (Dorsett, 1988).

The Sacred-Secular Divide

Another crucial outcome of the Cartesian split has been the division of life into two sectors: the sacred and the secular. Like the spiritual and physical divide, it causes Western Christians to divide two parts of life that are biblically not separated. A.W. Tozer (n.d.) commented on the danger of this divide, stating that it causes Christians to believe that the sacred actions they partake in such as prayer, Bible reading, reciting worship songs, attending church service, and other related acts are seen as springing from faith, while the mundane parts of living such as eating, working, looking after one's health and so on are not seen as springing from faith and therefore are seen as the less spiritual part of our lives. Much of the church even believes that the church functions as the bridge between the mundane and secular, as figure 2 shows. In the *Pursuit of God*, Tozer stated, "The sacred-secular antithesis has no foundation in the New Testament. Without doubt a more perfect

understanding of Christian truth will deliver us from it" (*Pursuit of God*). In the Bible, the distinction is non-existent:

Daniel lived and worked some 600 years before the birth of Jesus. So he had not inherited the centuries of church tradition that have conditioned us to think of work as either "sacred" or "secular." Daniel did not see himself as "just a layperson." He did not dream of quitting his job to go into "full-time Christian service." (*Sacred vs Secular Work: Loss to Individuals*)

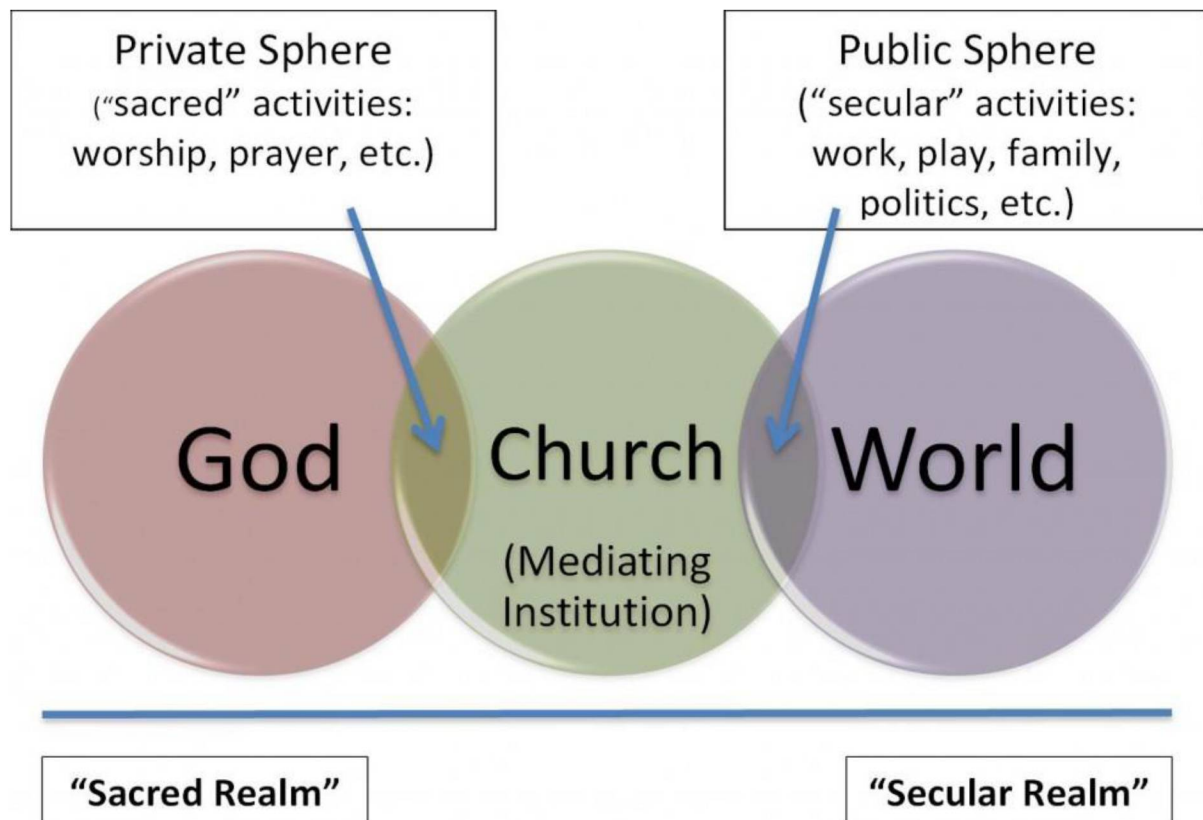


Figure 2 Sacred-Secular Divide. Courtesy of Christ Community Church®

This divide causes the secular to be seen as a space not worth time and resource. For example, secular concerns such as politics, relief work, public health and so on, are seen as spaces that may be relevant but are not inherently holy pursuits. This relegates Christianity to a private, more individualistic faith that does not need to be shared outside

the context of church or church related things in order to be justified. If that is the case, then social action, which has been put in the realm of the secular, is not seen as a necessary part of the Christian life. In churches, it means that evangelism, not seeking justice for neighbor and community, is the primary means by which faith is shared to the world. As one church member said to me, “We tend to think that evangelism is enough and that works are additional” (Ambassador, personal communication, December 3, 2014).

Hunsberger reflected on the effects of Cartesian Split in Christianity in his book, *The Church between Gospel and culture: The Emerging Mission in North America*:

The effect of this metaphor [Cartesian split] on Christianity in the West has been devastating. Christianity has been privatized, relegated to personal piety, while science controls public truth and life. Within Christianity, it has led to a division between evangelism and social concern. (p. 147)

In terms of social justice, these divides have put a damper on Western church thinking and living. Christians should not accept these dichotomies because they remove our concern for social needs and prevent Christians from adapting a complete missiology.

If the church is to adapt a more complete missiology, the Western church should bridge the current gap between evangelism and social concern and treat what happens inside the church as important as happens outside of it. To do this, Christians should actively seek to renew their minds as to not separate the physical and spiritual reality and should train themselves and others to look at their actions toward the world as a sacred experience.

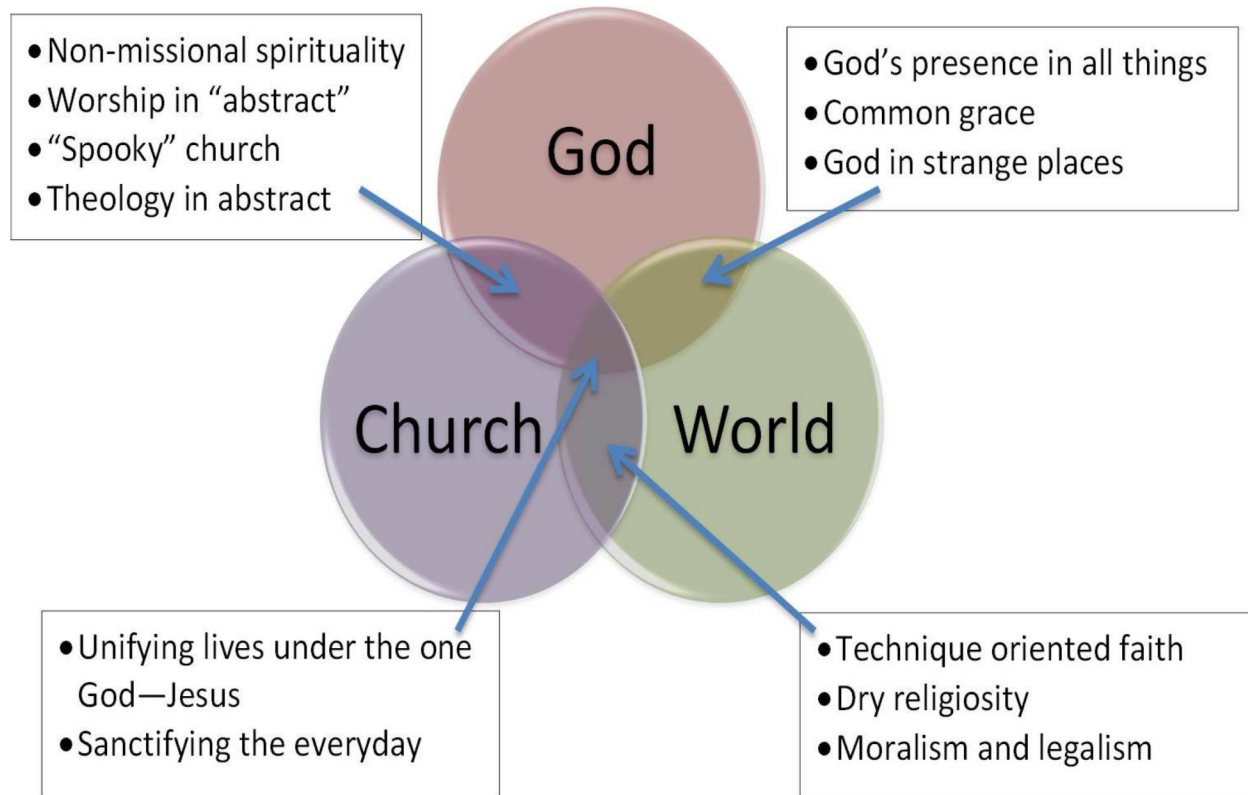


Figure 3 God in All Spheres Courtesy of Christ Community Church®

As Paul said, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1st Corinthians 10:31). Actions such as alleviating poverty, caring for the vulnerable, and being good stewards of all that is within creation should be seen as essential to true faith (James 2:20; Acts 2; Acts 4). When the Church begins to renew their definition of a spiritual life, our communities and society will begin to experience the love of God the way He intends.

Three: The Institutionalized Church

The Institutionalization of church is a Western tradition that is responsible for creating a church less concerned about and involved in social life. This church model makes it difficult for Christians to engage in a lifestyle that the early church did. How so? By institutionalizing the church, the church has become thought of as a place of consumption and passivity and has made it difficult for the church to function in the way the early church

did. It also contributes to a culture of segregation because people are not forced to be in deep relationship in this model. Moreover, the early church was portrayed as a communal family that directly engaged and served their community together, which is difficult to do in the Western model.

The Church Building

Many Christians take for granted their idea of church, speaking of it in terms of its institutionalized meaning. By this I mean the fact that Christians often speak of church merely as their place of gathering. We often hear things such as, “What church do you go to?” or “How was church today?” This means that Christians often associate church with a building and all that happens *inside* of it. Furthermore, it reveals one disturbing reality about contemporary church—it has turned church from an active, living organism of people who function into a passive crowd: “Thus every individual member should not simply be present, but be functioning. And there should be growth in maturity. That is the objective, but institutionalism has to varying degrees obscured this perspective and hindered the accomplishing of this objective” (The shortcomings of institutionalized Christianity, 2013). Over time, the church’s adoption of having a church building has institutionalized Christianity and has created a passive mindset in Christians.

Most Western Christians may not even realize that having a church building is a tradition not based in scripture. The early Christians never had the organizational-like churches we participate in today. In fact, “Christianity was the first non-temple based religion to ever emerge” (Viola, 2007, p. 11). In Frank Viola’s book *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of our Church Practice*, he noted that for the first three centuries Christians did not have special buildings for gathering. Church buildings did not come

about until Christianity became legal in Rome by Emperor Constantine, who himself began requiring Christians to gather in these buildings just as the pagans did (Viola, 2007). Before this, Christianity was a home-centered movement that emphasized a family-type environment (Banks, 1998). This more intimate setting produced a participatory culture in which Christians became deeply involved in life matters together, which inevitably included leading meeting each other's needs.

On the other hand, the church building has inevitably led to an organizational structure that makes this type of environment hard to produce. The practice of having a central meeting place has served as a catalyst to make Christians passive consumers of what the church service gives them. However, it is clear in scripture that this passive way of participating as a church member did not exist. In Acts, we see that the home-based model led to meeting needs and seeking justice for others because the intimate setting led everyone to be in deep relationship and therefore deep concern for others well-being. It was easy to share resources with someone in need when one knew someone's story personally and felt like they had a true stake in their lives. As Zac Gandara, founder of Love is Not Lost, a home based church in Capitol Hill, Seattle, noted:

At the end of Acts 2, we see the church portrayed as a family. A family setting rather than an institution-type setting. They ate together. They shared everything together. They had this idea that, "everything I have is not mine." In our culture, we create Christians that are consumers who do not rely on Jesus apart from the systems the Church institution creates. Without these systems, would Christians know how to live?" (Z. Gandara, personal communication, January 21, 2015).

In other words, the organic, grassroots feeling the early church had has been lost and Christians now find themselves as an audience in a building rather than functioning participants in their neighborhoods and communities. However, it is not the church building tradition that matters. It is the mindset it has created—it has a restrictive power to destroy the Christian fervor to be community focused. Instead, Christians find their church lives focused around what goes inside of the building they gather:

It doesn't matter where the church gathers—in a big building, a small building, a house, a garage, a barn, a tent, or under a tree. The bigger issue is in possessing a New Testament mindset that the church is not a building, but it is the people who are the temple of the living God. This may sound too simple, but this mindset began restricting the gospel to the four walls of a building instead of taking it into public life. It killed the evangelistic fervor of the church (Farias, 2014, para. 7).

Another effect of the church building is segregation (Saunders & Campbell, 2006). In the house-based Christian movements, people from many different walks of life, from rich to poor or the popular to the socially ostracized, came into intimate contact with each other. A culture of equality naturally emerged in this environment as resources were passed from the rich to the poor and as two groups of people who were once enemies had no choice but to lay differences aside. In an institutionalized setting, Christians are not necessarily in direct relationship with those in need and do not feel the natural inclination to be the generous hands and feet of Christ. Instead, they give not directly to a person in need but to an organization that funnels their resources to its programs (Viola, 2007).

In addition, people who have differences can choose not to be in community with people they find too uncomfortable to be around because they have the option to choose

from a plethora of others. These segregations do not reflect God's will to make all equal (Acts 4:32-35; Galatians 3:28). Furthermore, it contributes to keeping the poor and needy without much access to resources that the more privileged members of the church can share. It is preventing justice for those who need it. Saunders & Campbell (2006), noted in their book *Word on the Street*:

In many ways, our lives are representative of the tensions in which many mainstream Protestant congregations now find themselves. We are comfortable, segregated, suburban people, yet aware of desperate human needs just around the corner, needs that we know are somehow related to our comfortable, segregated, suburban lifestyles (p. 5).

Yes, different classes of people may meet together in a building, but once service is over they do not have to be deeply involved in each other's lives. This type of church settings is so individualistic and consumption-based that segregation is a natural by-product of its operation. Even Frank Powell, a pastor of a church organization in Jackson, Tennessee noted that this type of culture exists within churches, "Let's be real: This is a wall the church has accepted as normal. Sure, the rich and poor may show up on Sunday and worship together, but that's the extent of the interaction" (Powell, n.d., as cited in *4 divisions the church needs to cross*). Ironically, erecting church walls can cause segregation amongst those that meet within them.

So, does that mean that meeting in a church is wrong? Or that church buildings are evil? No. But, without knowing how this tradition affects the actions of the church, many Christians will miss the opportunity to fulfill the call of justice in their own neighborhoods and communities.

Community Engagement

The institutionalization of church also leads to another lack of function in the church: ineffective community engagement. The proactive building of relationships in one's community is difficult when church is an institution outside of one's neighborhood or even city. Fostering change for one's neighborhood or city is difficult when one does not even interact with them. That is unfortunately made possible and even easy in this Western church model.

The original church thought of themselves as people deeply involved in public life. This meant that as a people the church would seek positive change for their communities by purposefully engaging it. Even the term translated to church in English from the original Greek term, *Ekklesia*, shows how the church originally saw themselves. *Ekklesia* stems from two words that simply mean, "to call out." The word is not a reference to just an assembly of people but is a political term that was made in reference to an assembly of citizens that were summoned by a town crier to participate in legislative decisions for their city. These legislative assemblies were called forth when Greek citizens found their government to be corrupt and oppressive (Scott & Liddell, 1879). Much like a modern day form of nonviolent protest, these assemblies were a peaceable way to institute social reform.

So, why use this term to refer to God's people? It goes back to the early church understanding of Jesus as King and His people as citizens of His kingdom. This term was purposefully used to convey the idea that Christians were an assembly of people called to protest that which was unjust—the corrupt, oppressive practices of their day—in order to establish societal values that were more in line with Jesus' kingdom. Whether within the home or outside in the community, these values included equality, sharing of resources to

the poor and needy and the enactment of just social practices. This is hardly the case for the Western church model, which is a more passive and less participatory functioning assembly that gathers together to passively consume a service. Furthermore, it means the western church model can inhibit Christians from thinking of themselves as people called to engage society to advocate for just systems and promote a more moral society. Zac Gandara was right when he asked, “Can we meet needs of our community when we don’t even know them? Does this [institutionalized] way of thinking about church naturally lead us to live in a way that causes us to engage our communities?” (Z. Gandara, personal communication, January 21, 2015).

The Western model also perpetuates the idea that the success of the church is measured on its growing number of congregants, rather than measured by the work the people are doing for their neighbor and community. Due to this model and the “spiritual” emphasis mentioned in the previous section, the church’s “work” becomes saving people’s spirits and the goal of Christians then is only to attract people into the church’s walls. This makes it unnecessary to be directly involved in bringing God’s Kingdom ways into the outside community. This “attractional model,” as Dwight Friesen, one of the founders of The Parish Collective in Seattle, called it, produces Christians who engage their neighbors and communities based on a goal that does not fully reflect God’s heart for justice (personal communication, January 23, 2015). When Western churches do seek to solve issues, they have to be done through church programs because it is the only way the church leadership can produce an action-based response to the gospel message. The issue with this is that it makes the Christian’s response to participating in issues of justice a consumer choice, as Friesen stated:

Probably the most dominant form of church today is the “attractational model.”

Attractational models tend to programatize our responses to almost anything. The tendency is to see the poor not as human beings we should be with but as a problem to eradicate. To us, these acts of aid are always a consumer choice. “When you’re ready to do this, when you’re ready to give, take the next step.” It creates a dependency on program to be the church, relying on those in power. (D. Friesen, personal communication, January 23, 2015)

Essentially, outside the system of programs, the church does not have a true sense of urgency to live for justice outside of the institution. Worse, church members rely on those in power to do justice—something Christians should seek to do regardless of being led by someone else or not. On top of this, there is no sense of ownership in one’s own community because Christians have more of a stake in the institution’s mission.

In contrast to these, Friesen believes that the church functions best when they figure out ways of being a church that “integrates mission formation and community life as one” (D. Friesen, personal communication, January 23, 2015). When woven together, community life and mission create a more authentic expression of the Gospel to the world that inevitably includes bringing about justice to a broken world. Unfortunately, the Western church model makes it difficult. Institutionalizing the church can actually cause the church to sacrifice its mission to care for and transform communities. This is what makes a church a “consumer church” as to opposed to the more biblical “missional church.” As Dwight stated,

That more traditional, attractational model results in us losing our faithful presence in communities for the sake of growing an institution. The agenda of that

mission can actually cause us to sacrifice the actual mission of Christ. We must realize that we often spend more time preparing for and consuming a spiritual event rather than spending time with people we care about. When we give into this, we stop being the church. (D. Friesen, personal communication, January 23, 2015)

So, instead of being a church that happens to meet in a community, the church should seek to be *reflective* of its community because it not about an institutional agenda but rather about engaging the actual lives of those in and surrounding the church.

My church family, Reach, located in Kirkland, Washington, is a great example of how the traditional organizational church can still be a church that does not think of itself in terms of its institutionalization. While the church does meet in a central place, it merely rents out an auditorium at a school. Because of this, all of its resources are dedicated to meeting community needs rather than a mortgage. The church has committed to allocate its resources to development organizations and even individual church members and families that are serving Kirkland in ways that fulfill the church's call to seek justice. These partnerships include organizations that meet the needs of society that God cares about. These include organization that seek refuge for orphans, take care of teen moms, and fight for freedom for those in sexual slavery.

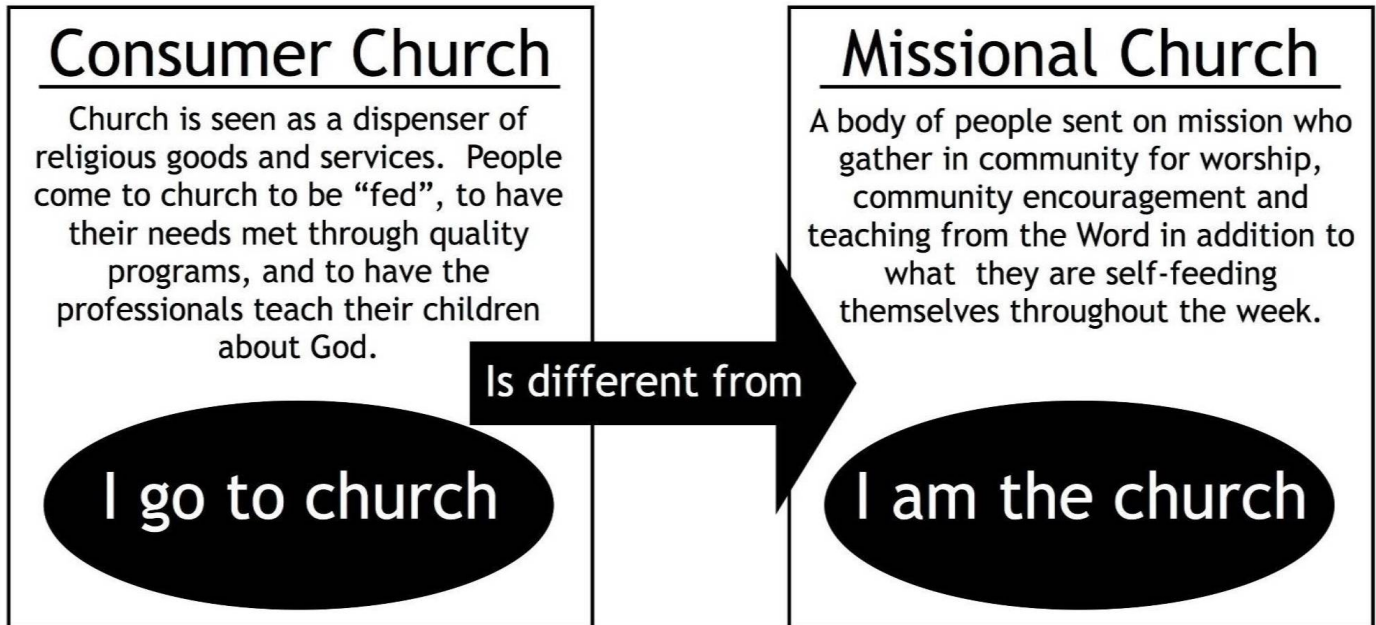


Figure 3 Consumer Vs Missional Church

In addition, many churches that have a central meeting place are beginning to promote what a culture that is about seeking the good of its immediate community through “missional communities.” These communities are home meetings that serve as a way to build deep relationships with other Christians as well as one’s community. These missional communities purpose to serve their neighborhoods according to contextual needs. Those in the missional communities can all band together as a “family” to allocate their time and resources to specific needs of both church and community members. This helps churches to emphasize the culture the early church had while still retaining the traditional Sunday service. More importantly, it makes the church a living organism that participates in the lives of community outside of the Sunday service.

Conclusion

Culture has profound effects on people. While cultural traditions, values and norms may not be bad in themselves, they affect us in ways that potentially lead to bad habits. In the case of the Western church, certain cultural factors have removed their sense of purpose to bring justice to their neighborhoods and communities. Due to the flawed paradigm in which the gospel is viewed in the West, the Western church suffers from a misunderstanding of what knowing God is, creating a misconception that faith can be matter of only accepting a certain belief system. The early church and Jesus emphasized that the Kingdom of God was being established on Earth and the church was to be a model of that Kingdom and demonstrate God's will for humanity.

In addition, the Western Cartesian Split between the physical and the spiritual have caused many Christians to separate spiritual matters from physical matters, in turn making it less important to be involved in the restoration of physical creation and that within it. This includes the restoration of the physical circumstances of the poor, needy and marginalized. Secondly, the sacred-secular divide have privatized the Christian life, reducing the Christian life for God to one of personal piety rather than one that carries out the practical teachings of justice and compassion for their communities.

Thirdly, the institutionalization of church has made it difficult for Christians to be a church that is deeply involved in social justice. The creation of the church building has made many believe that church is a gathering place and not a people commissioned to be carriers of God's will in their own neighborhoods and communities. It has also made room for segregation and has separated people from living in the family-type setting the early

church carried. Furthermore, it has prevented effective community engagement that naturally leads to developing relationships with those in need.

Lastly, the above information would not be complete if it not acted upon. Thankfully, there are many churches that go against the grain of those cultural factors that inhibit the church's mission. The Western church should actively seek to go against the grain of cultural factors that inhibit the church from its full calling.

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