
HAS CHURCH LOST ITS WAY?

AN EVER-INCREASING NUMBER OF COMMITTED CHRIST-FOLLOWERS ARE LOSING INTEREST IN CHURCH. THEY EARNESTLY DESIRE THE ELEMENTS OF CHRISTIAN LIFE PROVIDED BY A COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS who live in vital, love-filled connection with one another. They know they need regular instruction in God's word, and they want to be better capacitated to go forth into the world to minister to their neighbors and friends. They acknowledge they have learned these and other Kingdom empowerments, like getting along with (even submitting to) unappealing people/plans, while gathered with other saints under the watchful eye of LEADERS/MENTORS.

Nevertheless, scads of these long-time believers are cutting CHURCH out of their lives—not because they have lost their faith in Christ, but because CHURCH-as-we-know-it isn't resonating with them. As they experiment with not attending weekly services, they do not discern any decrease in their faith or negative results in their life. They would say of CHURCH, "It's fine, but so what?"

They do not find *ministry-done-by-others* engaging enough to hold their attention, and they have many questions about how often they need to sit in a weekly service that offers little practical training for their own ministry development. CHURCH seems unnecessary to their life and ministry, and many earnest believers are rapidly concluding that it may be keeping them from making a difference in their world. They want to be released (encouraged) to do more ministry themselves.

Another recent email exchange I had with a former church leader illustrates this growing trend:

"We were members (and leaders) of the [Church] in [City] from the beginning, then after 10 years moved to another city to pioneer a new church. We went to [another church] to get support... and then... we left the world of the institutionalized church, becoming OCCC's—Out Of Church Christians (to give that child a name)."

"My remarks are not specially aimed at [Denomination] because in the end it's all the same, no matter how you call your movement, denomination or group. We left the institutionalized church—being still and forever part of HIS CHURCH!—because we

dare to question it. We don't believe (anymore) that the church as a system reaches its goals (equipping the saints, helping brothers and sisters to mature...)."

To my pastor friends such words are challenging—almost confrontational. If we're not careful, we will completely miss the core of their frustration and critique. We will gather the "faithful" around us, retrench with self-congratulatory anecdotes about good things (still) happening at CHURCH, and pick holes in the arguments of those "rebel" CHURCH-leavers. Because we know of several instances when bad motives lured saints away from gathering regularly with others, it's tempting to lump all the *naysayers* together—and dismiss every challenge to CHURCH as inappropriate.

The congregation I pastored for 22 years daughtered nearly 40 other congregations, so I've had lots of experience sending people off for good reasons. Mistakes I made in leadership/ministry also inspired people to leave, perhaps justifiably. But in-between those two kinds of separation is another sort of parting-company—one that is confusing, hurtful and profoundly discouraging. I watched many people break fellowship for grievously wrong reasons, and in the many years I pastored, I discovered a telling difference between people who left CHURCH for good reasons (i.e., to pursue new ministry), and those who left for not-so-good reasons.

Badly Chosen Departures

People who leave CHURCH inappropriately almost always try to poison the waters they once drank. Criticizing a ministry requires little spiritual know-how compared to building and sustaining one. No longer supported by the fellowship, activity and instruction that came with CHURCH-life, displeased CHURCH-leavers rarely seem able to build meaningful ministry on their own. Perhaps they are surprised to find so little fruit developing through their lives after "finally" freeing themselves from what was wrong in their CHURCH, but they predictably turn their labors toward demolition. Unable to build, they try to tear down what others built.

Those who decide on an ungodly separation from CHURCH almost always engage in two tell-tale activities after they leave: (1) they speak ill of their former CHURCH and its LEADERS, and (2) they foster discontent among those who stay.

Remember the email from my friends who recently wrestled with "leaving CHURCH"? They later acknowledged that their questions/doubts about the legitimacy of CHURCH arose after a conversation with a former member of the CHURCH who left after a disagreement with the pastor. Though the leaving member had promised not to talk negatively about anyone ("*Because this is not about people, but about different ministry philosophies, right?*"), the temptation to justify himself—and his departure from CHURCH—proved too powerful to resist. In a kind of counterfeit move, he did what I've seen done dozens and dozens of times.

The *ex-part* (of CHURCH) presented himself as an *expert* (on CHURCH). He counseled my friends as though he still had the place in their lives that was given to him and validated by the very leader he now trashed with his words. No surprise. He was no genuine minister, and in the

months since his departure, he had not gained a voice in anyone's life. The only people with whom he had any influence at all were the believers he had been connected with through CHURCH—the very institution he claimed was a needless distraction from ministry!

Whatever high-sounding or philosophical words one wants to put to such attempts to draw saints away into isolated factions, I find it deplorable and indefensible (Titus 3:10-11). When my friend thought through the arguments the former member used, he realized something deep:

“My passion for Jesus sometimes goes in the wrong direction because of the enemy, but also because of my flesh (pride), or lack of discernment when others speak to me about their unpleasant experiences.

The next day, I went to see [Pastor] to apologize for what I said to him, and he forgave me! I have found now a new perspective, where I feel I have space to move, and where I will have more and more Jesus in me.”

I'll say again, judge a tree by its (eventual) fruit. Do those leaving CHURCH produce more spiritual harvest than their counterparts who remain connected? The simple, sad reality I've observed over decades of ministry is that the majority of those who leave CHURCH end up disappearing from the spiritual landscape. It certainly isn't true in every case, especially when they depart thankful for what they received. When God truly calls someone out and away from their existing circle of fellowship—like Abraham, Joseph or Paul—they start something with others in mind. You will never hear them talking negatively about what was.

Badly Chosen Priorities

There are many situations like the one I've just recounted. Nevertheless, it's too easy for PASTORS/LEADERS to conclude that everyone leaving CHURCH behind is carnal-minded. Frankly, Scripture offers more indictments against lousy shepherds than against stubborn sheep (Jeremiah 23; Ezekiel 34). If I had to weigh in on who has caused the flagging interest in CHURCH, I'd put most responsibility on CHURCH LEADERS who abandon or neglect Jesus' assignment for His CHURCH.

Like foolish pastors of yesteryear who measured believers' maturity and commitment by their attendance (or absence) at mid-week prayer services, it would be unwise for PASTORS/LEADERS today to judge someone's spirituality and commitment to Jesus solely by a willingness to attend *same-old-routine* church services. If they are looking for relevant expressions of the Body of Christ for themselves and their friends—reading the New Testament priorities and practices of the early church—are we really able to say that CHURCH offers today what it offered then?

I think not!

Is the institutional CHURCH missing something vital? Might institutional needs be getting in the way of spiritual and mission-focused priorities? My impression is that most of the mature believers who find CHURCH uninteresting and uninspiring are looking for something a little

more aligned with Jesus' priorities. We can either join in their quest, or oppose them by insisting that the way we have done CHURCH in the last 30 years is the one and only way it can be done. As my OCCC friend says,

"I don't say that church as a system is bad—it's just not the only way! And it's not our way anymore. I'm absolutely sure that GOD uses every form His children choose to gather, from house churches to mega churches.

Hmmm, why did I write this? I think I just wanted to show you a little bit why we (and many others) left the system."

I interpret much of people's disaffection with CHURCH these days as positive, not negative. If we take a historical look at the structures and patterns of CHURCH through the centuries, we realize that it is a dynamic institution—one that has changed and adapted to the eras and cultures in which it finds itself. For the moment, let's give those who are leaving the benefit of the doubt, and ask ourselves about this thing we call CHURCH. What isn't working—and why?

A Basic Model

Jesus' model and method for turning the world upside down was to enlist, train and engage ministry agents who went about in the world "doing good and healing all oppressed of the devil" (Acts 10:38). CHURCH, as it functions today, is often missing critical components of that modeling/mobilizing process. Consider those with whom Jesus spent most of His time compared to the audience most PASTORS prioritize; they gather regularly (usually each week) with a multitude we call a congregation, and only occasionally with select disciples.

Why are we following the exact opposite of Jesus' pattern? Jesus met regularly only with His disciples. The multitudes shifted with each locale where He traveled. Whereas most CHURCH LEADERS want to grow their congregation, Jesus shirked the crowds. He concentrated on giving a few disciples words of penetrating/comforting truth—assigning them to go out and minister on their own. It's only fair to ask about CHURCH: *is it reaching the world with Jesus' message by copying His strategy or by substituting institutional methodologies in His Name?*

Perhaps because my generation had few, if any, discipleship models to learn from, most of my peers focused on growing their CHURCHES; we were told that the "local CHURCH is the building block of the Kingdom." I do understand that statement was a reaction to denominational pressures and to the growing para-CHURCH movement. Unfortunately, however, well-meaning preachers made outlandish statements like, "All real/legitimate ministry originates in and flows from the local CHURCH."

While I celebrate the vital role a local CHURCH plays in the growth and development of each believer, I never subscribed to the idea that congregational ministry was the key to Kingdom growth. The local CHURCH—with its people traumas, logistical difficulties, physical space challenges and *how-do-we-get-along-with-one-another* dilemmas—is a vital component in the

kingdom of God. But it is an exaggeration bordering on falsehood to suggest that the local CHURCH is more central than individual saints to Christ's work on earth.

Point of Services

The structure, schedule, size or programs of CHURCH are not, for me, the issue. What counts is the degree to which it resources daughters and sons of God—truly (1) encouraging them to serve the world; (2) capacitating them to minister more effectively to people; and, (3) releasing them to minister beyond the CHURCH'S borders. CHURCH is being called into account: Does it and its programs truly serve individual believers and their individual ministries; or, does it expect their ministries to serve it? If CHURCH is working well, shouldn't individuals trained by its services for the longest period of time be less and less inclined to attend as they do more and more to train others?

Among the many problems that plague the CHURCH today, few are greater than the celebrity-syndrome that platforms a few *special-gifted* "LEADERS" in front of many *not-so-special* people in order to attract many more *not-so-special* people. I suppose it is a question of priorities, but in my thinking, mobilizing many is a far grander aim than simply ministering to many! Instead of running training clinics to capacitate and multiply additional ministry practitioners, too many spiritual LEADERS "perform" week after week in a sad replica of celebrities' long runs at entertainment centers.

CHURCH loses its way and its favor with God when it fails to stay focused on people—one-by-one—even when those individuals are assembled in the midst of a multitude. Jesus keeps His eye on the apples of His eye: us! We are His tools of choice. Each of God's children is a star in his or her own right, and I know of no grander calling, no greater assignment for a spiritual woman or man than to help other believers come into their own (ministry).

I don't want to put on a show in order to attract idle or bored Christians; I want to host training venues to equip/advance believers who passionately want to serve and minister to others. It might be hard to recognize, but that's what I call CHURCH. The primary assignment for spiritual LEADERS of churches is to:

- Draw people to the life-changing Truth and power of the gospel until they come to believe in God's love, forgiveness and grace in Jesus Christ;
- Enlarge the number of believers who actively do ministry-to-others—both inside and outside of the CHURCH;
- Increase the understanding and know-how of those ministers, so they become even more capable of greater impact in the natural/spiritual realms;
- Convince every believer to accept personal responsibility to develop others by passing along lessons-learned; and,

- Replace themselves by progressively substituting their disciples into the very ministry roles the LEADERS have used to enlist and train others.

A Common Theme

If CHURCH-leaders think about it for a moment, the primary justification we use for encouraging people to attend services and listen to sermons is that they will get the training and tooling to do ministry themselves. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is one of the bedrock passages that builds the case:

“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching... so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

In the past several decades, we’ve reinforced the notion of CHURCH services as “practice sessions” for the “real game” during the week. We’ve tried to convince our congregations that the “CHURCH unleashed” as a “force” is them streaming out of the pews into the marketplace like the 120 spilled out into the streets on Pentecost! Guess what? It has worked. Believers have grabbed hold of that message.

Everywhere I travel in the world, I pick up a common theme: individuals don’t just want to stand/sit each week while a select few up front do all the ministry; believers want to minister. I could list dozens of examples, like a woman in South America who almost cried when I gave her a book she could use as a discipleship tool to impact individuals—either one-on-one or in a small group setting. Why the tears? Her words:

“Only we have in our country big meetings in CHURCH. Lots singing, prayer, preaching... (sheepish smile), lots of preaching! I love so much. Jesus—my heart so full. But I want do something, too. You know? Now I can. With this pray, talk to, help other women!”

Our members, “equipped for every good work,” grow restless with perpetual preparation for ministry! Frankly, they’re tired of being collected week after week; they want to be sent—or, at least, encouraged to go do what they’ve been trained to do. Another quote from OCCC epitomizes this frustration:

“I know I am oversimplifying, but sitting on your chair/in your pew, looking at the head of your brother, standing up when told, sitting down when told, listening to a well prepared speech—already prepared in nice little portions—i.e. the view of the speaker, singing songs performed by a band...didn’t do it for me and for us anymore! We want more! Our heart is not beating for this, we don’t want to live for that anymore.”

I understand CHURCH LEADERS who essentially tell their congregations, “Your ability and capacity for more ministry-to-others will increase if you learn what I can teach you.” But I do not understand LEADERS who essentially say each week, “Before I release you to minister, you need to know what you don’t yet know, and if you come back next week, I’ll teach you a little more of what you need to know.” When does that bait grow stale? Are people who attend services each week significantly more tooled for ministry than those who miss most of the year? When, where

and how can the members of a congregation expect to be trusted and released to do to others what was done for them?

Notice the striking similarities between OOC's comments and what an RIC (Remaining in the Church Christian) recently wrote me:

"At church most of us ordinary Joe Lunch Bucket Christians hear about God and all His exploits, but the skill set is rarely developed in us ordinary believers to do exploits. We give offerings for other people to go and do more exploits, but we don't even know these people and we really don't know what their kingdom exploits are really like."

"We know there is more! We are the 99% and we want church leaders to hand over the spiritual goods."

Jesus gathered His disciples so that He might send them out, equipped and prepared for ministry (Mark 3:13-15). The training they received wasn't systematic or highly structured. It matched closely with the spontaneous situations the disciples would encounter in life. Jesus tooled the earliest ministers in every imaginable setting, episodically, fluidly—and usually away from the crowds. He drew them apart from their routines in order to give them extra insight, but He sent them right back into the world's daily rhythms to make use of what He taught.

Has CHURCH slipped in its practice from Jesus' example? Can we admit that the desire to have larger congregations has subtly shifted our priority away from "sending" to "collecting" saints?

One bit of good news is that many young pastors intuitively understand lots of what's going on—and some reasons why believers have grown impatient with CHURCH. Ben Eige, a 34-year old pastor in North Carolina explains things this way:

"TV shows run their course, people weary of them and they're canceled. Now, self-created content is supreme. People want to be involved in the process and not to be mere spectators. There is a huge community of fan-based content-creation."

But isn't this the model Jesus gave us? 'Go' was His great commission—be involved in the process! Churches ought to teach and train Christians to go into a pluralistic culture and contextualize the gospel as Paul did at Mars Hill for the Athenians, and become content-creators of new and innovative ways to advance the kingdom."

Essential Reminders

The New Testament picture of CHURCH has very little to do with liturgy, sacred sites, or hushed tones because most of the meeting-up places were temporary, ordinary, and beside the point. The real life of CHURCH came not from awed crowds participating in ritual performances conducted by someone up front, but from worshipful celebration sung, spoken, and prayed alongside one another, as well as from teachings and stories shared amongst one another. A separate class of clergy/ministers hadn't yet emerged.

When CHURCH first started happening on the heels of those radical 1st Century conversions, men and women were trying to understand utterly foreign spiritual ways of thinking and living. Everyone who had responded to Jesus' invitation was profoundly interested in learning from one another—especially from those who were a bit ahead of them in figuring out how things worked in the Kingdom.

Over the centuries, CHURCH has adopted different forms and structures. Our world is shifting again, and many of us have a prophetic sense that the 90-minute weekly service in a building that houses a congregation may not work well in the future. I'm not necessarily interested in commenting on historic patterns or making observations about how any of our contemporaries may pattern CHURCH. But I do want to explain my understandings of why CHURCH exists—why I encourage people to bother with the hassle of “having” CHURCH week after week.

Though very simple, these purposes are easy to forget, and they require almost constant attention from CHURCH LEADERS. However large or small, whether structured or informal, scheduled or spontaneous, CHURCH ought to:

- Introduce people to the love and the (eternal) life of God, through Jesus Christ—exalting Jesus as Lord in worship and witness.
- Disciple and train people in Kingdom principles, so that they can do likewise—teaching from the Bible, the revealed and definitive word of God.
- Embrace and nurture people unconditionally—loving without pre-conditions like the Lord loves each of us.
- Honor people as unique parts of the whole Body of Christ—empowering everyone to serve according to their God-intended design.

Even though Paul had quite a following among the early CHURCHES, he never forgot God's focus on individuals. His letters were penned to local and regional assemblies, yet he frequently mentions specific people (and concerns) by name. That duality is what led me to test myself monthly—to see to what extent I was fully living out my leadership assignment in Jesus' CHURCH.

As a congregation, we took communion on the first week of each month, and our pattern called for everyone to file a row at a time to the front of the auditorium, where they received the elements and returned to their chairs. I always held the basket of broken bread. As each person took the bread from my hands, I did a mental check of their name. Did I know it? Jesus knows His sheep; did I know mine? I realized long ago that my priority to know the people in my congregation would eventually butt against my desire to enlarge it.

Does that mean large assemblies ought not exist? No. But without an intentional structuring to make sure that the sheep are each known (well) by at least some of the appointed LEADERS, such

CHURCHES will not effectively produce active, *ministering-to-others* members. Being known and loved is a vital component of all discipleship—and making disciples isn't quite the same thing as having lots of people attend CHURCH services.

Paul found no inconsistency between his lengthy messages (sermons) and his expectation that when believers gathered they were to minister to one another (1 Corinthians 14:26). Both don't necessarily need to be done in the same weekly setting, and that's why I was so passionate about cell groups. They offered a perfect opportunity to train and engage people in *one-on-one* ministry. In the last few decades, LEADERS and members in the Body of Christ have been overly enamored with BIG as a measure of success in ministry—so many of the programs and structures in CHURCH have developed with that one goal in mind.

Along the way, CHURCH LEADERS forgot about knowing their sheep—and loving, mending, training and sending them into more ministry than they could ever have accomplished without being vitally connected to other believers from whom they learned.

I believe that much of the current exodus from CHURCH by long-time believers can be explained as a backlash against CHURCHES that have de-emphasized "*each-other*" ministry. CHURCH members who never have meaningful training/opportunity for ministering personally to others will eventually go off in search of a more biblical CHURCH. Their soul will not long tolerate such waste of their spiritual experience!