

## **Problem: Why Church membership?**

What lies underneath this question from a growing number of Millennial and Gen Z parishioners? What assumptions or suspicions are revealed by the asking of this question? The reasons for why they resist the idea of becoming members of a local church and submitting to that church's elders are common and varied. For instance, 'why do we need to be accountable to a specific group of people in the church; aren't we all a part of the 'priesthood of believers?' In fact, wouldn't it be easier to be accountable to those we are closest to?' Or, the claim that the church is simply too susceptible to leadership. This accusation has been manifested in various and very public ecclesial settings in the more recent history of the church. (i.e.--Driscoll/Mars Hill; MaCarthur/youth pastor; Sovereign Grace/Mahaney; Bill Hybels/Willow Creek Church, etc.) And finally, the employment of an 'epistemological & historical abortion' which severs today's church from the bible and church history's reflection on the governance of Christ's Church. 'The ancient church does not speak to the context and issues of the modern Church' is a common refrain. Despite the multitude of smoke screens used to keep oneself out of the ray of the church's 'influence', these questions reveal, in my humble opinion, deeper and dangerous assumptions that are detrimental to the church corporate and to the individual lives of its participants.

By way of subtraction, I surmise that the above excuses leave us with an epistemology and a spirituality that is congruent with it. First, by relegating the bible and the church's past and present implementation of ecclesial doctrines, the ontological starting point for thinking theologically about the church becomes primarily one of human autonomy. If the bible, and past executions of its ecclesial structures are removed or diminished, then the Christian is left to depend upon one's reason, science/observation, and/or experience to determine the veracity of biblical doctrines. I think a good example of such thinking is found in the writings of many of the '*emergent*' church leaders.<sup>1</sup> This framework of knowing has left us with many Christians having their spiritualities reduced to somewhat of a Christian Existentialism/Pantheism, where their apprehension and experience of God's truth is driven by our reasoned expectations, experiences, and resultant feelings. Apart from proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, the believer's spirituality is akin to a form of universalism or spiritualism. (This dynamic can be somewhat similar to what we see in some pentecostal circles.)

## **Irony: The Creation of Alternative Covenant Communities**

Despite the resistance to the influence of leadership within the church, many of these folks find themselves, unbeknownst to them, creating 'alternative covenant communities.' For instance, it is a common feature that these believers have high degrees of self-righteous fervor in relation to social and political issues. As such, many churches are experiencing a growing expectation for ecclesial responses to various social justice issues. (i.e.--police brutality, politics/elections, racial acts of violence, etc.)<sup>2</sup> As such, these impetuses serve as not so subtle 'stipulations' for acceptance or commitment to be a part of their groups or for them to join ours.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> McLaren, Brian, *A Different Kind of Christian*, and also in his *Generous Orthodoxy*, Both of these books open the door to creative epistemologies and hermeneutics.

<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon is not limited to conservative or moderate churches or denominations. Becoming a universal occurrence.

<sup>3</sup> I acknowledge that these occurrences are nothing new to the ecclesial landscape. These types of reactions have been occurring throughout the life of the church.

Also, many of these adherents tend to have their 'prophets' that reflect their values.<sup>4</sup> And closely related to this are the formation of collegial communities that 'house' those who come from similar 'ilks'; namely, networks, camps, conferences, blogs, podcasts, and in some cases the creation of new denominations and affiliations.<sup>5</sup> As such, these entities become bodies in which to influence their followers and others disenchanting within the current evangelical complex.

Having established new 'centers of influence' or gravity, both within and without our churches, the tendency seems to be to influence/persuade established communions, or their new networks to become 'bodies of influence' outside of the jurisdiction of the church. Unfortunately, having limited the influence of the Bible and the church's hard-won wisdom in relation to Church jurisdiction, much of the 'influence' in this camp has removed most of the regulators that would temper these forays into the jurisdictions outside of its spheres. As a result, much of the demands/expectations of these folks are wanting the Church to use its influence in the world via unbiblical methodologies.<sup>6</sup> Instead of allowing the Gospel, God's Word, and our confessional forbearers to be the influencing factor in our decision making, we make use of these worldly power-moves to move people into submission; creating a form of works of righteousness for people to submit to. As I have tried to demonstrate anecdotally, one cannot help but see current and potential problems arising from such an approach.

My mentioning and explaining some of these problems are by no means exhaustive, but I hope will point out some of the main ones that I see. First, following an experienced driven epistemology leads one to the *Impossibility of Unity*. The question screams at us: who's 'experience' and 'interpretation of reality' should all be compelled to follow. Second, creating one's own governing reality apart from Christ's church leads to an *Over-realization of the Agency of Man*. Despite all the good intentions, efforts to bring about a world of order and justice that one desires assumes not only that man can bring about the desired changes but that the means for that change are free from the gaze of the Triune God. (that they somehow are justified in their oppressive actions. A mistake that many churches have made throughout history) All the initial concerns stated for not becoming a member of a church and/or submitting to the leadership of the church become a real possibility. And finally, pursuing self-governing inevitably leads to the *Possibility of the Arbitrariness of Moral Arguments*. If experiences and feelings become the major interpretive lenses, then one's influence is limited only to those who are willing to submit themselves to their particular framework. Thus, influence is likely to come down to the very thing they accused the church of doing; namely, having to use force and oppression to get unity. (even using political & social movements to accomplish it) If they were really willing to follow their relativistic principles to their conclusion they would quickly see that they are venturing into the realm of unintelligibility; none of us can live with the principles of

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<sup>4</sup> Again, this occurrence is not unusual as each camp underneath the universal and reformed Church-umbrella has their 'prophets' which speak to their concerns.

<sup>5</sup> See McLaren's books & Amazon

<sup>6</sup> I.e.--amassing large numbers of folks into organizations or associations outside of denominational circles to create a sense of consensus; making use of various mediums and technologies to coerce, shame, and bully others into either silence or submission. (a cancel culture mechanism) These moves find their most insidious demonstration when folks blend their faith into a political narrative; this approach sets up the dangerous potential for nationalism and creates additional hurdles for peace and fellowship within the church. Instead of being united to one another via the Gospel of Grace, church members begin to place unbiblical expectations for fellowship upon one another. (i.e.--who one voted for) As stated before in other footnotes, this activity is not limited to any one stripe of church communions.

human autonomy. In fact, if they were consistent, they would not be able to give an account for why anyone should follow their prescriptions. They have just pulled the rug of influence out from under themselves.

### **Begging the Question(s):**

Nonetheless, this forces the church and its people to ask and wrestle with a very pertinent question: **Who should and will be the 'ultimate influence' upon Christ's Church; A Total Christ vision or one that is driven by human autonomy**<sup>7</sup>? I realize this may seem like a stark contrast, but in light of the epistemology of knowing being employed by those unwilling to join our communions, there isn't much difference between what a secular humanist does and the strain of christian I have laid out.

### **A Total Christ Response:**

#### **An Unapologetic Total Christ Spirituality<sup>8</sup>**

A *Total Christ Spirituality*, as we have all come to understand and experience is Christianity's state of being; or put another way, the Christian's and Church's ontology. The ultimate reality, whereby the Triune God relates to His creation via Covenant (prophet), Temple (priest), and His structure for One-Anothering (King). In this spirituality there is only '*one Influencer*'; the mediated presence of Christ working in, by, and through His Church. It is here, at the seat of God's throne, that the world experiences a power not of this world. The question for the Church is how has and is this power experienced and applied?

In the vein of the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, the power of the Triune God and His redemptive work is mediated through men by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. I use the simplicity of this statement so as to be able to highlight how that power is not to be executed or applied; namely that the kingdom of God is not brought about by any kind of violence or force.<sup>9</sup> A truth that the Apostle Peter learned at the arrest of Jesus and that Christ revealed to Pilate under interrogation.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the victory and power of God is made present by the death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus.<sup>11</sup> A power unleashed by servanthood, suffering, and sacrifice; a model that Jesus both taught and demonstrated to His disciples at the washing of their feet. The consequence of His redemptive work was to provide spiritual nourishment for the souls of His people throughout all eternity, as demonstrated by the institution of the Lord's Supper. A picture of where it is that He is leading His people; His table in the New Heavens and the New Earth. But notice, it is a 'leading to' His presence of Prophet, Priest, and King by grace; not a 'pushing' or 'coercing' by fear of punishment.

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<sup>7</sup> Reason, Science, experience, and feelings. (secular humanism)

<sup>8</sup> I am using the *Total Christ Vision* as somewhat of an epistemological framework by which to know any and all things. Typical Presuppositional approach.

<sup>9</sup> Physical, emotional, mental, relational, verbal

<sup>10</sup> Luke 22:47-53; John 18:33-38a;

<sup>11</sup> Acts 2

Unfortunately, church history is replete with ecclesial bodies that have misused the 'keys of the kingdom'; going beyond the boundaries of the Church's declarative powers. Examples of the misuse of power and influence range from the Middle Ages until the present day. Sadly, in these instances, Christ's Church has been duped by the lies of the evil one, who falsely promises power, independence, and glory.<sup>12</sup> As a result, not unlike the kingdoms of this world, the Church has also developed a track record of oppression and abuse when it has attempted to build God's kingdom man's way.<sup>13</sup> In these instances the Church really does not look any different from the kingdom's of man; trusting in our own human reason and developing our own solutions that center on political power. And along the way, we have tried to dress-up our pursuits of power and control by tying our faith to political forces so we might compel the world to see life the way we do. These actions only further complicate our ability to both evangelize, disciple, and shepherd millennials, Gen Z, and the up and coming Gen A.

The generations mentioned above have been conditioned with an epistemology that is driven by experiences, resultant feelings, and group think<sup>14</sup>. This approach to knowing is fueled by a relativistic apprehension of truth and shame-based fear. Consequently, when the church has employed the world's means for acquiring power and influence, we have exposed these young people to 'experience' a power hungry/controlling church and possibly a distorted gospel. (This may actually not be the case but it is very likely that it is how they are interpreting and experiencing the church's influence)<sup>15</sup>

These actions have only served to convey our own lack of faith in the ascended ministry of Christ; the true source of life itself, both in the realms of creation and in the Spirit. Therefore, I think the first course of action to regain some of the 'influence' and credibility of the church is for 'us' to regain our trust in our own ascended ministry theology. The *Total Christ Vision* is our ultimate gospel apologetic; the only worldview wherein the Triune God is the creator, director, and influencer. In essence, church leaders and potential members need to have their hearts and minds run through the gauntlet of a *Total Christ Worldview*.

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<sup>12</sup> Genesis 3:1-8, 11:1-10; Matthew 4; Luke 4

<sup>13</sup> The Inquisition; misuse of ecclesial power for financial and political gain via Indulgences; helping to pave the way for the French Revolution; assisting with the colonization of much of the world via oppressive governments; providing rationalization for the enslavement of peoples around the globe; enabling various acts of sexual abuse while protecting the clergy; not engaging in the concerns of the Civil Rights Movement in some way; Christian Nationalism; etc.

<sup>14</sup>The power of Social media

<sup>15</sup> As mentioned earlier, some of the critiques of the church have some legitimacy. For example, representative governance in the church can still be misused, even if it provides some safeguards. # Another experience has been the dismissing and disregarding of people's traumatic experiences. # It is not a surprise that these types of actions occur, but oftentimes the unwillingness of these communions to press in to publicly admit their failings, to bring about justice where possible, and to pursue the healing of those who have been hurt by their churches.

This 'gauntlet' will provide various components that can serve as renewing agents. First, challenging the assumptions or presuppositions of those who would devalue Christ's Lordship via membership. Helmut Thielicke, Corneilus Vantil, & other presuppositionalists call this process 'pushing the antithesis'; winsomely showing them that their underlying ideas are bankrupt. Or as Francis Shaeffer stated, 'showing that the emperor has no clothes.' This task, rightly applied, will show them that many of the principles guiding them are not from God, but are the result of a man-centered worldview, which reflect a spirit of human autonomy and will not bring about the desired results they want. And as such, following these assumptions and their resultant actions lessen their 'influence' for the gospel and God's kingdom.

***Re-Considering A Pastoral Model***<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>See Purvis, Andrew; Pastoral Ministry in the Classical Tradition; or Timothy Z. Whitmer's *The Shepherd Leader*