

Church: The Alternative Community as Evangelist **What is your church's story? What is your church's action?**

- ✠ “Your ability to talk about Jesus is only impressive to people who care. Actual living like Jesus impacts the people who don't” (Kevin Elijah Burgess, Christian hip hop artist, rapper).
- ✠ “How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it” (Lieslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic World*).
- ✠ “It is in the local congregation that the credibility of the gospel becomes apparent, for that is the place where a real community of men and women, of young and old, of stranger and friend, are gathered into the reconciled fellowship of the body of Christ, hear the declaration that their sins are forgiven, and feast together at the table of the Lord” (Rae Murray).
- ✠ Emil Brunner remarked, “For every civilization, for every period of history, it is true to say, ‘show me what kind of gods you have, and I will tell you what kind of humanity you possess.’” For the Christian and Christian community it is: *Show me what kind of association you have with those living with the effects of poverty, and I will tell you what kind of god you worship*” ~CMA, *Wasted Evangelism*

While the affluent among and around Christian congregations certainly had needs to be addressed and idolatries to be destroyed, the Church of Acts and the early church, through the first three centuries, focused their resources and Christian charity on the poor and the rejected.

There were two particular examples, two kinds, of charity action, which can be referred to as Christian (or biblical) social action, and of which give application for “church as the evangelist.”

- ✠ Congregations paid for the funerals of the poor (most often members; but not always members).
- ✠ Congregations (Christian families) took-in street orphans and rescued exposed babies and children dumped in garbage heaps. (This was called exposure; we call it abortion).

The first was a practical, concrete, direct act of Christian charity (gospel care or needs-based, if you will).

The second was a direct result of a newly understood Christian view of humanity and of a person's worth (gospel-based, theologically-based, if you will).

Both a demonstration of the gospel and a discipleship of the cross that changed the world. We have these two categories of congregational social action, charity action, the actions of Christ through the local church.

What kind of action and/or charity might we do today? List them?

- 1) Practical, charity, needs-base**
- 2) Gospel-Theological (humanity)**

I. Some Preliminary “Marks”: The Marks of Church,¹ particularly the fifth one (#5)

- 1) Gospel-Centered
- 2) Being Missional
- 3) United in Belief
- 4) Participating in Sacramental Worship
- 5) United in Community**

We want to emphasize a local-oriented ministry where community really matters. This community formation occurs where Christ our King is fleshed out through life-on-life “one anothering” and holistic empowerment under the shepherding care of Christ’s under-shepherds and servant leaders.

What to look for:

- A communal, rather than individual, approach to everything – such as to change the way we think about our possessions, time, decisions, ethics – everything in relation to one-anothering!
- A community that shares its burdens with one another.
- A community that values the Christian village in child raising.
- A communal consciousness that feels the relation of the part to the whole, both in flourishing as each member flourishes and in suffering as one member suffers.
- **A missional method that focuses less on the individual evangelist and more on the communal evangelist as a strategy for reaching those not yet Christians.**
- Intentional shepherding and life on life (vs. just curriculum on life) discipleship.

II. Some Assumptions & Texts of Scripture

- A. Christ is the Head; church is the body.
- B. The mystical, but not less than real, mediatorial presence of Christ in/through/with/by a church.
- C. Implied local-ness of the body of Christ geographically
- D. The New Testament writers seem far more concerned with the gathered believers as sacred space than they are with actual (addressed) space (with one caveat).
- E. The House-church as NT model (see next point/page for implications that can be applied)

There are a number of texts indicating a gathered-church in someone’s house²

- . . . greet the church that is in their house (Rom 16:5)
- Greet those who are of the household of Aristobulus (Rom 16:10)
- Greet . . . the household of Narcissus, who are in the Lord (Rom 16:11)
- Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house (1 Cor 16:19)
- Greet . . . Nympha and the church that is in her house (Col 4:15)
- To Philemon . . . and to the church in your house (Phlm 1:1–2)

¹ Christ Presbyterian Church spirituality, Marks of Church > <https://www.cpenewhaven.org/our-spirituality>

² Other texts affirm and indicate the formation of “household” as church (e.g., 1 Pet 4:17; 1 Cor 1:16; 16:15; Gal 6:10; 1 Tim 3:15; cf., 2 Tim 1:16; 3:6; 4:19; 1 Pet 2:5; cf. Acts 12:12; 14:27; 15:30; 20:7–8).

F. New Testament Texts that Affirm “*Church as the Alternative Community*”

Ephesians 1:15-23: For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, ¹⁷that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ¹⁸having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might ²⁰that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²²**And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,** ²³**which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.**

Ephesians 3:8-10: To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, ¹⁰**so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.**

1 Peter 3:13-17: Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? ¹⁴But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵**but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,** ¹⁶having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. ¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

1 Corinthians 3:16-17: Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. **For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.**

2 Corinthians 6:16: What agreement has the temple of God with idols? **For we are the temple of the living God;** as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

Ephesians 2:11-21: Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹²remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹**So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,** ²⁰**built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,** ²¹**in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.** ²²**In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.**

II. Implications of House-church for evangelism: Ministry Amid Neighborhood

A. The House Church in the New Testament offers some insight in the nature of Evangelism³

B. A Congregation, the only possible hermeneutic of the gospel

1. The primary means to demonstrate the gospel

“I have come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross?” (Lesslie Newbigin).

2. Secondary means is rooted in and depends on the primary means:

“I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. I am, of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel— evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences, and even books such as this one” (Lesslie Newbigin).

“But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community.”⁴

C. The place of the alternative community: neighborhood

1. What is a neighborhood?

2. *Ekklesia* (church) in the New Testament—the word *ekklesia* (*church*) is used in three different ways in the New Testament:

- a) *Ekklesia*, use of the new people of God in the totality of their lives as the recreated/re-constituted/redeemed humankind in Jesus Christ. As such, her life comes to expression in the totality of her life and not only as she gathers for worship, but in her severality (i.e., believers as individuals and families) in their relationships and associations.
- b) The word *ekklesia* is a community *gathered* for certain “religious” activities—i.e., worship, prayer, sacraments, and so forth.
- c) The word is used of local identifiable congregations. These congregations are organized as communities and are recognizable as a human community in a certain place.⁵

³ The role of the “house church” (cf. Acts 7:48; 17:24; Eph 2:11-22) should have similar value as the OT references to use uncut stones (Exod 20:25; Deut 27:5-6; Jos 8:31) for building altars for YHWH, namely the emphasis on “not built with hands” apply to both.

⁴ Newbigin, Lesslie, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 227.

⁵ See Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Eerdmans, 1975): 328-330.

3. *Ekklesia* (church) in place where it shows up (communally and in community)

- “It is, I think, very significant that in the consistent usage of the New Testament, the word *ekklēsia* is qualified in only two ways; it is “the Church of God,” or “of Christ,” and it is the church of a place.⁶ A Christian congregation is defined by this twofold relation: it is God’s embassy in a specific place” (Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*).
- “We don’t want to simply snatch families and kids out of bad neighborhoods and send them all to middle-class suburban land. Our great challenge is to bring Jesus into the ‘hood’ and have people of churches planted there develop a sense of ownership in their own community. The challenge is to have poor people who come to Christ in that place love the people of that place, and seek to change that place through the power of God” (Randy Nabors, *Merciful: The Opportunity and Challenge of Discipling the Poor Out of Poverty*).
- “Loving our neighbour means more than mustering kind feelings toward anonymous others. It might require, here and now, that we commit ourselves to building (or better, recovering and redeeming) built environments in which neighbours actually show up to be loved.”⁷
 - Although Smith probably means “show up” as in become visible to the church, I’d preferred if he wrote: . . . *in which the church local (his body, his presence) appears to our neighbors.*⁸
- “Loving without agenda: Often our neighborhoods are filled with special interest groups. The church is not a special interest group; rather we have a reconciling mission that seeks unity, that all might flourish. Consider how your faith community can champion what others are already doing” (Paul Sparks, et al., *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community*).

III. Signs (or lenses) of the Gospel through a Congregation of Believers

1. During the early years of its life, the church understood her identity as resident aliens.
2. The lenses: sign, instrument (or agent), and firstfruit (sometimes deposit or foretaste) of the kingdom
 - Newbigin’s focus: *The Congregation as Hermeneutic of the Gospel*—“It (the community formed by Jesus) becomes the place where men and women and children find that the gospel gives them the framework of understanding, the “lenses” through which they are able to understand who they are and how to navigate and evangelize the world.”

⁶ Cf. Ro 16; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:2; Col 4:15-16; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; Rev 1-3.

⁷ Smith, James K.A., “Loving Our Neighbour(hood)s: The Architecture of Altruism.” Comment, online magazine (Sept 1, 2007) >> <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/loving-our-neighbour-hood-s-the-architecture-of-altruism/>

⁸ Partially, the meaning behind our CPC in The Hill phrase, “In His Midst.”

- “Each of these three words is important. They are to be a sign, pointing men to something that is beyond their present horizon but can give guidance and hope now; an instrument (not the only one) that God can use for his work of healing, liberating, and blessing; and a firstfruit--a place where men and women can have a real taste now of the joy and freedom God intends for us all” (Newbigin, *A Word in Season. Perspectives on Christian World Mission*. Eerdmans (1994), p. 33).

- 2. The church understood itself to be an alternative community that was nourished by an alternative story affirmed in its house-venue and by its gathering to worship
 - The church is a community that is shaped by a different story than the dominant cultural story. The word community stresses that the mission of the church is a communal affair; the church is to embody a social order that faithfully points to the coming kingdom.
 - This community at worship is not a community that ignores public life by being reshaped into a private institution framed an otherworldly and spiritual salvation for its members. Rather it is publicly subversive by a life of radical discipleship that exists as a contrast/counter/alternative to society.

- 3. Christian worship was semi-public (in view of neighbors)

- 4. The church-gathered is a new kind of humanity: worship is the story repeated
 - “A Christian congregation is a community in which, through the constant remembering and rehearsing of the true story of human nature and destiny, an attitude of healthy scepticism can be sustained, a scepticism which enables one to take part in the life of society without being bemused and deluded by its own beliefs about itself. And, if the congregation is to function effectively as a community of faith, its manner of speaking the truth must not be aligned to the techniques of modern propaganda, but must have the modesty, the sobriety, and the realism which are proper to a disciple of Jesus” (Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, p. 229).

- 5. The public alternative community as evangelist

- 6. The church/a church is not simply as religious community gathered to engage in certain religious rituals; rather the church is the new humanity that already shares in the life of the kingdom of God and that life spans the whole of human affairs.

*I have adapted Newbigin's six (6) characteristics of a congregation—i.e., the “lenses,” the “signs”—that is true to its calling, church as Evangelist, its nature as the alternative community:

a. A community gathered for worship as evangelism

- 1) We are not silent movies
- 2) Worship is declarative (word) and performance (deed)
- 3) Worship is framed by the gospel
- 4) Worship develops in habits (formed by word and deed)
- 5) Worship was semi-public

b. A community of Truth (and constant remembering) with a new plausibility structure

- 1) The Word (i.e., Bible/Scriptures) & the Gospel
- 2) Recreating a plausibility structure: truth & worship

c. A Community Deeply Concerned and Involved with Its Immediate Neighborhood

- 1) Church-in-Neighborhood: “God’s embassy in a specific place” (Newbigin)

Every member must be either part of this neighborhood or committed to it, bringing about the truth of the Gospel in the context that surrounds the church itself, both in proclamation (worship & witness) of and in living out the Gospel.

- 2) Take seriously the second command to love one’s neighbor(hood) . . . or its simply a concept . . .

- “Almost all intellectuals profess to love humanity and to be working for its improvement and happiness. But it is the idea of humanity they love, rather than the actual individuals who compose it. They love humanity in general rather than men and women in particular. Loving humanity as an idea, they can then produce solutions as ideas. Therein lies the danger, for when people conflict with the solution as idea, they are first ignored or dismissed as unrepresentative; and then, when they continue to obstruct the idea, they are treated with growing hostility and categorized as enemies of humanity in general” (Paul Johnson, “The Heartless Lovers of Humanity”).

I think church and Christians can fall into this same pattern . . . loving man (i.e., love humankind) and not love men (not love humans). Neighborhood makes love concrete.

- “Jesus’ command [*love your neighbor*] sounds a tad anachronistic . . . But if we’re honest, the geography of this injunction must sound strange for a culture that dwells in ‘executive’ homes on *cul-de-sacs* with heated garages and massive decks in the backyard. North American culture increasingly inhabits the kind of world where we not only don’t *know* our neighbours, we never even *see* them.”⁹

⁹ Smith, “Loving Our Neighbour(hood)s.”

3) A church loves in word and in deed

“Bonhoeffer notes that when Jesus says to his disciples, ‘You are the salt of the earth,’ he means they will be his witnesses in the totality of their existence, both in word and deed, proclaiming and acting” (Franklin 2007:101).

4) The issue of jointly vs. severally . . . but still as church

- “While each neighborhood church is called to be a sign, foretaste and instrument of God’s kingdom, she is to do so in light of *who* she is and *where* she is ministering.”¹⁰ Thus, it must exercise a level of intentionality in engaging with its community, becoming aware of its needs, and meeting those needs as best it can as a representative of God’s kingdom.

d. A community that disciples people to be a priesthood in a neighborhood

- “People share meals, serve others, discuss issues of culture in relation to their Christian convictions, and pray without beginning with specific invitations to accept the gospel” (Maddix 2013:20). This is a community that is focused on discipleship for the purpose of being a light to the nations. They form their practices of discipling around principles of: contextualization, redemption of all creation, acts of compassion/justice/mercy, hospitality, cross-perspectival dialogue, and working for the freedom of those in bondage and oppression (Maddix 2013:22-25).

1) Following around Jesus¹¹

2) Models in Leadership (doing what Jesus did)—what leaders do are what the members are supposed to be doing anyway.

3) Community Need Assessments (more on this at the end)

e. A Community of Mutual Responsibility

1) A congregation is to be a community of people responsible to each other, for each other, and with each other, a true fellowship. “Fellowship” or “Church” is not just Christian code for simply gathered together; rather it refers to a way of life that leads each member into deeper relationships, accountability, authenticity, and responsibility with the other members of the congregation.

2) Faithfulness toward one another

3) A unity that promotes open dialogue among itself about the concerns, deficiencies, gifts, and passions of its various members.

4) Developing individualized ways for people to grow closer to God individually and communally is the next step

¹⁰ Woodward, J.R. and Alan Hirsch, *Creating a Missional Culture: Equipping the Church for the Sake of the World* (InterVarsity, 2012): 171.

¹¹ See my sermon on “Following Jesus” >> <http://www.wastedevangelism.com/wasted-blog/category/following-jesus>.

f. A Community of Hope

- 1) Church grounded and existing within the reality of the gospel is a community of hope.
- 2) A local congregation renounces an introverted concern for their own life
- 3) A community of hope intentionally chooses not to be introverted and simply about its own “sustainability” and seeks to have but a church that insists there are other “strategies other than the growth paradigm.”¹²
- 4) A community of hope exists for the sake of those who are not members, as “sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the whole life of society” (Newbigin).
- 5) A hope founded in Christ, lived out in the congregation, and extended to the community for the purposes of their salvation and God’s glory.
- 6) A plausibility structure built on this hope, insists on deeper reflecting and intentional action outward, a way of life, for this congregation.

¹² Andrew Davey, *Urban Christianity and Global Order*, p. 112.

IV. Applications, Issues, and Intention When Considering Church as Evangelist

A. The problem of changed hearts to change systems

1. Not simply changed hearts to change structures and systems, or we'd be selective in whom needs Jesus
2. Not simply changed hearts to change structures and systems, or we'd be selective in whom needs Jesus

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil (1 Peter 3:13-17).

3. The congregation must get into its surrounding community and ask questions, find out about the important issues, and ways in which they can partner with the community for its flourishing.

*engagement in the needs and concerns of the neighbor, the realm of the questions) is evangelism (deed)

*the reason—when they ask—is evangelism (word)

4. Not how to navigate the personal and community idols, but to learn how to destroy them.
5. The question is how does a congregation go about becoming such a hermeneutic?
6. Early church paid for funerals, cared for orphans, rescued infant, and fed people . . .

B. Partnerships in Church for Evangelism

1. Poor community churches need nonpoor partners . . . that doesn't sacrifice the flesh of the neighborhood.

“Sharing our abundance may, as Jesus says, be impossible for mortals, but nothing is impossible for God. None of us knows what risks God’s spirit may empower us to take”¹³

2. Community friends and institutions that can leverage assistance

¹³ Brueggemann, Walter, “The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity,” *The Christian Century* (March 24, 1999).

C. Social Action as Evangelism

Definition

- “Social action is, therefore, associated with actions taken by individuals or groups on behalf of others, in particular advocating on behalf of marginalized or powerless individuals or groups whose access to the systems of power are limited or nonexistent” (*Wasted Evangelism*).
- “. . . social action is a relevant and legitimate evangelistic activity when it promotes actions and outcomes that demonstrate the inaugural presence of God’s rule and reign over creation” (*Wasted Evangelism*).
- “By living in the world and anticipating in the kingdom of God, the Church has to become critically and prophetically involved in all spheres of society” (Van Nam Kim:107).

D. Developing a Community Assessment: Intentionally getting to know the needs of your neighbors and implementing strategies and actions (i.e., logic models) on behalf of the community/neighborhood.

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