
PREFACE

Before you dive in, I want to take a moment to make some things clear about my intentions with this paper. I feel the need to include a disclaimer because this is a long and targeted writing, and I've found that, without any upfront clarification, some readers have developed some misconceptions about the message and I'm trying to convey with it.

This writing is not a call to simply "change things up because we've been doing them that way for a long time" nor is it a desire to "do things differently for the sake of doing them differently."

The core of this writing is concern for the mission of the church, as well as the culture (and personality) that it operates in.

The central questions are:

- As we consider the church today, are we truly operating in our *real* mission?
- Does the way that we think about and operate as the church today keep us squarely in our real mission or does it influence us in other directions altogether?

That's the heart of everything that you will read here – please keep these things in mind as you read.

Please understand that I don't have a vendetta against church buildings – that would be misguided and weird. What I have become uncomfortable with is the effect that I believe our building-centered church culture has on the identity and functioning of bride of Christ.

Similarly, I don't believe that church buildings are *the* problem with the church, but unlike most I do honestly believe that they are legitimately *a* problem. I believe the building-centered church model provides legitimate barriers to the church thinking and moving as God intended. As such, I believe it would be wise for us to willingly remove that barrier so that we can then, with clear eyes, identify any other impediments/idols that the current church structure may be covering up.

With this writing I wanted make the effort of looking in some detail at the effect that the church building specifically has on the church's mission and culture; hopefully, to spark some deeper introspection around a topic that you may have never thought to examine on your own.

By the end of this paper you may still disagree, and that's o.k. But it's my hope that reading this writing will afford you an opportunity to think about the church, its culture, and its mission more deeply – and if you haven't already, I'd ask that you continue to examine it earnestly, honestly, and prayerfully from this point.

-Alex

CHURCH: ARE WE BUILT AROUND THE BUILDING?

Alex Franklin

In recent months I've had some great conversations with other Christians about the state of Christianity; In these talks my intent was to discuss the current culture, personality, and operational style of the church, for the deeper purpose of exploring why the church today seems to look and feel so different from the one we see described in scripture. But there's been a feature of modern Christianity that I've been interested in discussing with people to get a feel for how they interpret the effect it has – or doesn't have – on the church, it's a feature that stands as arguably the most glaring difference between the early church and the modern church. The feature to which I'm referring is the traditional place of Christian worship and gathering: we call them “church buildings”¹.

In these conversations I've attempted to present the idea that the church operating centered around church buildings is not consistent with the intended culture, personality, and mission of the church we see described in scripture. When this idea is presented it usually faces resistance, which is understandable, because the church building is so deeply woven into the fabric of Christianity that it feels uncomfortable – wrong even – to consider the church existing without them.

Listed below are the most common objections and responses that I've encountered in conversations to this point:

- By far, the most common defense for church buildings has been something along these lines: “Well I can see some of what you're saying, but church buildings are simply an expedient for the church today.”
- The next most common response is like the first: “Sure, early Christians didn't have church buildings as we have them today, but it's not ‘wrong’ for us to use church buildings.”
- The following was also offered on several occasions: “I don't know that the church needs a change as drastic as doing away with church buildings, I just think we need Christians that will try harder and put in more effort to get closer to God.”

I'll be using the rest of this writing to attempt to examine these objections and explore the Christian church building and the affect that it has on the culture, personality, and mission of the church.

¹ Church building will be defined in this writing as a building that is the dedicated place of Christian worship and fellowship; a facility that is built or bought, owned & operated by a group of Christians with the intent that it be the primary (or exclusive) place of congregational church activity. In other words, it's not merely a generic facility or location that is used simply for its ability to accommodate a gathering, but something that is more-or-less *the* church's place of operation.

An Expedient

The most common response: Church buildings are merely an expedient to the functioning of the church.

To examine this statement, we first have to more fully define it. To do that we have to answer some questions – and the first question that needs to be asked is: “What is an expedient?”

The general definition of **expedient** (*n.*) is “a means by which to achieve a particular result efficiently or effectively”. Using this general definition, the implication would be that a church building is believed to be “a means by which to more efficiently or effectively fulfill the Christian purpose or mission.”

The next question then is: “What is the church’s mission?”

The church’s mission is best summed up in what we call “The Great Commission,” as given by Jesus himself. It states:

“...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”
(Matthew 28: 19-20)

With the church’s mission now identified, the “church building is an expedient” proposition can then be completely presented as this:

“Church buildings are a means by which to more efficiently or effectively go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, then teaching those disciples to obey everything Jesus commanded his disciples from the beginning.”

So, is it true that church buildings help the church more effectively go and make disciples of all nations [and so on]?

That’s the million-dollar question.

In my attempt to examine the question, I thought it best to break the church’s mission down into parts and assess, by looking at each part individually, whether the building helps or hinders the church in advancing toward its God-given mission.

For this writing I’ve decided to break down the mission as follows:

- Go (unto all nations)
- Make Disciples
- Baptize
- Teach Disciples

Go (unto all nations)

Go. The Christian mission starts here.

It's on this single word that the rest of the Christian mission is dependent – if the church isn't going (whether abroad or within its own surrounding communities), it can't effectively project the message and life of the Kingdom into the world around it. And it's at this foundational step that I believe we run into problems with church buildings because buildings, as a practical matter, don't encourage anyone to go anywhere; If buildings encourage anything, they encourage us to *come*. We (humans) build buildings so that we can be inside them. We build buildings so that they can protect us *from* the world. We build them, primarily, to be in them, not away from them.

Now, can we (Christians) still make it a point to *go* and have people *come* with us into our church buildings? Sure. But the fact remains that to do so would be based on our emphasis and effort alone, the building itself would not have encouraged us to go.

At this point you may be thinking: “Well we just need to try harder than we do now to reach out to our communities, it doesn't mean we need to do away with church buildings altogether.”

And this is true...But, the efforts to be more involved in our surrounding communities will ultimately lose their momentum because buildings have a natural pull to them – especially comfortable ones. It's here that we should examine the inherent influence that the design of a thing will have on how it's used.

Think about a couch...Does a couch encourage you to move and be active, or does it encourage you to sit, relax, and be comfortable?

It's the latter – a couch by its very design encourages you to sit, relax and be comfortable. Is it possible – if you get creative and try really hard – to exercise on a couch? Maybe for a short amount of time, but any exercise attempted will probably be awkward and unsustainable because the couch, by design, encourages comfort and relaxation – not activity. To attempt anything other than sitting and relaxing on a couch is to work against its design.

Similarly, think of an exercise bike...Does an exercise bike encourage you to sit, relax and be comfortable, or does it encourage you to move and be active?

Again, it's the latter – an exercise bike, by design, encourages the person sitting on it to get moving. Can you technically sit and relax on an exercise bike? Sure, but if you've ever tried to sit on one for any amount of time you know that it quickly becomes uncomfortable. Exercise bikes, in and of themselves, encourage movement – not relaxation.

Church buildings are no different; their design influences how they will be used – and buildings are designed to have us (comfortably) in them. We can try to use them in a way that is contrary to their influence, but they (like couches and exercise bikes) will be constantly working against us. We can try as we might to be outward-facing despite them, but our buildings will – as they already do – continue to pull us into their comfort, influence us toward inactivity, and at times, provide us with a false sense of security (or accomplishment) in the large numbers that may be assembled within them.

Also, church buildings encourage isolation from the world, not activity and visibility within it. Think about what modern Christian does today...After shopping for the “right church,” it’s normal to travel a fair distance to go to church on Sundays, and some weekdays as well. Many of us leave our immediate communities, spanning across our respective cities, to funnel ourselves into a relative handful of centralized locations. Over time many Christians will invest considerable time and money to leave the world so that we can “go to church.” Rather than being a presence in our everyday communities, we leave them to travel to a different community that we’ve determined to be a more favorable one for us to express our faith.

Furthermore, and in closing of this section, the call to *go* is for reaching “all nations” – that’s to say all socio-economic classes, all lifestyles, all nationalities, all religions, languages, colors and backgrounds.

How do stationary buildings encourage the church to reach all socio-economic classes, lifestyles, nationalities, worldviews and backgrounds? How do stationary buildings help us go into a fast-moving society, reaching all people where they are? How do they encourage within the body a culture of getting comfortable with other people who may be very different from ourselves?

Simply put: they don’t – at least not with any sustainability or scale. We were called to go unto all the world, but when we operate in a way that dictates that we be tethered to one specific location, the world must come to us instead.

“As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”
(John 17:18)

(next: Make Disciples)

Make Disciples

Biblical disciples ... Do church buildings help us make them?

The answer depends on what you think it means to “make disciples.” There is biblical, Christ-modeled discipleship, and there is something altogether different.

You see, Jesus tasked us with making disciples – not converts and not congregants, but disciples. As I see it, real disciple-making in the modern church is nearly non-existent. The modern, American church – like the culture around it – tends to be individualistic and rather detached (as it relates to real intimacy within its parts).

Church culture in America is such that Christians tend to bring themselves and their individual Christian walks to the building to worship (or study, or fellowship) in *proximity with* other believers, but not to necessarily function in *unison with* those other believers in a living community. Contrast that to the culture of the church described in scripture; there we see a group of people living in real community, actively working in a common mission (displaying and advancing the kingdom of God); The discipleship culture of the early church resulted in a unified body – a unity that is, frankly, uncommon within the church today.

So, what was the discipleship that Jesus modeled for his bride to replicate?

Jesus showed us that true discipleship is an experienced follower showing a less experienced follower – within the confines of an active relationship – what it looks like to live a fully subservient, fully-renewed, God-centered life in this world. Daily, Jesus showed his followers how to operate as citizens and emissaries of God’s kingdom here on earth.

As his disciples followed, he modeled practical things for them like:

Living humbly	Dying to the influences of the world
Praying to the Father	Recognizing and resisting spiritual attacks
Living in the conviction of the Spirit	Living sacrificially
Correctly interpreting the scriptures	Living counter-culturally
Serving others	Having compassion on the downtrodden
Authoritatively teaching and debating in public	Imparting grace and mercy on the “lesser”
Identifying false teachers	Encouraging others
Handling opposition	Correcting sin

Jesus gave his disciples a front-row seat to *the* life of the kingdom, with the full expectation that when he was no longer with them, they would carry on his legacy – living exactly as he did and giving others the exact same “front row” experience and hands-on training that they themselves had.

True Christian discipleship is not lectureship, it is apprenticeship; it’s not scholarship, it’s mentorship. Unfortunately, our churches tend to confine discipleship almost exclusively to lectureship. But a Christian is no more likely to be an effective minister for the kingdom by absorbing lectures in church than a man is likely to become a master craftsman by simply watching instructional videos.

Everyone has the capacity to be a disciple and every Christian – without exception – is expected to be a disciple-maker. In Acts 4, Peter and John were preaching at Solomon’s portico in the Temple. While they were preaching, they were arrested and were brought before the Sanhedrin to be questioned (and bullied into silence). Eventually they were given an opportunity to speak, and when they spoke – under the influence of the Holy Spirit – scripture tells us that members of the Sanhedrin were taken aback by both their speech and demeanor; It’s stated that: “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished, and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.”

“And they took note that these men had been with Jesus” ...wow!

This is how the world should *still* look at Christians today. They should see us not just as people who believe certain things, or who avoid doing certain things; Everyone, including the people who stand in opposition to the message we proclaim, should see a group of people who are operating with a confidence, a freedom, a love, and a unity that is unique to anything else in this world. We as individuals may be unremarkable (or even marginal) by the world’s standards, but it should be obvious to both friend and “enemy” that we’ve moved beyond merely knowing *about* this man named Jesus to actually experiencing his transformation first hand. Our connection to Christ – his spirit, and his authority – should be undeniable.

Now what does the church building have to do with any of this? We can still connect with God this way “at church”, right?

I don’t believe we can fully, according to what Jesus demonstrated. The way Jesus lived, he showed us that the real meat of the discipleship process happens in real-life contexts – around meals (at the homes of everyone from tax collectors, to disciples of his, to Pharisees), in Synagogues, sitting in public courts, travelling along roads, resting at watering holes, in gardens, on hillsides, etc. Jesus largely kept his followers in places and situations where real life happened fast and unfiltered; and it was in these life situations that kingdom lessons could be both learned and applied. (To be clear, Jesus would settle down in one location to just teach his disciples from time to time – see John 3:22. My point here is that most of his time discipling was made up of him and his disciples being in the world in everyday situations, not separate from the world in a sterile teaching environment.)

Christians have long ago given in to the adversary’s temptation to substitute real discipleship and real kingdom living for doing “church,” but we need to understand that doing “church” is no substitute for God’s people being active and moving together as one bodily unit in the world.

Now I’m not trying to attack anyone or question the sincerity of anyone’s faith or practice, because I know we mean well when we gather for our church events and activities; but as it stands, the typical gathering “at church” is neither the time nor the place where we address the many, very real things that members of the body are experiencing, or need help with. Very few Christians, present company included, use the times when gathered at the building as opportunities to be open about things they’re dealing with so that they can receive the help and support that they need from their brothers and sisters. The typical church environment is, at best, an awkward environment for Christians to lean on other Christians for help with the very real (and sometimes very ugly) issues that we all face.

Many believe that buildings are an expedient for the church, but I think it's telling that most of the real relationship building, intimacy, and mentorship that does happen within Christianity, tends to happen *outside* the church building.

Also, consider this...If there was ever a person to walk this planet that was qualified to establish a doctrinally sound, spiritually fruitful, and culturally vibrant "church" that would have hordes of people streaming into its building doors, it was Jesus of Nazareth. He was wiser, more dynamic in character, and more magnetic in personality than anyone before him, or anyone since.

But he never established anything that looked like our modern "church" ...Why?

Surely, he could have if he wanted to; he'd healed and powerfully affected the lives of so many, he undoubtedly could have had his followers donate to the cause of constructing a building from which he would minister and "make disciples." But he didn't. Instead, he identified a handful of men and told them to follow him; Follow him as he went *into* the world, into real-life situations, interacting with real-life people, daily giving the world the love and grace, it so desperately needed. He didn't set up a building and expect the world to come to him; instead he went out to the world and every moment of every day he confronted the darkness of this world, marching in the mission of his Father with fierce intent and a focus that would make a laser jealous.

...And being his disciples, that's exactly what we're expected to do, too!

The fact is, the church can't function healthfully and as intended without real, active discipleship; Discipleship is to permeate and empower *every* aspect of the church's functioning – evangelism, teaching and instruction, leadership development and training, individual and collective spiritual development, peer-to-peer accountability, church discipline, benevolence, worship, and so on. To lack discipleship is not to miss a "nice-to-have," it's to be missing the functional core and personality of the church!

With all that said, the real question is not, "Is discipleship *possible* within the church model we're used to operating in today?" (just about anything is possible) the real question is, "Does our current church model *encourage* the constant, genuine discipleship and disciple-making that that we see in the early church?" Because if our church model doesn't encourage discipleship then we'll just be fighting a constant battle against our environment, and that shouldn't be.

Discipleship should flow naturally for the church; In other words, the church should perpetuate discipleship and discipleship should perpetuate the church.

As it stands today, the church has lots of outstanding facilities, but it has very little in the way real discipleship. If church facilities in-and-of-themselves are expedient to the process of making real disciples, I believe that discipleship would be more natural within the church, but instead, in the modern church it's largely non-existent.

(next: Baptize)

Baptize

While performing a baptism is in some ways convenient in a baptistery (that's *if* the building even has one), the act of immersing a believer is no more effective in a church building than any other accommodating body of water like say, a pond, river, swimming pool, bath tub, etc. In fact, if you're on another side of town (or out of town completely) and don't have access to a church building, it's not a help at all. At that point you would need to find another means of immersing someone, sans church building.

Teach Disciples

(In many ways this section on teaching will dovetail with the section on discipleship, which will be evident as we go along.)

At first glance it seems as if the church building could be expedient to Christian teaching and learning, but the question is: "What type of teaching are we talking about?" and "What types of things are Christians expected to be learning?" Referring again to the Great Commission, Jesus said:

"...teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

1) Teaching [disciples] to obey

Obey (*v.*): a. to comply with the command, direction, or request of a person or a law; b. to submit to the authority of.

Teaching obedience and submission to God's authority aren't things that can be done adequately through lecture alone. Obedience and submission are things that need to be modeled, and accountability needs to be present as well.

And that's exactly what Jesus did – he led his followers by example. He never asked them to do anything he either hadn't done first or was unwilling to do. If he wanted them to be perfectly obedient to the will of the Father, then he would have to demonstrate perfect obedience to Him first. And he did that – from day one all the way to his death.

As his disciples followed, he went into the world and preached, taught, served, healed, loved, and fought for those who couldn't – or didn't know how to – fight for themselves. Do you imagine that if all Jesus had done while he was apprenticing his disciples was simply *talk about* obedience within the kingdom of God, that when his time came to physically leave them to do the work, that they would have been properly prepared (or motivated) for the day-in-day-out cross-bearing of a Jesus follower? If they hadn't seen Jesus tirelessly serve those he encountered? If they hadn't personally witnessed him reason with, resist, and rebuke religious leaders? If they hadn't seen him graciously exonerate the woman caught in adultery? If they hadn't been there when he witnessed to the Samaritan woman (and subsequently her entire village)? If they hadn't seen him remain silent and humble in the face of false accusation and execution?

Most of Jesus' teaching was done by living and actively engaging with the world. Then, when there was time and space to reflect, he would take the time to talk to his disciples in more depth about what they had experienced; he would emphasize key points of learning and his disciples would have him clarify things they still didn't fully understand. His teaching in this manner was one of the

reasons that Jesus was so effective – his teachings were so tangible, so concrete; the students could identify with the lessons because they were living the lessons first-hand.

Kingdom concepts weren't as abstract to Jesus' disciples because they were grounded in real-life experience. I'm afraid we miss much of this as the church today, having our teaching grounded in lectures rather than on practical experience, application, and relationship. As a result, biblical concepts and practical application aren't as real (or clear) to many Christians today as they otherwise should be.

2) Obeying the commands

What are the commands Jesus wanted all his followers to be obey?

We could go several ways here, but for simplicity's sake, my mind goes to Jesus' response when asked by a teacher of the Law which commandment in the Law was the greatest.

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."
(Matthew 22: 37-40)

Question: "Can you adequately teach someone how to live in a committed, loving relationship in an academic setting?" Because that's exactly what we're to be constantly cultivating with God – a relationship; in many ways akin to a marriage – the depth, the intimacy, the constant pursuit, the forgiveness, the grace, the encouragement, the constant exploration, discovery and experience. You can't cultivate a healthy marriage by someone merely telling you about it, ultimately you must experience it yourself. You must fail and succeed, you must give and take, and you must sacrifice for it. It's the same way with loving God; loving is a class most completely and effectively taught in experience, not head-knowledge.

Likewise, how can Christians be expected to learn to love their neighbor and impart grace freely on *everyone* in what is essentially a classroom? You can only really learn to love and be gracious to "difficult" people by getting out there, loving, and giving grace to "difficult" people – not by sitting and listening, over and over, to teachings about the virtues of grace and love. If the church really expects to grow in the things Jesus has commanded, it must begin to exercise them.

Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law, and his obedience to the Law was manifested in ways dissimilar to that of the typical teacher-of-the-law; He loved, he encouraged, he strengthened, he served, and he lightened loads; in short: He gave life. In contrast, the obedience levied by the teachers of the law was borne out in strict, burdensome rule-keeping, judgement and fear; fear of being punished by God for not adhering stringently to every letter of the Law. *Adherence* to the *letter* of the law is something easily communicated and received in lecture-form ("Here's what the Law says, do that."), but *obedience* to the *spirit* of the Law, not so much. Obedience to the fullness of the spirit of the law – like Christ demonstrated – takes maturity, and maturity comes from experience, experience comes by doing.

What churches primarily offer today is the teaching of information – facts, commands, ideas, and concepts; but because the learning is based on acquiring *head*-knowledge it struggles to become anything more than abstract information in the lives of many believers. In contrast, the early church functioned on a platform of teaching/learning based on practical life application and experience. And it was through *this* culture that the church learned, matured, and multiplied as explosively as it did. Every day the church lived-out their obedience *together* and the obedience that was put on display encouraged even more obedience within the body – their active obedience only bred more obedience and therefore, more faith in God’s provision.

Lastly, implied in the command to obey all things Jesus commanded was that *all* disciples are to make disciples – which requires teaching. But does the current church model facilitate a culture of *every* member being an active minister and mouthpiece in the kingdom, or does it encourage sitting and learning under the “more educated, more capable” teachers? Being that many times there are such large numbers of capable people in one congregation, many within our churches fall into letting others do “the work” rather than them operating in a responsibility of kingdom ministry as well.

An unfortunate byproduct of our church culture is that many Christians feel unqualified to be active, in general, because they don’t “know enough Bible” or they don’t “know how to teach.” While bible knowledge is critical for every believer (and we should increase our familiarity with the Word so that its precepts can be written on our heart) the common feeling among Christians that they can’t be active because they don’t know enough is an indictment on our [over]emphasis on acquiring bible knowledge.

When you take an honest look at how Jesus and the Apostles lived, what they taught, and how they taught, there is an unmistakable message that we absolutely mistake today. And that message is this:

Christ-centered teaching should result in *servants*, not *scholars*.

Having bible knowledge is fantastic – and absolutely necessary – but if that knowledge isn’t shaping us into lowly servants, willing to wash dirty feet and lay down our lives for our neighbors (any, and all of them), then we’re completely missing the spirit of our teacher and master.

Verdict

Yes or No

Do church buildings provide the church a means by which to more effectively (or efficiently) ...

- 1) Go into the world (near and far) and reach all its people with the gospel? No
- 2) Cultivate mature, experienced Christ-imitators who are active in making more Christ-imitators? No
- 3) Baptize new Christ-imitators? No
- 4) Teach Christ-imitators, in a practical manner, how to live a life of full reliance, abiding, obedience and deep love for God and all mankind? No

(next: Related thoughts and considerations)

A few more thoughts and considerations around this topic:

- Our owned buildings require precious time and energy that could be otherwise used to advance the kingdom.

Think about it: if churches were to experience rapid *multiplicative* growth, imagine how difficult it would be for our facilities to keep up. If churches consistently multiplied, we'd be constantly running out of accommodations. Should we just keep throwing up buildings rapid-fire? Imagine the time, energy, money, and resources that would be required to scout, acquire and/or build, then maintain all those buildings. Years-worth of time, crazy amounts of energy, and of course, money. Then what happens if after a sustained period of growth there is a period of shrinking? Now we have a surplus of buildings we need to support. Our current church model doesn't efficiently handle sustained growth or pruning, church populations must be throttled in order to stay in a sort of a "population sweet-spot," if you will. But we should never throttle, and we shouldn't have to worry about "sweet-spots."

- We are very prosperous here in the U.S., but just because we often have the resources to acquire and maintain specialized facilities, is it wise stewardship on our part to do so? How much more could we be doing in the kingdom if we didn't have such a large amount of resources allocated to facilities? Facilities that many Christians only spend a small fraction of their time in, and most non-believers have no interest stepping foot into?
- When assessing the state of the church today we often lament the lack of energy, commitment, and conviction among Christians, but we don't acknowledge the effect the church environment plays in the malaise. To paraphrase a common sentiment that I've had communicated to me lately, it's believed that "many Christians are simply lazy and don't try hard enough in their faith walk to be fruitful; Christians just need to read more, study more, pray more, attend more church services and teach more bible classes – they just need to *want it* more, but they just don't. If Christians just worked harder at doing the 'right things,' then the church would flourish and be restored to the powerhouse that it once was." Well, we've lived in this philosophy for a while now and that hasn't proven to be the case.

Now stay with me here, but I don't think it's stepping too far out on a limb to make the statement that 21st Century Americans are lazier and more entitled than, say, early-19th Century Americans. But are humans inherently lazier now than they were several centuries ago? Of course not, there are people groups in the world today that work every bit as hard as humans ever have – usually because their situations dictate that they do so in order to survive. The fact is that the present-day American is lazier and more entitled than their earlier counterparts because our environment cultivates laziness and entitlement. Technology and conveniences make things easy for us and after a while comfort, ease, and self-centeredness become our default setting.

I offer that the same is true of modern Christianity. Many Christians are deficient in conviction, energy, and deep commitment because that's what the current church culture dictates (To be clear: not *all* Christians can be characterized this way, but *many* can, myself included at times). Collectively, we don't think nearly as much about kingdom work as we do "church" work. Our churches are largely built on catering to their members. Interesting sermons, informative classes and curriculums, engaging programs, etc. Then, because our church mission is largely centered around us, we end up lacking the real power and authority

to really transform the world around us. You see, humans will always get behind what they feel is a real mission, something that gives them a true sense of purpose; and I think when you get down to it, the lack of conviction in so many Christians comes from a deep, subconscious acknowledgment of the superficiality of the mission they're operating in.

Many believe that Christians drag down the church, but I believe it's a fair statement that to a larger degree our church culture drags down Christians. People don't understand their true mission and identity as kingdom citizens.

(Now, I feel the need to briefly speak more on the idea that "all the church needs is more people that 'work harder' and 'do more' to be better Christians, thus creating a better church" – because this is a **very** common sentiment that's been expressed to me in conversations about the church. This idea of what the church needs seems noble on its face, but looked at more deeply, I believe it's very dangerous and is the exact opposite of what the church needs. We need to understand that a culture built on this premise will only produce more proud, judgmental, burdened, insecure Christians. Like knowledge in-and-of-itself, works in-and-of-themselves tend to puff up and make us more self-important and self-reliant. Then, when others fail to uphold our level of dedication and [self-]righteousness we're tempted to look down on them for it.

What the body really needs is more *humility* and *submission* to God's will, not more doing and striving according to our own will.

Our desire for the church shouldn't be more *works by* its people, it should be for more *humility within* its people. We should want the church to be made up of people choosing to be empty vessels, filled only by the Spirit and seeking to do only the will of the Father. When *that* happens, the people will have no choice but to be active, engaged, and deeply convicted. But if we expect things to work the other way around then we've got a backwards understanding of the church and are stuck in old, dead religion.)

- If we survey our landscape and notice a distinct lack of spiritual power being exercised by the church...then there are only two explanations. Either:

The Holy Spirit is lacking in power to do its work in the world.

- or -

The church is limiting the Spirit's ability to do its work in the world.

There is no third option. The Spirit wants to and is ready to move ... either it *can't*, or *we aren't letting it*.

- Given the current social and political trajectories of America, it's not all that hard to imagine Christianity being rejected (or outlawed) at some point in the future – it may not happen, but it is certainly possible. I think it'd be wise to at least consider the fate of the church if something like this were to happen. What would happen if churches were forced to immediately close their doors against their will? Would the church, as constituted today, survive that change?

If Christians have little-to-no idea what it means to *be the church* apart from brick and mortar, then we're massively failing at something, are we not?

- In the early stages of considering the effect of church buildings on the church, it's normal to think, "But it's not *wrong* for the church to operate church buildings," in other words, "It's not a *sin* for it to use church buildings." I can relate to feeling this way, I was there, too, at one point. I think this type of defense is natural when examining something you're very attached to. You want to find a way for that thing to be right...to be ok.

But I kept examining this topic. And as I did my perspective continued to shift.

You see, we still tend to want to operate in an Old Law mindset as we relate to God and his church – i.e. show me where it specifically says I can or can't, should or shouldn't do X, Y, or Z. But we have the miraculous gift of the Spirit living in us; as a result, we're expected to operate on a different level than the Israelites did under the Law of Moses; as a part of this new covenant there is much less in the way of explicit do's and don'ts like they were under. Instead, we are expected to live in relationship with God and allow him to live in us and through us. As we do that, God will speak to us and guide us by His spirit in various ways. When properly understood and applied the Spirit will only ever guide us into thoughts and actions that bring glory to God and put His goodness on display.

This mature, Spirit-lead functioning will generate questions like:

"Does doing this accurately express my King?"

"Does thinking or operating this way bring Him glory?"

As opposed to the more shallow, selfish questions like:

"Can I do this and still go to heaven?"

"If I do this will I go to hell?"

Yes, it's true you can search every inch of the Bible and you won't find anything that says: "the New Testament church operating church buildings is a sin." But if you look in those same scriptures and see that the church was intended to be a living community of people in the world, going into it to serve and change hearts for God, reclaiming His creation for His glory ... then, compare that to what we do and find that that is largely not what we're doing or where our hearts are focused – are we not in violation of our God-given purpose as the church? And if there's any part of our current church implementation (whether it be church buildings or something else) that plays a part in influencing us away from being the God-manifesting and God-glorifying community that we were intended to be ... is whatever that thing is not wrong at that point? And shouldn't we then be eager to examine what we're doing and what we need to change?

(next: Closing)

CLOSING

As the body of Christ, we need to make sure that what we're doing is aimed only at advancing *God's* kingdom in this world ... not just perpetuating our theologies, ideologies, practices, and – for goodness sake – political views.

Are we actively making disciples? Are we aiding the Spirit in rooting Satan, his lies, and his fear out of peoples' lives? Are people – both those inside and outside the church – discovering what it means to be transformed by Christ? Are we active and visible in the world or are we mainly just active amongst ourselves, away from the world we're called to fight for?

Are we loving the whole world, or only loving ourselves and those like us? Are we regularly exercising our ability to love those that aren't like us, thus showing them Christ? Are we asking for God's confidence, His power, and His love to be with us in uncomfortable places and painful circumstances? Or are we satisfied with simply carrying out our "Christian duties" in our safe places among safe people?

I believe that there are major changes needed in how we live, think, and move as the body, and that there is much growth and power to be realized by rediscovering the community of God as He intended.

Let's rediscover the church.

In Love,
Alex