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The American Church: A House of Prayer or A Den of Thieves?

Jesus entered the temple to an uproar of jingling coins, shouting traders, and restless animals. It smelled like a stable. The Son of Man watched as men, women, and children rushed from seller to seller looking for the right animal sacrifice they could buy for the feast. The priests sprinkled the blood of sheep and cattle on the altar for the sins of the family (*thenazareneway.com*). No one noticed the “King of the Jews.” John 2 records that Jesus made a whip and forced the traders out of the temple. It says that he poured out their coins and flipped their tables. Then Jesus says, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer,’ but you make it a den of robbers” (Matthew 21:13).

Pastors, elders, and church leaders may not be selling cattle, sheep, or doves anymore, but are they selling Christ? God has blessed the American church with much prosperity and possessions, and where much is given much is required. 1 John 3:17-18 says, “But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” Often times churches sing about love and listen to sermons about love, but the church still has millions of “brothers” in need. According to Gallup, seventy-five percent of Americans identify as Christian. Yet, there are 43.1 million Americans living in poverty (*United States Census Bureau*). These statistics are inconsistent with the Church's mission of giving and serving the poor and marginalized people of this country.

The church changed its trajectory of serving during the reign of Constantine. The church under the Roman empire faced poverty and widespread persecution from Roman emperors such as Decius and Diocletian. In 313 CE, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which restored all the confiscated churches, land, and cemeteries back to the church (Gonzalez 126). When Constantine became sole emperor in 324, the relationship between the emperor and the church went from good to great. Constantine donated money to the churches and also appointed multiple Christians to government positions (Gonzalez 140). Once Theodosius I took the throne, he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman empire (Gonzalez 141). The early church that once was haunted by poverty and persecution now was known for its wealth, power, and dominance.

Centuries have passed since the Roman empire, but its effect on the church has remained. Throughout the medieval period, Christians built luxurious churches, sold relics, and had increasing involvement in secular politics. Through the Reformation, Martin Luther attempted to call the Church back to discipleship by challenging ritualistic and traditional religion with relational Christianity, but the Church's history of wealth and power has left its mark even in congregations today. Many churches today, although they bear the name of Christ, have structured their services and ministries much like a business would. This is problematic for the message of discipleship as many people are flooding to churches in the hope of finding prosperity. As Americans are increasingly falling to the trap of consumerism, the Church has failed to separate itself from a culture of greed, envy, and competition. The modern American church has replaced its identity of Christlike love, service, and sacrifice with irresponsible consumerism by focusing on the unbiblical practices of exchange marketing, personalized liturgy, and financial decisions concentrated on profits.

The American Church cannot escape the pressures of the society in which it exists. As technology advancements have made it possible for more social interaction, the Church has found itself in a tough situation. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and other social media outlets have made it possible for people to be heavily influenced by the voices of peers, pop culture, and advertisements. This influence has exacerbated consumerism to a degree to which Americans are now only interested in what benefits them. They have a mentality that the customer comes first. This influence has created pressures upon the Church to remain relevant in society. The Church has to constantly look for ways to connect and interact with a culture that changes so often. Many church leaders feel they must work to adapt how the Church functions in society so that Christians can continue carrying out the Great Commission. The problem with finding new approaches to sharing the Gospel is that transformational discipleship is often ignored.

The modern, American Church behaves more like a business than they do a fellowship of disciples. According to Kent Miller in the *Strategic Management Journal*, all religious organizations require some sort of outside source of funds and support. Churches realize that the only way to keep their doors open on Sundays is to keep people in the pews. This has resulted in many churches becoming so focused on the quantity of people that fill the pews that they forget their responsibility to practice quality discipleship with these people. When the Church turns its attention from discipleship to increasing attendance, the Church no longer can fulfill the command of Matthew 28:19 that says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...” An economically driven church becomes an attendance driven church. As Miller puts it, “Religious economies are like commercial economies. They consist of a market and a set of firms seeking to serve that market” (439).

The Church has become the firm and our society is the market. Carl Trueman points out in an interview on consumerism in the Church that many churches are seeking to reach Americans, especially young Americans, by keeping church programs and services as culturally acceptable as possible. He talks about how this goal has reversed the roles of young people and elders in many churches. In the early Church, experience and a proven record of discipleship took precedence over youthful zeal and emotionalism (Trueman). Today, churches have transformed their programs, buildings, services, and even the Gospel into trendy products that will attract religious consumers. This is not Biblical evangelism as church becomes all about the world and not all about Jesus. Trueman states it best when he says, “By placing individual purchasing power at the heart of the system, public morals are made dangerously vulnerable to all manner of transformation.”

When churches become firms and seek to satisfy one market, competition becomes an unfortunate consequence. Churches begin competing for more members rather than celebrating the victory that people are even coming to church. Churches, especially across denominations, claim that they are the group that most closely represents Christ. This is to establish credibility which is attractive to the “market.” Miller states, “The key to marketing religion is creating the perception of credibility” (441). Churches market the Gospel as well as the benefits of being a part of their individual congregations in order to create this credibility. Christians have forgotten the message of 1 Corinthians 12 that discusses how each church serves a purpose in the body of Christ. Instead of celebrating God’s love that unifies the diversity in the body of Christ, churches are focusing more on how their role in the kingdom is superior or more important than another church’s role. This competition to be superior is harming how the world perceives the Church. Rather than the world seeing the love of Christ, they are finding a fierce battle between churches to be the biggest, wealthiest, and most true congregation in a specific community. Competition

does more than harm the Church's image. It also produces more creative marketing techniques to attract more visitors to church.

In *Selling Out the Church*, a book written in 1997 by Philip Kenneson and James Street, the authors warn of these problematic habits of marketing the Gospel. They argue that there is more than just one aim of marketing, but regardless of a church's reasoning, marketing leads to a cheapened Gospel of Jesus Christ. Kenneson and Street point out that most churches feel they are not changing the content of the Gospel, but rather, they are just changing the form of the Gospel (26). They argue against this belief by saying that form and content are not easily separated, and both carry certain predisposed ideologies whether churches realize it or not (33). Although many people did not respond, Jesus Himself never altered the form or message of discipleship. Today, people are responding to Christ in waves at megachurches and evangelistic crusades. Therefore, churches must be presenting a popular Gospel that is different in both form and content than the Gospel that Christ preached.

Keneson and Street warn that when churches market the Gospel they are "tied to meeting human needs" (64). "Human needs" is a broad term that means something different to every individual. Most of the world is satisfied with having the needs of food, water, and shelter to be met, but many prosperous Americans have confused their wants and needs and placed life-dependent importance on things like cell phones, cars, furniture, and the list goes on. One drawback of the consumeristic lifestyle is that many people are seeing the Church as another market to meet their wants and needs (Keneson 68). This puts churches in a position to take a "production approach to ministry" (65). Churches feel pressured to produce songs, sermons, and programs that will satisfy the "consumer."

When the Church sees people as consumers rather than souls, it loses sight of the costs of what it means to follow Christ. Instead of treasuring faithfulness and fruitfulness by church members, the Church involves itself in an “exchange” economy (Kenneson 68). In the business world, this means that the consumer receives a product while the business receives a payment. If the Church markets the Gospel, people will come to church expecting to receive a product rather than denying themselves. This contradicts the message of Luke 9:23 which says, “And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’” Following Christ is not an attractive lifestyle for the individual focused on receiving rather than giving because one must, in a sense, “die” to their desires. Many come to church on Sundays or serve at a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving as their penance towards God and as a way to improve their self-image. But as Kenneson and Street say, “The Church is not called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or visit the imprisoned because it is seeking personal or customer satisfaction, but because the people of God have been called to bear embodied witness to God’s ‘upside-down’ kingdom” (71). Jesus came to the world to be a servant and challenge the hierarchy of mankind. In Matthew 20, He says, “So the last will be first, and the first last.” Christ has called Christians to live selfless lives that prioritizes others over themselves. A disciple of Christ “walks as Jesus walked” (1 John 2:6), not to receive praise, but rather to exemplify the love of God through service and sacrifice.

Church marketing has more implications than simply attracting people to church. It often leads to personalized liturgy. When the Church markets the Gospel, people will come to worship services on Sunday expecting to be treated as a consumer just like they are at any other place of business. This creates a philosophy among Church leaders of the “customer is always right” (Kenneson 73). This means that if the “customer” feels they need a worship setting that fits their

style, churches will frequently offer additions to the church such as padded pews, a church café, a gift shop full of CDs and shirts, or a concession stand selling snacks and beverages to ensure a comfortable worship experience. It also means that churches will exclude certain liturgical practices such as communion, singing, or fellowship to make their services more timely and efficient to satisfy the bored or impatient “customers.” A personalized worship setting creates the misconception that church worship is for the individual and not for God.

The most obvious evidence that worship has become about the “consumer” is the overwhelming amount of denominations in the country. According to the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, there are 217 Christian denominations in America. This statistic can be a cause of concern considering that 1 Corinthians 1:10 states, “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” Although he was referring to racial segregation, Martin Luther King Jr. noticed the division among Christians and proclaimed, “It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning.” How has the Church that is commanded to love and accept all people received a reputation for segregation and division? The answer is simple: Christians have prioritized personal liturgical preferences over Mark 12:31’s command of “loving [one]’s neighbor as themselves.”

Consumeristic Christians come to church expecting to find “homogeneous congregations” (Kenneson 93). People want to fellowship with those who are like them. This can mean that churches are separated based upon race, but it often means that churches congregate with those with similar theology and traditions. In order to gain the credibility that was discussed earlier, churches use tradition as a “competitive advantage” to attract people to their congregation (Miller 442). People look for traditions that fit their personal preferences as a Christian. Church tradition

obviously is defined by different denominations and congregations, but there are practices that incline certain people to attend church and not others. Churches that do this can present a distorted view of worship that prioritizes personal preference over sacrifice.

Music is one of the aspects of liturgical tradition that divide Christians. As to be expected, different generations prefer different styles of music. For example, a middle-aged or an elderly Christian lived in a time when hymns were the prevalent form of Christian music. Therefore, these Christians prefer older styles of Christian music to the newer, more contemporary styles preferred by millennial Christians. Kenneson and Street discuss how churches will only implement certain styles of music, whether it be hymns or contemporary songs, that will attract a certain type of Christian (139). When churches divide over musical preference, they prove that they make decisions based on the premise that the “customer is always right.” In regard to those split over hymns or contemporary songs, Kenneson and Street state, “Both groups need to be taught the importance of something they don’t like, but consumers generally aren’t open to such admonition. Consumers are trained to believe that they, and they alone, are the final arbiters of what they need.” Church leaders must realize that allowing consumers to dictate what music is played during a service limits the number of people the Church can reach. Music in the Church should not be picked based on tempo or instrumental accompaniment, but rather, it should be picked based on theological principles that glorify Christ.

When looking at the early Church and their liturgical practices, one can see that their traditions were few and simple. Acts 2:42 says, “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Harald Hegstad, author of *The Real Church*, indicates three common practices of the early Church: the preaching of scripture,

the Eucharist, and common prayer (176). These three practices unfortunately are not primary in many churches today.

In regards to preaching, consumerism restricts ministers by dictating much of what they preach. When churches use marketing as the tool to evangelize, preachers are pressured into crafting sermons that will encourage new attendees to stay. According to Morgan Lee, seventy percent of pastor salaries amongst “megachurches” are determined by the size of the congregation. Kenneson and Street pose the question, “How can pastors enter the pulpit each week and proclaim the truth of God’s Word when they are now expected to be concerned with pleasing their customers in order to keep their congregations solvent” (143)? Some might say that pastors must preach messages that are not as harsh to keep people coming to church and hearing about the blessings of being a Christian. However, church is not a place to persuade people to follow Christ but rather a place where sinful people are confronted by the holiness and righteousness of Christ and convicted to “turn away from evil” and their own sins (Hegstad 184-85). This cannot happen if preachers do not preach that one “reaps what he or she sows” (Galatians 6:7). As stated earlier, being a disciple of Christ is about denying one’s self and following Christ in unconditional love and sacrifice. People will continue to behave as consumers if the sermons they hear from the pulpit never challenge the ways in which they fail to uphold the standard of discipleship. Preachers cannot fall to the pressures of preaching a form of “prosperity Gospel” that encourages church attendance, because “prosperity Gospel” fails to present the true Gospel that is full of persecution, brokenness, and suffering.

One cannot forget the fellowship involved in worship, especially in practices such as prayer and the Eucharist. Hegstad states, “Worship is therefore, more than just specific actions performed by individuals, but more something you do in fellowship.” Church liturgical practices must be

done in fellowship to preserve the cohesive and transformational nature of the Body of Christ. Eddie Gibbs, a professor at Fuller Seminary, claims that churches failing to incorporate intimate fellowship during or after worship leads to casual Christians that are Christians in name only. He argues that many people choose to attend churches that lack fellowship so they are not forced to develop relationships. Many people want to attend churches where they can remain isolated from developing relationships because isolation does not promote discipleship. It is only in an intimate community of believers that one finds the accountability and encouragement he or she needs to live a life that is “holy and acceptable unto God” (Romans 12:1). Patrick Oden in *The Transformative Church* quotes Ryan Bolger who says, “Kingdomlike churches pray together, confess their sins to one another, watch over each other, and encourage one another.” To be the Church is to be like Christ *together*.

Consumerism has created an American Church that prioritizes consumer choice and preference. However, God has called His Church to be one that “identifies with the life of Jesus, transforms the secular realm, and lives highly communal lives” (Oden 12). Christians, even though some wish to remain isolated, understand that community is a part of their identity in Christ. When the Church becomes infatuated with making money, Christians often confuse unity with uniformity. Uniform churches, while members may all look the same on the outside and claim the name of Christ, concern themselves with individual merit and glory rather than the well-being of their neighbors. A unified church may have Christians that differ externally, but internally they have one vision and goal to see the needs of their neighbors met. Consumeristic churches quickly find that their identity is no longer a unified community in Christ but rather a uniform group of people identifying with capitalism, greed, and egotism. To identify with the life of Christ is to identify with His poverty and care for the poor. The Church must acknowledge its selfish identity.

Through repentance of its selfishness, the Church is “liberated from alternative forms of identity and liberated into the identity of Christ” (Oden 10).

To fully understand the identity of Christ, one must consider Christ’s rejection of riches. 2 Corinthians 8:9 says, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” Christ chose humbling beginnings in the manger as he was wrapped in rags. Once He began His ministry, Jesus tells His disciples that He has nowhere to lay His head. He lived His life as a homeless man living among the poor and needy. Christ set the example of sacrifice for believers. His life declares that Christians should not be too comfortable in this world as heavenly riches are the true reward.

The problem is that many churches are too comfortable. A survey of 1,605 churches conducted by *Christianity Today’s Church Law & Tax Groups* has shown that churches are not being good stewards of God’s money. The graphic *How Churches Spend Their Money* shows that up to forty-seven percent of a church’s income goes to administrative salaries, benefits, and reimbursements. Churches only spend a combined eighteen percent of their income on church ministries, international missions, and domestic missions. The remaining thirty-five percent of churches’ income goes to maintenance, utility bills, mortgage, insurance, denominational fees, and other debt. This means that eighty-two percent of a church’s income is being used to maintain a building and provide income for church administration and their families.

According to Morgan Lee, the average “megachurch” employs 25 members and spends almost half of its income on staffing costs. Most would justify that church upkeep and administrative salaries are Biblical uses of a church’s money. However, one has to recognize the dangers of Christians living a life of too much comfort. In a survey called *How Much Financial Stress Do Pastors Experience*, 4,249 pastors were asked about how much anxiety is caused by

their financial situations. Sixty-nine percent of pastors said that they only had some stress or hardly any at all. The argument can be made that pastors are not stressed about their financial situations due to their faith in God's provision. However, one should consider that most American Christians, in general, have not felt the burden of Christ's command to "Sell your possessions, and give to the needy" (Luke 12:33) as many live with luxuries such as cable TV, wireless internet, and smartphones. One may assert that this stance is too harsh, but the American Church's ideology on wealth and poverty has been molded by its immersion into America's capitalism. American Christians often perceive the notion that hard work and wealth equate to God's favor, but early Church views of wealth are much different.

Early Church Christians did not necessarily have an issue with wealth, but their main concern was with how that wealth was being used (Weaver 381). Rebecca Weaver states, "A crucial element in the self-identity of the church was the practice of charity, and the contributions of individual Christians were considered to be part and parcel of that work" (381). Weaver in *Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church* explores how Clement of Alexandria, Cyprian of Carthage, John Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo view the role of charity and wealth in the early Church. Clement's stance on wealth was that Christians should not be attached to their material possessions (370). Cyprian believed that wealth should be distributed to the poor as charity makes "God one's debtor" and that almsgiving was a way to escape God's judgement (374). John Chrysostom and Augustine were against a life of riches even after Constantine gave the Church so much power and wealth. Chrysostom believed that God had given people their riches, and it was their responsibility to use that wealth to provide for the poor as a way of gaining favor with God (377). Augustine thought that "strong" Christians were able to give up all their

possessions (379). Weaver points out that all four early Church leaders “gave clear witness to the hazards of wealth and the eternal benefits to be derived from almsgiving” (381).

The early Church did not despise wealth in and of itself but believed that wealth should be used to support the poor. One cannot find in the New Testament that the early Church used their “possessions” for anything other than helping the poor. In contrast, one can easily see that the American Church has made a priority of spending money on material possessions. Kenneson and Street point out that often churches focus their attention on getting the “unchurched” to “come to church” (Knesson 144). Therefore, church buildings and sanctuaries are a “bridge” between the Church and the “unchurched” (144). The American Church has attempted to turn the building in which they worship into an attractive space that would draw in visitors. This is another attempt at concealing the cost of discipleship. Some churches across America pay thousands and, in some cases, millions of dollars to make sure their place of worship is up-to-date and suitable for cultured Americans. Churches understand that consumers will “judge a book by its cover” and with the first sight of an outdated building or sanctuary, move on to the next church congregation. While churches could use money to glorify God through domestic or foreign missions, they buy items such as Christmas trees and wall decorations to modernize the sanctuary instead. Many churches claim that God is glorified through having a pleasant building to worship in, but this is a misconception caused by consumerism in the Church. They fail to realize that the Body of Christ is now the “temple” in which Christians glorify God. 1 Corinthians 3:16 says, “Do you not know that you[a] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?”

With this in mind, the American Church has forgotten who it is in Jesus Christ. It has been tainted by marketing, personalization, and comfortable living. For years, the Church has attempted to fill its pews by offering a version of the Gospel that is prosperous and comfortable rather than

challenging and exhausting. For years, the Church has been catering to the liturgical preferences of music, preaching, and fellowship that the people, not God, have ordained to be holy and acceptable. For years, the Church has watched the poor across the nation suffer as Christians indulge in their immense buildings, satisfying sanctuaries, and expensive tastes. Consumerism has allowed the love of money to slowly seep into the hearts of the Church. Carl Trueman says, “When church is just one more product to buy or leave on the shelf, then marketing, not theology, become the driving forces in her life.”

Consumers do not need to see an attractive Church upon the shelf. Rather, they need to be transformed by the Church’s service and sacrifice. Churches have changed their identity in order attract more people to the congregation on Sunday. They must realize that the Church’s identity is not wrapped up in what it does but rather in what Christ did. Jesus never begged or persuaded the crowds to follow Him. Instead, He left the ninety-nine for the one. The Church must exchange its consumerism with God’s purpose. The Church must resist the temptation to concentrate only on the large crowds and the financial benefits they bring and again “seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). God has called the Church to be “a sign, a foretaste, and a herald of God’s present but still emerging kingdom” (Kenneson 23). The American Church must stop being a shopping mall for consumers, a concert hall for spectators, and a bank for investors.

Harald Hegstad writes, “Whatever happens in the church service should not remain there, but is sent out into the world” (202). Matthew 25:33-36 offers a sobering account of what it means to be “sent out”:

And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food,

I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’

If we do not find Christ in our churches sipping coffee before the service, buying a souvenir, relaxed on a padded pew, why do we continue to allow the Church to be plagued by consumerism? Regardless, the Church must go to a hurting world that needs God’s love more than it needs the riches of the world. Ignatius of Loyola put it best when he said, “If our church is not marked by caring for the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, we are guilty of heresy.” The Church cannot be a caged cathedral where heresy manifests itself through marketing, tradition, and consumption. It has to be the Church of love, service, and sacrifice for the last, the lost, and the least.

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