



MOVING FROM CHURCH-CENTRIC TO KINGDOM-CENTRIC

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The big challenge ahead for Western churches is to shift our focus from being all about the church to centering on the Kingdom of God. This is a game-changer, giving the church a fresh role in the world that lines up with what God is up to on Earth.

Think of it like this: People used to believe the Earth was the center of the universe. Now, we know the Sun is at the center. The cosmic mental shift was a big deal.

Similarly, this shift for the church is a major realignment. It's like adjusting our cosmic GPS. Our whole understanding of our place in the grand scheme of things changes. It might take a bit for everyone to catch up to this new perspective, but eventually, we'll see things in a whole new light, like getting a clearer picture of how things have always been.

A church-centric understanding of the church's mission has blinded us to the mission God has been pursuing ever since the Garden of Eden. It is a mission that predates the church by several millennia and post-dates the church when it spills into the Eschaton, the end of the world (and the church is no longer needed). Said another way, the church can NOT be the mission of God since the church has a beginning and an end inside of human history.

This raises the question: If the church is NOT the point of God's mission, then what IS the point?



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...is it possible that the church is NOT the point of God's mission, then what IS the point? And finally, what then is the POINT of the church in this redefined understanding of God's work in the world?

First, what is the mission of God? It is this: For people to experience his Kingdom and, as a result, experience life as God intends. It is this characterization of the Kingdom – “life as God intends” – that captures the essence of the Kingdom, the POINT of it all.

God wants people created in his image to enjoy the quality of life he envisions for them. This includes not only our spiritual dimension, but also extends to every aspect of our lives: Physical, emotional, psychological, relational, financial – in short, the entire scope of human existence.

Understanding the Kingdom in terms of “life as God intends” is a notion firmly rooted in the biblical witness of God's engagement with planet Earth. It all started in the Garden of Eden. At the center of the Garden stood the Tree of Life. When Eden disintegrates following the cataclysmic entrance of sin, God sent an angel to stand guard over that Tree. Life – God's primal gift – was diminished, but not rescinded.

At the other end of the book, the dawning of the Eschaton (the end of the world) reveals the vision of the City of God with the River of Life flowing through it, with Trees of Life lining both its shores, whose fruit never goes out of season (signaling the eternal nature of our life's ultimate destination).

In between the beginning of Eden in Genesis and the new beginning of the City of God in Revelation comes the Word from the beginning. In a breathtaking move, God himself visits the planet in the person of his Son to show us the Kingdom. Jesus lives out in plain view the life that God intends for us to experience: A life totally centered on the Kingdom.

Jesus was obsessed with the Kingdom. And why shouldn't he be? That's where he came from! It's all he had ever known! It was his frame of reference, informing every aspect of his life, teaching, and ministry.

More than 90 times in the Gospels he talks about the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of heaven, or simply the Kingdom. In the model prayer, the very first petition is “thy Kingdom come.” Everywhere Jesus went, everything he said and did was an answer to that prayer. Jesus said that he had come to give us life “to the fullest” – life as God intends! And in the most remarkable statement ever uttered from human lips, Jesus declared himself to BE that LIFE!

It seemed that Jesus was not just interested in helping people get to heaven; he was consumed with the ambition to bring heaven (the Kingdom) to Earth! His life and teachings addressed the whole breadth of human life, from physical healings to spiritual salvation and fulfillment to human relational dynamics. From Jesus, we learn that the Kingdom mission involves taking back everything that Hell has stolen from life as God intends.

A church-centric religious culture has obscured this fundamental understanding of God's Kingdom mission and Jesus' focus on it. It ignores the fact that the only time Jesus spoke about the church was when he established it and that act itself was against a Kingdom backdrop.

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The church was not created with a mandate to create church people, whose spiritual lives were to be centered on church activity and their spirituality measured by their involvement in and commitment to the church. Rather, the goal of the church in Jesus' mandate was to support and foster the Kingdom movement that he had initiated. The church was NOT the point; the KINGDOM was – and is!

The fallout from this mission misalignment has severely shrink-wrapped many church leaders' notions of what God is up to in the world. A church-centric orientation assumes that God is primarily concerned with looking after the church and how it is getting along.

Kingdom concerns have been viewed as a subset of church activity, which itself is seen as the main expression of God's work. "Church" has become a place, a destination, a vendor of religious goods and services, an institution, none of which reflects the biblical understanding of "church."

First century Jesus followers viewed "church" as a mission, a "way of being" in the world. It was a movement born out of a relationship with God through his Son and a commitment to follow Jesus in his Way, which was a life centered in and on the Kingdom. Followers of the Way was how we were first known. It's time we recaptured the dynamic of that spiritual movement, The Way that Jesus founded.

This transformation will require that we move from our current church-centric orientation to a Kingdom-centric ministry agenda. This reorientation is not a fall church program or four-week sermon series. It reflects a radical cultural shift, challenging every aspect of current church expression.

Pulling off this culture shift entails four non-negotiable changes. There are no "hall passes" to this monumental challenge. Every element must be addressed. Each of these items represents a shift in and of itself and will require carefully constructed strategies to successfully navigate the necessary transition put into play.

The First Shift: Story

The first shift is the shift of STORY. This refers to the internally-held and externally-manifested narrative that provides the underlying meaning for the church. The story spells out to people – both inside and outside the church – the "why" the church exists and "why" we do what we do. Our story energizes those who have already signed on and explains our cause to people who desperately need to experience the life God intends for them.

Church leaders must ask themselves, "Are we telling a church-centric or Kingdom-centric story?" In the first instance, the focus is on the church's vision, its offerings and activities, why people want to be a part of *this* church among all the other competing church options. It is customer driven

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and has produced a church crowd of highly-selective consumers of religious programming. The ensuing socialization often produces members who struggle to connect their church bubble experience with the concerns of their neighbors, their jobs, and the other dimensions of their lives.

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A church-based ministry, on the other hand, focuses on linking people to God's redemptive mission, His story. Helping people know how to position themselves to experience more of the life God intends for them. It celebrates human life transformation and offers people on-ramps to join God in his mission of improving the world around them.

Those who grasp the Kingdom story see themselves as partnering with God's redemptive mission in the world. The desire to love God and love their neighbors (from their home to their local community to the far reaches of the world) sustains these primary pursuits.

The "output" of a Kingdom-centric ministry are viral agents who naturally introduce their families, neighbors, coworkers, and schoolmates to God's heart for them and routinely serve their communities in a variety of capacities.

The Second Shift: Scorecard

The second shift required to secure the move from a church-centric to a Kingdom-centric ministry agenda is a change of SCORECARD. The current church-as-institution scorecard typically reflects church activity designed by church people for church people, led by church people, most often conducted on church property. It celebrates participation and activity with church program success as its measure.

A Kingdom scorecard is not program-driven in its focus and accounting. Rather, it measures progress in the development of people. In other words, it just doesn't register participation; it celebrates maturation. The fundamental question is: Are people growing into the life that God intends for them to experience? In consultant-speak, this reflects a shift from merely tracking "inputs" to assessing "outputs" or "outcome" results.

I sometimes ask church leaders a litany of questions to highlight the difference in these two types of scorecards.

"How many better marriages do you have in your church than you did last year?"

"How many parents have a better relationship with their children than they did six months ago?"

"How many people report feeling closer to God over the last few months?"

Leaders typically respond, "We don't know that" or "We don't ask those questions." Then I ask, "Why not? Don't you think married couples want good marriages, and parents want to have good relationships with their children, and people want to grow closer to God?"

These are quality of life issues and concerns that reflect whether people are experiencing the life that God intends for them. We don't know this information because our church-centric scorecards are based on

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participation (program involvement) rather than maturation (growth).

Jesus told us to make disciples. That's people development! So why don't we know if what we are doing is developing people or just keeping them busy with church stuff? After all, people are built to last!

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A church-centric perspective just stop with internal measures. It also assumes that the church should have a measurable impact in its community. Depending on the congregation's community involvement, the scorecard could celebrate the number of church members who are serving in various non-profits, or how many fewer people are food-challenged, or how many kids are reading at a 3rd grade level (the critical threshold for continued learning) or any number of indices that should be impacted positively if the church saw its role as servant to the community. The emphasis is one result: More people living life as God intended.

Unfortunately, the current church-centric scorecard often celebrates an organizational win (worship attendance up, budget met, facilities constructed, etc.) while the community around the church is decaying!

The Third Shift: Stewardship

This brings us to the third shift that must be made for the church to position itself for Kingdom impact: Its sense of STEWARDSHIP must be redefined. In a church-centric perspective, church leaders' efforts to pursue missional effectiveness have been hijacked largely by internal organizational concerns.

Pastors and church leaders spend the vast majority of their time and energies on church activity — preparing sermons for church gatherings and attending to elements and items calibrated to ensure church program success. Instead of being disciplers of Jesus-followers, their roles have been reduced to those of program developers and project managers to satisfy church consumers.

In a Kingdom-centric understanding of the church's mission, the church assumes responsibility for the welfare of the community where it is ensconced. Leaders devote time and energy to establishing and nourishing leadership networks in the community.

One use of the word *ecclesia* (church) in Jesus' day referred to a group of elders who had responsibility for the welfare of their village. By designating his disciples with this term, Jesus was establishing their role as stewards responsible for the caretaking of the new Kingdom community he was establishing.

The exercise of Kingdom stewardship requires both a corporate and individual personal strategy for loving our neighbors. Rather than being isolated from the community in its activity — the result of church-centric ministry focus — Kingdom-biased leadership efforts and expressions are informed by the needs of the community.

Kingdom leaders act upon the church's unique position to address big issues that challenge peoples' opportunity to experience the life that God intends for them. These might include hunger, homelessness, literacy, mental health, child and family welfare, just to mention a few. Rather than

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being seen as “outside” concerns to the church’s agenda, Kingdom leaders see these societal concerns as the key reason the church exists, viewing them as calls to service and action.

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This understanding refines and directs the church’s efforts to support its core mission: to be on the local Kingdom agent in every aspect of their lives and influence. Their participation in worship gatherings, Bible studies, small group discipleship, and other church activities is not seen as an end-in-themselves. These venues and engagements are designed to inform and enhance the capacity of Jesus-followers to be Kingdom influencers in every dimension and aspect of their lives.

The Fourth Shift: Structure

A fourth shift that is essential to moving from church-centric to Kingdom-centric ministry is STRUCTURE. Admittedly the challenge this element presents differs depending on multiple factors such as ecclesiological tradition and denominational affiliation. Notwithstanding, every denominational tribe and ecclesiastical network in North America is organized around a congregational modality, meaning the church is defined in congregational terms. Its clergy are trained to administer and minister in congregational settings. The story, scorecard, and stewardship of “a” church are all integrated to support “church” operating as a congregation.

Looking back, we need to remember that the “congregation” was not the first life form in the taxonomy of the church. House church and house church networks were the predominant forms of church in the first and early second centuries. These were non-clergy dependent and non-clergy led. No one had a “church job,” yet the full expression of the gifts identified in Ephesians 4 were fully operational to enable the church to fulfill its mission.

In subsequent centuries, the congregational expression gained ascendancy along with the rise of a clergy class to support its doctrinal development and administrative needs.

Looking ahead, church leaders must realize that we are at an inflection point in history that has significant ramifications for the church. All institutions of the modern world are suffering a loss of trust and must be redefined and re-tooled if they hope to retain relevancy or even survive. Church-as-institution is not excluded from this challenge of decay in institutional loyalty. It must assume new forms and expressions to connect with an emerging world shaped by the digital information revolution. Mere adherence to or doubling down on a church-centric paradigm will only serve to accelerate missional ineffectiveness and irrelevance.

The good news is that the Spirit is helping people reimagine church-as-movement much like it existed in its early days. Hierarchical church cultures of command-and-control leadership, as well as mass-standardized approaches to people development, are giving way to collaborative networks, shared leadership environments, and customization of spiritual journeying. The goal of turning people into “church people” (requiring that they embrace congregational identification and order their lives around congregational rhythms) as evidence of their commitment to Jesus are increasingly seen as ludicrously archaic and spiritually tone deaf.

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The bandwidth for how “the” church expresses itself is widening beyond the singular modality of congregation (though this form currently and will continue to serve millions of Jesus-followers). Church as community center, as restaurant, as sports bar, even church as business are just some of the new expressions of church-as-movement. These newer expressions (and their shape for the Kingdom mission they are pursuing. Their programs, and activities) are determined by the Kingdom outcomes they seek. These expressions are not “para-church,” an unfortunate term reflecting a Christendom bias of church-as-congregation. These ministries are “the” church, though they likely do not fit the definition of “a” church in ecclesiologies developed in the past (especially following the Reformation) that are largely congregationally-rooted and reflect church-as-institution.

This development carries implications for church planting. Traditional efforts have focused on planting a gathering that hopefully grows into a congregation. In the future, church planting must be about planting “the” church, and its form (STRUCTURE) will be customized to the culture where it is rooted and the specific ways it intends to promote and to reflect aspects of the Kingdom and Kingdom living. We are already seeing the rise of microchurch expressions, from small groups of people doing life together to more-structured missional communities.

We will probably see fluid city-wide networks of Jesus-followers emerge. Not based on “membership,” these movements will embody Kingdom expressions, sometimes spiritually-focused, at other times addressing some community challenge.

A clear choice confronts the church in North America. One path is to stay the course in its church-centric posture. This approach assumes that building better churches (with even greater customer service options and delivery) will secure a better future for the church. This choice ignores the fact that though we have the finest church facilities and programming in history, more and more people are opting out of becoming “church people.” They are pursuing their spiritual journey outside the well-rutted tracks of institutional church engagement.

The other and more compelling choice is for church leaders to adopt a Kingdom-centric ministry agenda and approach, positioning the church as the continuing incarnation of Jesus’ mission. Jesus did not come to establish a religion. He came to abolish religion. In its place, he planted a movement to help people experience the Kingdom of God.

This movement is the church, and it has ONE job: To reveal to the world the Kingdom of God.

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