

## *The Quiet Revolution Pts. 2 & 3*

It would be useful to begin this article with a definition of the ‘modern church’, a phrase which I will apply to the vast majority of Christian churches starting from a few centuries after the death of Jesus:

*The Protestant Church: A myriad of denominations who differ in small theological ways but are similar in that they all have positions of authority held by deacons, pastors, reverends, and bishops. They propose that the way to God is personal salvation through Jesus; a matter of faith, a matter of objective knowledge and understanding.*

*The Catholic Church: A unified body of believers who place less emphasis on the objective nature of salvation, but more emphasis in ceremonies, traditions, and the authority given to the leaders of the church.*

While the article “*Christianity is an existential communication*” laid out my own model and theological criticism of the mainstream/evangelical church, and “*The Quiet Revolution: Part 1*” dealt with the message of Jesus and how the kingdom of God is defined as a social movement, this post will examine the question of whether the modern church is representative of Jesus. A glance at Part 1 of *The Quiet Revolution* with the modern church in mind will reveal how dissimilar it is in comparison to the Kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Issues of wealth and status will not be covered in this article, as it will instead focus on less obvious differences. It will argue that the modern church is inherently illegitimate due to its accommodation of hierarchy and religious authority, its assault on alternative opinion, its negative function within society, and lastly its encouragement of public displays of religious devotion. It’s easy to recognise how powerful the modern church is in Christianity at the moment. In religious circles the litmus test for a good Christian is most often how involved a person is with his church. Participating is somehow a supremely important activity for a Christian, and the church is assumed to be necessary for the survival and prosperity of Christianity. I am aware that Jesus envisioned his followers grouped together, and for many reasons gathering together was fundamentally important to the early Christians. However, the current state of the church is overwhelmingly inconsistent with the teaching of Jesus, and it is not true that an illegitimate and corrupt church is better than none at all. Some suggestions on a more appropriate church model are offered in the last section of this article.

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<sup>1</sup> Part 1 attempted to demonstrate how the Kingdom of God was designed to be non-hierarchical, filled with unconditional love and forgiveness, above family ties, for the undeserving, for the statusless, and for the poor/destitute.

### Religious authority is necessarily illegitimate.

*“But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” (Matthew 23:8-12)*

I used this passage and Luke 22:24-27 in *The Quiet Revolution: Part 1* to argue that Jesus never wanted his followers to adopt any form of religious hierarchy. Jesus spent a significant amount of time challenging the religious authority that the Pharisees and Temple held over Jewish peasants, and it’s unsurprising that Jesus never wished his followers to revert to a similar institutional structure following his death.<sup>2</sup> Protestant churches give a lot of lip service to the theological idea that no religious official can be an intermediary between a man and God. Indeed, a common criticism of theirs towards Catholicism is that it grants the power to forgive sins to priests, and to the Pope the power of virtual infallibility. Many see this distinction as significant, and indeed it is, but it ignores a more fundamental problem. Practically speaking, the debate between Protestants and Catholics on religious authority is that while there is a consensus of the need for religious authority, they dispute the specific degree required. While pastors/reverends don’t directly forgive sins, they hold doctrinal authority, they have near-monopoly on teaching to the congregations, they expect a level of respect not given to layman, they perform all religious ceremonies, and they are considered the head of the church while the congregation is dubbed their flock. This level of power doesn’t find parallel in either the teachings of Jesus or the earliest Christian documents.

There is an important difference between the erection of a loose organisational hierarchy to serve an unwieldy number of people, and a strict hierarchy that bestows religious authority to its leaders. The earliest Christian churches used the former. House churches, which were the most popular model for Greek Christians, were organised by the patron of the house in which the group were gathering.<sup>3</sup> The meeting itself most often involved a common meal<sup>4</sup> and the practice of spiritual gifts. Paul mentions a very diverse range of gifts

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<sup>2</sup> Which it did.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, they were occasionally women.

<sup>4</sup> Although it is impossible to ascertain whether they shared a common meal at every gathering, Paul suggests that at least occasionally it was the specific purpose of church (1 Corinthians 11:33). The Greek Word used to refer to the common meal (e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:20) is *deipnon*, which means dinner. Therefore, it was most likely an entire meal, not merely a token piece of bread and wine (see also: Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community*, Sydney 1979 (Revised edition, 1994), p.81). Although the sharing of a common meal had significant symbolic meaning to the early churches, there is no evidence to suggest that an ordained celebrant administered the process. In fact, the process closely resembles the customary meal served to guests in Jewish

being practiced in meetings; including teaching, healing (non-miraculous), miraculous works, prophecy, discernment of spirits, *glossolalia* (speaking and interpreting unknown languages), administration, exhortation, merciful acts to those in need, and financial aid.<sup>5</sup> The gifts were not meant for personal enjoyment but rather the edification of the group.<sup>6</sup> They were organised in a way that allowed for every member to contribute, but were not evenly distributed. Indeed, Paul ranked the value of the gifts according to which gave the greatest practical effect to the community.<sup>7</sup> The more fundamental gifts received more time during a meeting.<sup>8</sup> However, Paul did not want the lesser gifts marginalised,<sup>9</sup> and did not want the same people dominating the meeting. Accordingly, he encouraged people to seek and contribute gifts they do not yet have.<sup>10</sup> This spirit of equality extended into areas of organisation as well; should a member possess a gift of administration, he will be granted the ability to exercise that gift, but not at the expense of absolute equality between the Christians.

Paul's model for the church was characterised by equal opportunity and responsibility. On the issue of women, Paul mentioned the existence of women deacons,<sup>11</sup> and in front of these early churches women were also able to pray and prophesy.<sup>12</sup> Although 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 suggests that women should keep quiet during church there is no reason to assume that this was a general rule as opposed to a response to an isolated situation.<sup>13</sup> It's clear that the principle of equality is intertwined throughout Paul's philosophy of Christian gatherings. This is additionally shown by the lack of a developed religious hierarchy. While Paul mentions words such as elder, bishop, and deacon, it is important not to read into an ancient document the contemporary connotations and characteristics of these words without justification. The term for priest, *hieris*, is never used by Paul. In Acts there are instances of elders being appointed to a community,<sup>14</sup> and the letter of *1 Timothy* mentions bishops and deacons.<sup>15</sup> However, the word *episkopos*,<sup>16</sup> which is translated into bishop or

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homes. First the bread was broken, the meal was concluded with drinking, and a prayer of blessing usually accompanied it (See: *ibid.*).

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, Romans 12:6-8

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:7, Ephesians 4:12

<sup>7</sup> Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, p.96

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1 Corinthians 14:6

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:26-33

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:31; 14:1,31

<sup>11</sup> Romans 16:1

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:5

<sup>13</sup> The Corinthian church placed special emphasis on liberty, and since women at this time did not often possess strong religious education, it is reasonable to argue that the meeting was being constantly interrupted by the women's questions. In response, Paul suggests that instead of asking the questions at the meeting the women wait until it is finished to ask their husband.

See: Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, p.122-123

<sup>14</sup> Acts 14:23

<sup>15</sup> 1 Timothy 3:1-13

<sup>16</sup> Acts 20:28

overseer, had an array of uses in Greek. It was never used to represent a specific function, and referred to positions in voluntary societies that were mostly minor in nature.<sup>17</sup> It is telling that Paul always addressed his letters to the congregation, and not the self-designated leaders of the group.

It is unfortunate that more is not known about the social organisation of the early Jewish Christian churches, but a second church model has been found among Gentile Christianity through the use of archaeology and chapter sixteen of Paul's letter to the *Romans*. Located in Ancient Rome,<sup>18</sup> they have been called tenement churches,<sup>19</sup> and represent a style of early Christianity which was poorer and more egalitarian than the house Church. The social data for these churches can be extracted from Romans 16, which is a list of greetings that Paul gives to certain people in Roman churches. Of the twenty six names mentioned, at least 2/3<sup>rd</sup> indicates a Greek background. The overwhelming Greek majority in these churches suggest an immigrant status and a social background of slave or former slave.<sup>20</sup> One specific example is found in 16:10b-11b, where Paul greets the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus, but not the masters themselves. Using five different types of archaeological and literary evidence, Peter Lampe located the two most likely locations of the early churches in Rome; the districts of Trastevere and around Porta Capena.<sup>21</sup> Trastevere possessed a number of statistical extremes for the city of Rome including the lowest number of bakeries per square kilometre, the highest proportion of tenement style dwellings, and the most densely populated section of the city, all of which indicate an area occupied by the very lowest in society. The area that surrounded Porta Capena offers a similarly bleak picture; populated by lowly tradesman and transport workers. Lampe comments that "An indication of the social status of transport workers, donkey drivers, and carriers is indicated by the fact that hardly a cemetery inscription refers to such profession."<sup>22</sup> It is clear that the early Christians in Ancient Rome were very poor.

Following this line of argument, Robert Jewett has laid out a style of community gathering that differed significantly from the traditional house church model. Considering that over 90% of slaves or former slaves lived in the upper levels of tenement buildings called *insulae*, the fact that the Christian communities inhabited Trastevere and Porta Capena indicate that

<sup>17</sup> Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community*, p.147

<sup>18</sup> And possibly Thessalonica

<sup>19</sup> The following analysis is based around the research of Peter Lampe and Robert Jewett.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Lampe, "The Roman Christians of Romans 16", in Karl P. Donfried (ed.), *The Romans Debate*, (Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), p.227

<sup>21</sup> Argument in Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2003), p.17-67

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.43

they gathered in very small unluxurious rooms.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Paul greeted the prominent people in these communities (16:14-15) without a specified patron or leader, and uses the title “brothers” for all five.<sup>24</sup> The house church, which usually consisted of an upper or middle class patron along with their household and friends, is not appropriate for the communities that Paul addressed in Romans 16. Instead, groups of mostly very poor slaves or former slaves congregated in a very small room in the upper floors of tenement buildings located in the poorest areas of Rome. Church was not a nice Sunday morning, but rather a matter of survival. Jewett convincingly uses 2 Thessalonians 3:10<sup>25</sup> to argue that the tenement churches shared food very frequently in the form of a common meal, and that the food was provided by community members as opposed to patrons.<sup>26</sup> The picture that has been painted by the historic research into tenement churches reveal a church model that was non-hierarchical and communitarian (more so than the house church), and further proves that the assumed necessity of religious authority in the modern church is unfounded.

Arguably the first time that a more contemporary understanding of church authority appeared in early Christianity was the letters of Ignatius (early 2<sup>nd</sup> century). Within the letters of Ignatius is a model of church hierarchy which grants the leaders great authority. Ignatius is generally considered to be ‘ahead of the curve’ on his thoughts of religious authority by scholars, and indeed his extreme position holds no parallel in that century. Ignatius claimed that the congregation ought to respect the bishop as fully as they respect the authority of God,<sup>27</sup> and that there could be no church without the presence of a bishop. Ignatius gave the bishop sole rights on religious ceremonies such as baptism, laying on hands, ordination, and offer sacrifice. Ignatius also claimed that to go against the priesthood is to go against God, and that everyone in the church is subject to the bishop.<sup>28</sup>

The point of looking at Paul’s house churches, the Roman tenement churches, and Ignatius views on church authority is that not only was the present form of hierarchy in the modern church condemned by Jesus, it stands in stark contrast to the practices of the earliest Christian churches up to the point of Ignatius. A hierarchy was never intended to be built into the Christian church, especially one that granted the leaders religious benefits and honour.

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Jewett, “Tenement Churches and Pauline Love Feasts”, *Quarterly Review*, Spring of 1994, p.48-49

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49

<sup>25</sup> “For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.”

<sup>26</sup> Jewett, “Tenement Churches and Pauline Love Feasts”, p.51-54

<sup>27</sup> Magnesians 3:1

<sup>28</sup> Smyrnaeans 9

### **Churches subvert alternative opinion and debate.**

It's interesting that while western societies as a whole have generally progressed towards the ideals of democracy and the freedom of speech; social structures exist within the system that are designed to stifle alternative opinion and debate. Politically it was accomplished through homogeneous major parties and press, with vast sections of popular opinion on certain important issues being ignored by both sides of the 'political debate'. Economically it was achieved through the emergence of corporations who necessarily operate with the exclusive goal of maximising short-run profit, no matter the social cost of their production or even the long-run profits of their corporation. Lastly, it has been done in the religious sphere for centuries with a very strict and undemocratic religious hierarchy and the concept of heresy. Heresy, it is said, leads to very bad things. If a person were to embrace what the majority considered to be heresy, he is either backsliding from the church or even being lured away by Satan.

I've been labelled a heretic a couple of times, and when I was still inside the church it affected me so greatly that it led to anxiety, despair, and guilt. The very concept of heresy is inherently inconsistent. It is supposed to act as an objective measuring stick to determine whether a disagreement is a small theological difference among Christians or a dangerous infiltration by the enemy. However, what is considered to be heresy is an entirely subjective judgement. Consider the thousands of Christian denominations that exist within the world, all believing small variations of the same thing. Each group has a different conception of what constitutes heresy and to what extent it should be tolerated. Heresy is not an important protection of the church's purity and virtue; it's a way to call someone a dirty name while maintaining that God is on a particular side. It's true that every worldview involves recognition that certain ideas and acts are incompatible with your definition of goodness. However, sensing a difference with another human being does not need to be accompanied with disrespect, accusations, and broad generalisations that demonise not only the beliefs but the character of the other person.

Intentionally or unintentionally, heresy is being used as a tool by religious authorities to encourage conformism among the flock and to cement positions of power within the hierarchy of the church. The ethical, theological, and doctrinal agenda of a church are clearly controlled by the leadership. Whenever an alternative opinion is expressed that challenges the legitimacy or the assertions of the religious authorities, it is far easier for the opinion to be labelled as heresy<sup>29</sup> instead of debated in a way that allows each member of the church to make an educated decision. When Luther protested against the Catholic Church, he was

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<sup>29</sup> Perhaps throwing in a couple of arguments along the way that take passages in the Bible way out of context and exclude a number of relevant passages and philosophies from the discussion.

labelled a heretic because he challenged the religious institutions of his day and their authority over Christians. When Jesus protested against the religious authority of his day, he was labelled a heretic for the way in which he re-interpreted the Law of Moses and subverted social conventions.<sup>30</sup> Jesus, in a way, was a heretic.

Nevertheless, the damage that the concept of heresy has caused to the church should not be overstated. There is a far more effective tool used by the modern church to control the congregation and subvert diversity; ignoring alternative opinion all together. Many of the arguments that are made and passages that are quoted on this website are not commonly considered heretical. Rather, they are arguments that for centuries have been almost completely ignored by Christianity. Examples include pacifism, loving your neighbour as yourself, loving your enemies, forgiving unconditionally, loving in order to cover a multitude of sins, being non-judgemental, passages from Jesus that concern wealth, God's opinion of you being based entirely on how you treat the poorest in society, faith without works is dead, if you don't forgive other people God will not forgive you, if you do forgive other people God will forgive you, and there is more. Jesus was a radical in Judaism, and based on the beliefs of the modern church he would be considered just as radical and dangerous in the present. Difficult passages from Jesus that encourage social action or do not fit within modern theology are either never mentioned, outright rejected, or diluted using excuses and illegitimate interpretations until they mean nothing at all. It is not the label of heresy that has single-handedly stymied progress towards the ideals of Jesus, but rather heresy and intentional ignorance married together. It is this aspect to the modern church, above all others, that most strongly betrays Jesus and makes the modern church a mockery.

### **Churches do not represent the message of Jesus in society**

In an age where millions of people die every decade from wars, genocide, economic sanctions, poverty, and violent crime you would expect Jesus' message of love, forgiveness, pacifism, and selflessness to be in dire need. The modern church, instead of being a powerful mouthpiece for the message and a living emulation of the virtues of Jesus, is more often a bastion of intolerance, greed, and bitterness. Excluding religiously tinged charities, the number one priority for the modern church when they interact with their community or the world is evangelism. Not only would it rather hand a starving child a booklet about how they need to say the sinner's prayer to not be spiritually decadent instead of some food, it limits the method of evangelism to verbal evangelism. When the early church was starting to establish itself, it's understandable why verbal evangelism was so important. The name of Jesus and his message was virtually unknown. Now, with the globalization of communication and the mass-production of Bibles, information about Jesus has been

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<sup>30</sup> The word 'heretic' was never explicitly used, but blasphemous almost means the same thing.

ingrained (or at least is readily available) in most people. Whenever a series of beliefs are presented that are not intellectually justifiable but rather a matter of subjective/existential experience,<sup>31</sup> it is no wonder that direct verbal evangelism is usually ineffective.<sup>32</sup>

The reason that the modern church is ignored by many thoughtful and open people is based on how it is perceived. The church is considered hypocritical by many people, and that is because it is. The existential essence of the church is completely hollow. On a personal level, it is hollow because many Christians choose to ignore the very words of Jesus and fail to meaningfully imitate his character. This isn't surprising since that they are rarely given the opportunity to hear the words of Jesus and its practical implications within the church. Now, I would never claim to be a meaningful imitation of the character of Jesus, but the modern church believes that they are righteous while the unbelievers surrounding them are spiritually and ethically dead. It's easy to imagine how the "Good News"<sup>33</sup> is hard to swallow when Christians behave the way they often do.

On an institutional level, it is hollow because of the bitter and defensive way the modern church enters the political debate. It does not advocate the needs of the poor, or decry the needless death caused by a war, or even discuss how the ideals of Jesus would make the world a better place. Instead, the modern church behaves like an oppressed minority, railing against the immoral majority who seek to marginalise and corrupt their independence and virtue. The modern church condemns the rights of homosexuals and their prevalence in society, condemns other churches for allowing women to hold any position of authority within the church, condemns people for saying that war is wrong, condemns public schools for not being Christian enough, and condemns immigrants and foreigners in a way that can border on xenophobia/racism. Where in the entire political platform of the modern church is anything that even remotely resembles the character and message of Jesus?<sup>34</sup>

Lastly, the church is fixated on money. Due to the 'prosperity Gospel' and the spiritual obligation that people are often coerced into feeling towards their church; megachurches exist. These surprisingly rich churches take money from people as if they were a charity, but

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<sup>31</sup> i.e. the statement that "Jesus is Lord", see the article: "Christianity is an Existential Communication".

<sup>32</sup> It must be stated that the modern church has eagerly sought ways to counter this. Instilling a fear of hell during a climate of instability will always draw a lot of people to the church. However, all methods to increase efficiency in this manner are not an authentic solution to the underlying problem.

<sup>33</sup> Which often boils down to an explication about how sinful a person is, and how they need to convert right away else they face imminent apocalyptic judgement followed by eternal torture from a loving God. See the article "The Good News" for a fuller explanation.

<sup>34</sup> A possible exception could be granted for the modern church's stance on abortion, but that is an incredibly complex issue that will not be delved into here.

spend their funds on larger buildings, more programs designed to indoctrinate the congregation towards the worldview that the church authority possess (usually disguised as spiritual or revival weekends designed to prey on the existential meaninglessness that most people feel with their lives), and outreaching to the community. Admittedly, sometimes a byproduct of this outreach or missionary work has very practical benefits for the community, but this is almost never the primary motivation. The fact that some churches are now rich rarely provokes the thought that maybe they should not be.<sup>35</sup> As a result of all of this, the church fails to resemble Jesus in any recognisable aspect, and is yet another reason why the modern church is inherently illegitimate.

#### 4) Public displays of religious devotion necessarily lead to hypocrisy and pressure.

*“Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them... But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. So that your giving will be in secret...” (Matthew 6:1,3)*

*“When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men... But when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to the Father in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:5-6)*

*“When you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6: 17-18)*

Jesus understood the corruptive effects of religious acts performed in public. Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting were very fashionable activities in the community. Jesus did not just casually mention that they should be performed in private, but passionately pressed the point. With almsgiving, he extravagantly stated that the left hand should not be aware of what the right hand is doing. With prayer, he did not merely tell people to be certain no one is looking, but to pray in a very small and dark room. It’s clear that he considered this to be important, and it is completely dissimilar to the practice of the modern church. Public prayer is very common today, giving money to the church is done in full view, and singing is often carried out in a way that suggests that the congregation is competing for the most spiritually driven loud voice. “She must really love the Lord to sing like that,” it is said. Random shouts of hallelujah and amen come from the pews as the preacher impresses them all with his fiery and passionate oratory.

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<sup>35</sup> We have come a long way from James. See: James 1:9-11, 2:1-7, 14-16, 5:1-6

The delivery of an inspiring prayer will naturally command respect from peers. The intention of the performer is irrelevant, as for Jesus it is not a matter of ethics. As religious acts are performed in a group, even if the intention is to earnestly encourage and convict fellow churchgoers and not impress them, it is inevitable that these activities are used as a vehicle to self-glorification and a spiritual hierarchy built on respect and admiration. Jesus opposed this, and therefore proclaimed that all acts done in this way are meaningless in the eyes of God. Religious devotion becomes a currency; bought and sold with every convincing display of affection towards God. Not only does public religion lead to self-glorification, it will create an environment of pressure. Those who are poor on the currency will naturally become envious, and seek to emulate the piety of others through elaborate performances.

An interesting example of this is one of my classes in high school requiring students to take turns saying morning prayers in front of the group. A couple of students led the group in prayer in front of a large whiteboard filled with prayer requests, and in the following days the rotation would continue endlessly. The obligation to pray in view of others created an inherent pressure from the teacher and fellow students to pray in a certain way. When it was first instituted some of the students made a real effort to make their prayers as impressive and authentic as possible. It was obvious that mental compliments were given to good prayers, and negative expressions met lazy prayers. Over time most of the prayers became lazy, and prayers were delivered in a mechanical fashion by merely reading off the list on the whiteboard. They were lifeless, hollow, and meaningless. It not only serves as a good example of how obligation and pressure should never be associated with religious acts, but also how the impressive and lazy prayers would have been considered meaningless by God.

Surprisingly, even after the degradation of effort the importance of prayer was still vociferously defended by the students. One morning I had given a devotion to class concerning prayer (devotions were also required of students several times a year). I claimed that since prayer in the modern church was merely a way to impress God through the use of extravagant language (the beauty of which is in turn used to judge the character of the Christian), and a way to ask God for miracles or material comforts, it had been rendered meaningless. I offered a radical and naïve definition of prayer that was “the continual wordless affirmation of Jesus impact in our lives,” and then sat down. The idea being that if prayer lost the quality of being full of words, it had the potential of rising beyond a semantic distraction and an expression of materialism into an authentic way to thank and praise God through a state of mind married with actions. It was unorthodox, and arguably as immature as my personality was at the time, but I now realise it was a natural reaction to the way in which prayer had been used in my school and church. Needless to say, the devotion was not well received. Following my conclusion the reception in the faces among my classmates was

blank, and a number of people proceeded to think out loud (often behind my back) that I held weird views. Religious convention is often defended aggressively.

Lastly, I would like to discuss the role that worship plays in the modern church. While public singing often overlaps with the traps of publicly expressed religion, it was never explicitly mentioned in Matthew 6. However, Luke 11:27-28 contains, to my knowledge, the only reference of verbal worship that Jesus makes:

*“While Jesus was saying these things, one of the women in the crowd raised her voice and said to Him, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore You and the breasts at which You nursed.’ But He said, ‘On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.’” (Luke 11:27-28)*

This passage is often interpreted by Protestants as a pre-emptive attack against Catholicism, as Jesus is telling a woman not to worship his mother. However, I don't believe that the woman said “blessed is the womb that bore you” because she personally knew Mary and desired to worship her. Rather, this woman thought Jesus was divine and so worthy of worship that she praised something that was merely connected to Jesus. In essence, she ‘worshipped the ground he walked on.’ The impact of Jesus’ reply should not be neglected. Through an ultimate concern about his movement transforming from a group of people who listen and imitate into a group who are more interested in worship and other forms of non-existential appeasement; Jesus rebuked her. Jesus was worried that the easiest way for his life’s work to be nullified, and his impact on the world minimised, was by a group of followers who are worshipping instead of listening to you. Directing worship away from himself and onto people who adhere to his teaching is an attempt to stop his movement from becoming like *that*.

When the main activities, goals, and sentiments of the church are taken into account, it's clear that Christianity as we know it is not important, but Christ is. Its reversion into a religious hierarchy that Jesus argued was necessarily illegitimate, its ignorance of his message, its failure to represent Jesus in society, its failure to champion the rights of the poor and treat the least of society, and its failure to heed Jesus warning that performing religious acts of devotion in public will lead to hypocrisy and pressure all indicate that the modern church is not worthy of its name.

## The Alternative

I personally believe that the church should be a hub for a group of very different people to come together, discuss with each other their spiritual passions and personal beliefs, and then proceed to examine how they can serve the least in their society and in the world. Sermons will be abolished, and replaced with every member of the group being allowed a certain amount of time to talk about anything related to Christianity. Money gained from its members will be administered through democratic decision-making sessions, where the priorities and goals for the money will be discussed. It will be strictly non-hierarchical, where the main functions of the church are performed by every member through rotation, or where people with specific gifts are allowed to take care of certain areas provided that it is transparent and all major decisions have the consent of the group. Titles of honour will be considered irreverent, as Jesus considered them. Public prayer, giving, worship, and fasting will be discouraged, again as Jesus did. Above all else, the church group will strive to be known in their society for their love for one another and their love for the poorest of the poor.<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, most of the funds raised will go towards easing the suffering of those in great need (whether next door or half way around the world), and also to members of the group who have become sick, or unemployed, or economically exploited. Evangelism will be performed primarily through lived example, but also verbally if anyone were to ask about their actions or beliefs. I personally believe that this is a more authentic church model, and one which the modern church should be moving towards as fast as possible in order to align itself in some degree to its founder.

By Timothy Neal

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<sup>36</sup> John 13:35, Matthew 25:34-40