



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

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“Who Needs the Church?” Romans 12

“Who needs the church?” That’s a question that more and more people have been answering, “Not me!” Even churches that are holding steady in membership and attendance are really falling behind, because the population around them is most often growing, and they are not capturing the same percentage of the population as they used to recruit. But in many places, there are churches closing their doors. Participation in service clubs and especially fraternal orders has been plummeting, too. For people today, these organizations and their “ceremonial cultures” are pretty irrelevant.

Today I want to look with you at some reasons why people feel they don’t need the church, and wonder with you if there’s a message for us in this trend.

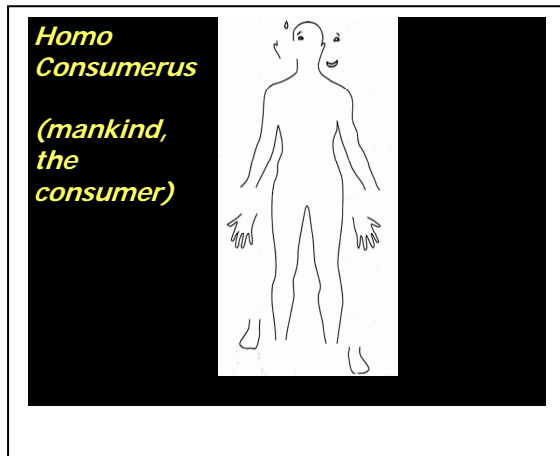
A friend's five-year-old son had been confused concerning the family's Christmas tradition of gathering in a circle, holding hands, to say grace before the big holiday meal. In prior years he had cried and shown contempt with the practice. But this year he was different. When the appropriate time came he gladly clasped the hands of the adjoining relatives. The prayer was uttered. Then the circle of people disbanded in all directions. All of a sudden the startled child burst into tears. "What's wrong?" asked his father. Through the sobs he uttered, "I thought we were going to play ring around the rosies." (William Richard Ezell, Naperville, IL)

Children have to be taught—often through trial and error--our culture and our meanings for life. Many of our grown-up customs must seem very strange. Think about how hard it is for children to learn table manners, or how to set a table with cutlery and dishes in just the right way.

For a lot of people outside our churches, what Christians do in worship will seem just as strange. I remember a young guy who joined our staff in the youth ministry I ran in Kansas. Stew was the son of a Church of the Nazarene pastor, and usually worshipped at a large church next to the Nazarene college in Olathe, Kansas. He told me about taking to worship there a girl he had met outside our ministry. This church, oriented toward college students, had a kickin’ praise band, state-of-the-art sound system and video, drama—all the things that “seeker sensitive” churches work so hard to produce. After worship was through, he asked this unchurched gal what she thought about it. “Nice show,” she said. Boy, was he disappointed. He had been moved by the soaring musical tribute to the Lord Jesus Christ; she saw it as a “nice show”. He had forgotten that churches have their own culture, and for more and more people today, it is a foreign culture they don’t care to take the time to understand.

Culture is a powerful force—that’s our first point today. Our American capitalist culture is focused on the individual-as-consumer, and tries to break us down into individual pieces—“market segments”, they are called. One result is the dissolution of common bonds, because we’re devoting more and more attention and energy to ourselves. Kids, of course, pick up on this right away. Shop at the supermarket during hours when parents are getting food, and watch

the children grab for favorite brands of breakfast cereal, or candy at the checkout stand. Younger and younger children are able to identify brands of clothing and indicate preferences. Advertising through our televisions is just right for younger ones who haven't developed the filters many of us adults use to sail past the hundreds of messages coming at us every day. And even though we filter out many messages each day, some get through to us. And the unconscious message underneath all the other messages is, "the good life comes through consuming the right things". *Homo consumerus*: mankind the consumer—that's us.



Compare that to the Scripture from the Apostle Paul's first letter to his friends at Corinth, where he wrote about the "Body of Christ". That's the one I read with the children today. In his illustration, all the parts were connected, right? They cooperated; they needed each other. That's what church is supposed to be.

Listen now to Paul's words to his friends at Rome, chapter 12. I found Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of this text so compelling, I decided I'd use that with you this morning, instead of a more literal translation. Listen with me for God's Word

to us today, as I read these words aloud. [text]

When we listen to Paul, the picture is of a body, all the parts connected, all needed, all accommodated, all valued. But our American consumer culture seems to prefer this—a segmented body, the individual parts attending to their own needs. You're a woman; your needs and preferences are different than mine. You're older than I am; your needs and preferences are different than mine. You're younger than I; your needs and preferences are different than mine. You are from a different economic group than I; your needs and preferences are different than mine. And on, and on. It's the exact opposite of Paul's words in First Corinthians. This culture likes it better if "the whole body WERE a hand", or "an eye". This is the culture we live in, and we take it for granted like a fish takes water for granted. Culture shapes our perceptions; we pass by things culture teaches us are unimportant without even registering that we've seen them.

I've used this example before, but to me, it's a fascinating one. A Russian biologist named Kropotkin was observing nature and the survival of species, and he observed that many species survived by cooperating together to ward off threats altogether, or to adjust successfully to threats. Has anyone here in the room heard of Kropotkin's theory of survival of the species? I didn't think so. We've focused instead on Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest; those are the ones who reproduce successfully and preserve the species through their singular adaptations. Now, standing back for a moment, is it Kropotkin's theory or Darwin's theory that more closely matches our cultural narrative of the individual hero, going back to Greek times? Even in "science", which we believe to be the most objective measure of reality, we find that culture has conditioned perceptions about what is real and what is not! Culture is powerful, and our individualist culture (inherited from the Greeks and refined by American capitalism) affects all of us so much that we don't even notice all its impacts.

Last week, we saw some of those impacts on the church--how over the centuries and especially with the rise of the Industrial Revolution and advertising, the church also has become more and more oriented toward "meeting my needs". There's nothing about "meeting my

needs” in our Scripture texts today. Blending the greater part of our individual identities, energies and resources into a coordinated whole that follows Jesus, our “Head”—that’s the message of these “body” illustrations.

But we don’t live that way, and most of us cannot imagine living that way. We have worked too hard to have our individual houses, cars, freeways. (OK, the government built freeways with our tax money, a collective enterprise; but think about it--freeways have powerfully accelerated the sprawl of individual, larger and larger, houses, and that has supported the American dream of home ownership and individuality for me and mine.) It’s only with the availability of cheap energy—gasoline—that this lifestyle has been possible. But many people today want to claim “cheap gas” as a “right”! A “right”?! Where does such an idea come from??

Culture! Culture shapes our values, preferences, relationships. Relationships become just one more commodity, to be used and discarded, as some 50% of marriages are discarded because the participants have discovered “irreconcilable preferences”. ☺

Is there any way to get “from here to there”, from our omnipresent culture to a place where we can even hear what the Holy Spirit is telling us through Paul’s words to these early Christians?

There is a small movement of Christians in our country and other Western nations that is deliberately creating a Christian counter-culture. They have become convinced that unless we experience a powerful influence for Christ-centered living from a counter-culture, we will not have sufficient desire to move toward the relationship-based life that God designed from the beginning, in Genesis 2 and 3.

When scientists had access to deep-diving submersible machines, they took first some unmanned models to depths of thousands of feet, where the pressures of the sea water would crush anything we know of here at the surface. In the blackness, they switched on the exterior lights, expecting to see nothing but debris and decay from upper levels of the ocean. To their surprise, there were all kinds of creatures there, including a number of fish like this “Tripod Fish”. This made no



sense. How could a fish live under those extreme pressures without being crushed? So they sent down a model with a net that could capture a specimen and bring it to the surface. In dissection, the scientists discovered that these fish had tough air sacs inside that remained inflated, and with their pressure from the inside, these sacs allowed the fish to survive in the pressure from the outside. The Christian counter-cultural movement operates like that.

These Christians—calling themselves “The Organic Church” or “the Emerging Church”—meet in small groups and live a more communal mindset. I know a group in Ohio where one family felt a call to move their household to another city, and start a new “mini-church” there. After a lot of time and prayer in their dinner meetings together, 8 or 10 families all put their homes up for sale, and made that move until they all had come to this new location where they energetically engaged in connecting people there with Christ through the relationship-based life they were already living. They are a counter-culture.

Some of these groups find themselves called to serve the poor, and deliberately locate—as Gracie Michel did since college—among people who need a lot of help to break the cycle of poverty in our consumer culture.

Some of these groups seek to influence government. Some are called to penetrate the world of the arts and communication. Whatever their calling, they achieve maximum impact, far beyond their numbers, because they do not spend much on themselves. But more important than their vocation in the world, they are changing their own hearts by changing and maintaining this counter-culture. They are forming an outpost of the Kingdom of God. They are practicing the presence of Christ as they work, pray, cook meals, help their kids with homework, pump gas, stand in line. They eat meals together often, sometimes every night in one home or another. They are aunts and uncles to each other's children. Pet care, house sitting, sharing grief at a parent's death, chipping in when there is a need—it's Acts, chapter 2 come to life!

But here's the thing. Most of these are groups of younger people. The Boomer generation and their kids (sometimes lumped together as 'Generation X') have no interest in institutional maintenance. They ARE interested in Jesus, however—very interested. And what really gets their attention is a group of Christ-followers who are living Jesus' commandments with love and joy. There's an undeniable power in that, an integrity where the "inside" matches the "outside", where "beliefs" are lived as "behaviors. That's something our "visit-on-Sunday" churches find hard to match. You see, it's not the good activities that MOST draw them; it's the reality of the relationships--working through conflict, coming to agreement, sacrificing time and money, working so that each member can be the best he or she can be in Christ. In a world of damaged and broken relationships, this is a powerful witness, and touches something deep in these folks. The Christians are doing life together, confessing sin, listening to God--as a Body--so that God's will "IS done on earth as it is in heaven".

William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas in their book *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*, ask the question, Why do we have children?, and give what some think is an excellent answer. They write: "Christians have children, in great part, in order to be able to tell our children the story... It is our baptismal responsibility to tell this story to our young, to live it before them, to take time to be parents in a world that is God's creation (a fact we wouldn't know without this story)... It is our privilege to invite our children, and others' children, to be a part of this great adventure called the Church." (1990, Abingdon Press, p. 60)

Telling the story—through living our lives as a counter-culture—is a way to re-parent all God's children. Our Life Groups can become primary re-culturing families to give personal power to the new culture of Christ. And as the culture of Christ grows, "the church of Jesus" rises. People today in the 40's and younger won't make time for the church as it is in most places, by and large. But they are hungry for genuine relationships, where the words of Jesus RULE. That radically-different lifestyle powered by God's values draws attention in powerful ways.

Now, how has all of this sounded to you? Has it touched you and made you curious, or even given you a "holy hunger"? Perhaps at least you now are in touch with why many of our children do not connect God with their lives at all, even if they were raised in a church. Do you sense, now, what it's going to take to reclaim the younger generations for God, so that disciples of Christ, the Body of Christ, has strength for His mission?

Last night, Sharon and Preston and I attended the Gold Country Young Life fund-raising banquet, north of town. Most of the people there were familiar with Young Life, the ministry to high school students that puts staff and volunteers on high school campuses, ministering to kids through relationships. Instead of waiting for kids (and their families) to come to our church buildings for worship or classes, Young Life goes to the kids, on their turf—at school, a part-time workplace, hanging out on corners, sharing tacos. As those relationships grow, a Young Life weekly Club meeting is started at someone's house or barn, and the group sings wild songs, watches crazy skits, and hears a Jesus message. For many students, this is the first time they have heard about Jesus and his good news of God's love. Some will go to Young Life camp, and for a week, out of their normal element, they have a blast, and get a chance more clearly to hear the call of God on their lives, and many will give their lives to Christ. Each area committee is the group that supports this counter-culture, so that the work of Jesus—go, make disciples, baptize, teach to obey his commands—happens with integrity.

This is so different from most of our churches, it's no wonder that most Young Life kids don't find their way to our churches, even after they've committed to following Jesus. If the church is only another point of contact with consumer culture, not many kids or their families will make an effort to check it out. But "the church of Jesus", with Christ in her midst as experienced in ordinary life decisions of her people—THAT is what every person in our world deeply needs, and many would jump to come near, like Moses coming near the "burning bush" to see what God is doing.

Will we be that church, "the church of Jesus", for "Act Two" of our life together?

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on September 28, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]