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The Pharisee Church

Why the Heart of the Modern American Church Does Not Match the Heart of Christ and

What We Can Do To Change It

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Abstract

Religious discussions often hinge on semantics. Currently debate abounds concerning the state of the modern American Church. Is it failing? Is it flourishing? Who is a part of it? Comparing the biblical understanding of church to the state of the modern American Church provides great insight into how the modern church has erred. Investigating the semantic range of the word “church” also sheds light on why perceptions of the modern American Church vary. Additional comparisons are made between the typical American Christian and Pharisees. Potential similarities are identified and analyzed. Finally, suggestions are made regarding church reform so that the reputation of Jesus Christ may be regarded highly by those who are skeptical of the modern American Church.

The Pharisee Church: Why the Heart of the Modern American Church Does Not Match the Heart of Christ and What We Can Do to Change It

Failures and misconceptions both inside and outside the church have led to a state where the heart of modern American Church does not match the heart of Christ. The mission of the modern American Church proves to have odd dissimilarities with the mission of Jesus Christ. Lifestyle behaviors of typical Christians are regularly inconsistent with what would be expected of their claimed Messiah, and the church's methods of evangelism bear little resemblance to the characteristics of Jesus' ministry on earth. Interestingly, in these three areas—mission, lifestyle, and evangelism—the behaviors of the modern American Church may be paralleled with those of the Pharisees, the religious leaders with whom Jesus so often disagreed. Steps can be taken to correct this mistake, bringing many people to faith and enabling this generation of believers to successfully bear the image of God and the name of Christ.

Terms Defined

Because semantic range blurs religious discussion so easily, it is most appropriate to begin with an analysis of the word “church.” First, the biblical understanding of church should be understood prior to analyzing its malformation in what is understood as the modern American Church. The Greek work for church in the New Testament is *ekklesia*. The word literally means “called-out company,” but over time and common use, the original context allows the word to be interpreted as a “gathering.”¹

1. William D. Mounce, *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 110.

The Bible uses the word for church in three main ways.² The first way describes a group of believers in a specific area, a local church. The second way describes more than one group of believers in a large area. For example, racial differences between Jews and Gentiles had not been overcome in Rome when Paul drafted his letter. Scholars suggest that the letter is intended for multiple churches in one area; corporately, they would be recognized as the Roman church even though they were separate groups.³ The last way describes all believers everywhere. The universal church refers to any person on the planet at any given time who is genuinely reconciled to God.

The apostle John saw variations in Christian identity sprouting at the very onset of the early church. One group that threatened to distort the identity of the universal church was called the Gnostics. In his epistles, John gave instructions to the churches on how to identify a true member of the universal church, setting them apart from the Gnostics.⁴ These people, the true believers, revere the Word of God, and obey it out of a love for God, not fear or habit. 1 John 2:5-6 says, “But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.”⁵ The skewed theology of the Gnostics allowed for sin in the body, because the redeemed spirit was entirely separate from the body. This selection from 1 John informed his readers that obedience to God will be the desired and expected

2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 95-98, 130-136.

3. Douglas Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 27.

4. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 15-19.

5. Scripture is quoted from the NIV, copyright 1984, unless otherwise noted.

behavior of someone who is a part of the universal church.⁶ Their lives reflect the life of Jesus; their hearts resemble the heart of Jesus.

These three, previously mentioned, definitions of the church are all rooted in Scripture: 1. The local church, 2. The regional church, and 3. The universal church. They define, technically, how the church should be understood.

While the Bible provides the correct church definition for girding a Christian worldview, it is not practical to use for addressing the modern American Church. People outside the Church certainly would not describe the church as they see it in a way that is similar to the biblical description. Unfortunately, many people inside the Church would not adhere to a biblical definition of the church either. Semantic distress occurs when believers who understand the biblical definition of the church fail to recognize its inability to define the modern American Church at large. The best way to understand the semantic dilemma is to say that the true biblical church operates within the larger modern American Church.⁷ Because both are simply called “church,” people who do not adhere to the biblical definition of the church are strongly skeptical and often resentful of the church in general.⁸ People who do adhere to a biblical definition of the church are often resentful of people who claim to be Christians but do not represent the true church as the apostle John said believers would. They believe that the alleged fake Christians give the church a bad name; in this, they are absolutely right.⁹

6. Ibid.

7. Steve McCranie, *Love Jesus Hate Church*, (Gastonia, NC: Back2Acts Productions, 2005), 13-17.

8. David Kinnaman, *Unchristian*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 41-45.

9. Thom S. Rainer, *Essential Church?* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), 98-99.

For the purposes of this study, the term “modern American Church” will refer to the general group of Americans who claim to be Christians and participate in religious norms such as attending church and observing church ordinances. The term does not necessarily refer to people who are in reconciled relationships with God. Four main descriptors for the modern American Church that most non-Christians identify are hypocritical, ignorant, exclusive, and boring.¹⁰

Contrasting the modern American Church with the Pharisees will prove ineffective if the Pharisees are not defined as well. The term “Pharisees” will refer specifically to the religious sect known as the Pharisees during the time of Jesus’ ministry. Pharisees adhered scrupulously to the Torah as well as to Oral Law.¹¹ They were known for their abounding knowledge of Scripture and, in this context, for their self-righteousness and insincerity.¹² Throughout Jesus’ ministry, the Pharisees were responsible for continuous opposition and persecution because of his teaching and works. Ultimately, they claimed responsibility for his crucifixion.

Conflict in Mission

One would hope that the mission of the church would be consistent with the mission of her Savior. This simple expectation is called into question with the modern American Church, where culture and socio-economic norms have reshaped interpretations of the biblical call on a believer’s life.

10. Jim Henderson and Todd Hunter, *Outsider Interviews*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010), 50-54.

11. Menahem Mansoor, “Pharisees” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, (Detroit: Macmillan, 2007), 30-32.

12. Joachim Schaper, “The Pharisees,” in *The Early Roman Period*. Eds. William Horbury, W. D. Davies and John Sturdy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 402.

Jesus' mission is simple enough to understand: live exactly according to God the Father's plan without the slightest deviation. He would usher in the kingdom of God on the earth.¹³ As a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden, man's union with God was broken. Man was helpless, depraved to the uttermost, and needed God to mercifully design an alternative route to reconciliation.¹⁴ God debased himself by means that the human mind cannot fully understand by taking on human flesh and being born of a sinful woman but without original sin.¹⁵

In Philippians 2:7, Paul writes that Jesus "made himself nothing." The Greek word used is from *kenoó*. It is a verb that means "to empty."¹⁶ Jesus literally emptied himself of his rights as God in order to become fully human. Paul goes on in Philippians 2:8 to describe how Jesus "humbled himself." The verb here is from *tapeinoó* and bears an idea of movement. Jesus is lowering himself, moving down in rank and position, to fulfill the mission of reconciliation.¹⁷ This is not to suggest that the Son's person in the Trinity is of lesser importance than the Father, for verse 9 teaches that "God exalted him to the highest place" and was glorified by Jesus' debasement.

Jesus' literal descent from God to man was done so that he could reconcile man's sinful heart to God. Jesus faced all the temptations that man faces. Hebrews 4:15 teaches its readers, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet

13. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 210-217.

14. Wayne Jacobsen, *The Naked Church*, (Newbury Park, CA: BodyLife Publishers, 2002), 64-66.

15. Ben Gutierrez, *Living out the Mind of Christ*, (Lynchburg, VA: Thomas Road Baptist Church, 2008), 67-69.

16. Mounce, *Expository Dictionary*, 1188.

17. *Ibid.*, 434.

was without sin.” By living a sinless life, he was able to bear the burden of man’s sin when he was crucified.

Jesus is metaphorically the Second Adam, in that he is humanity’s second legitimate chance at pure, unhindered communion with God. Whereas Adam led mankind into sin, Jesus would lead men out. Through the atonement theory titled *Christus Victor*, theologian Gustaf Aulen places emphasis on the principle that men necessarily die with Christ in order to be raised with Christ.¹⁸ While the goal of Jesus’ mission is still reconciliation, the means of his crucifixion greatly highlights Jesus’ victory over sin, death, and the Law. In sharing in Christ’s suffering, man is also invited to share in his victory. The key distinction theologian Gustaf Aulen seeks to present in his discussions on atonement is that *Christus Victor* describes an ongoing sanctification inseparable from atonement.¹⁹ This sanctification allows a believer to draw nearer to God as a result of being justified by Jesus’ sacrifice.

If Jesus’ mission is to reconcile man to God, then one would naturally assume that the church’s mission is to spread this message and show the world the path to redemption. Upon asking an American Christian if that is his mission as a church member, the answer will likely be a confident and resounding “yes.”²⁰ But does the answer match the actions? One may find that the lifestyle of a modern American Christian is significantly more American than Christian.

18. Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1969), 71.

19. *Ibid*, 4-5.

20. Dan Merchant, *Lord, Save Us from Your Followers*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2008), 25-28.

The American dream has made a strongly identifiable insignia on the nation's history. Manifest Destiny is commonly understood as the mission of the United States to reach from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. It is important to note that in 1845 when John O'Sullivan neologized the phrase "Manifest Destiny," he stressed the notion that it was God's plan for America to stretch from sea to shining sea; Virginia was destined to be a sister state with California before Christopher Columbus was a thought in his mother's mind.²¹ This important fact shows how attributes of the American dream were linked to an association with God's mission from the very beginning. The error occurred when the American dream began to shape Christ's mission rather than vice versa.

In 1776, Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence that God grants all men unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; Americans believed him.²² These unalienable rights are fundamental to American thought, and therefore, fundamental to modern American Church thought. George M. Marsden, a professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, teaches his students of the idea "that zeal for the Gospel and patriotic enthusiasm should go hand in hand," and cites cultural examples of this concept back to World War I.²³ Throughout American history, aspects of patriotism and church life became cultural norms.

In contrast to the American cultural tendency to emphasize personal rights, Philippians 2:6 emphasizes that although Jesus was God, he "did not consider equality

21. Bradford Perkins, "Manifest Destiny" in *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 171-172.

22. Independence Hall Association, "The Declaration of Independence," USHistory.org, <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document>.

23. George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2006), 142.

with God something to be grasped,” and Paul exhorts his readers to bear the same attitude. Jesus was entitled to full rights as a Sovereign Creator God but gave those rights up in order to fulfill God’s mission.

That kind of teaching stands in harsh contrast to the cultural norms that have developed in America over time. Americans fight for their rights and for the rights of others.²⁴ The modern American Church is shaped more by the idea of defending her unalienable rights than by Jesus’ example of relinquishing all rights and trusting God.²⁵

The American dream encourages ambition and diligence to reach the top.²⁶ This idea shapes the objectives of the modern American Church. Churches aim at bigger numbers, nicer facilities—up, up, up—until they reach the top.²⁷ But what is climbing the ladder of success in light of 1 Corinthians 9:19? Paul says, “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.” The concept of embracing a slave mindset and dependency on God in order to pursue the mission of Christ contradicts the American ideals of independence and self-sufficiency.

The fair conclusion is that the mission of the modern American Church is not aligned with Jesus’ mission, but the similarities to the Pharisees’ mission are interesting. Dr. Menahem Mansoor, expert on Jewish history, taught extensively on how the Pharisees were able to “incorporate popular customs and traditions into the Temple cult and the religious life of the people” whenever Jews sought clarification on various

24. Ibid., 239-241.

25. Udo W. Middlemann, *The Market Driven Church: The Worldly Influence of Modern Culture on the Church in America*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 10.

26. John Marzillier, “The American Dream,” in *Psychologist*, (December 1, 2005), 736-737, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed February 7, 2012).

27. Middlemann, *The Market Driven Church*, 39-40.

matters in Scripture.²⁸ They allowed their culture to shape their religious mission, oddly similar to the unintentional tendencies of the modern American Church. Mansoor explains repeatedly how the Pharisee “spin” on doctrine emphasized hope to appeal to “the oppressed masses.”²⁹ This is oddly reminiscent of the promises for new and better life that are characteristic of the American dream. This theme is common and found in examples like the history of the California Gold Rush and the teaching that all people can and should go to college.

Comparison of Lifestyles

Jesus’ life was perfect, which means all of his actions were perfect. There was no sin in him.³⁰ Jesus customarily spent a significant portion of his time among sinners.³¹ The Gospels recount various examples throughout the ministry of Jesus extending hospitality and grace to sinners and Gentiles. Comparison of Jesus’ lifestyle to that of typical modern American Christians and to Pharisees is most significant in cases of addressing social pariahs. While the term “pariah” is more common in the Hindu caste system, it has subtly made a home for itself in Christianity. Homosexuals, divorcees, partying college students, and hippies are just a few of the many groups that could be classified as pariahs in the United States.

Two well-known examples of Jesus meeting with social pariah are Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 and the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11. Although Zacchaeus was

28. Menahem Mansoor, “Pharisees,” 30-32.

29. *Ibid.*, 30.

30. John Dickson, *Life of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 64-67.

31. Mary J. Marshall, “JESUS: GLUTTON AND DRUNKARD?” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 3, no. 1 (January 2005): 52-55. *Religion and Philosophy Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 1, 2012).

clearly a social pariah, a sinful tax collector detested by the majority of people, Jesus sought to have dinner with him. He did not just tolerate Zacchaeus' company; he pursued it. Jesus ignored the disapproving remarks of the crowd, and gave his time and salvation to a hated man. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus prevented the woman caught in adultery from being stoned, even though the punishment for her sin would have been justified by Mosaic Law. He loved her and showed her grace she did not deserve.

Comparable scenarios occur in the modern American Church, but the average church-goer rarely reacts the way Jesus did. The American Church has a reputation for hating and discriminating against social pariahs.³² Excuses are invented to avoid befriending or showing grace to thugs, homosexuals, promiscuous women, liars, thieves, murderers, and other societal rejects. A common objection to building these relationships is that being a friend of sinners will inevitably draw a Christian into the same sins. Many people argue that Jesus was able to befriend sinners because he was God and could not sin, but a Christian today does not have that protection.³³ While relationships with non-Christians will likely be marked with trials of all kinds, the Bible is clear in its message that no temptation is too great when a person has fully surrendered his life to a relationship with God. While there are some things to be wary of, it is entirely incorrect to dismiss the idea of building relationships with people who hold different beliefs. Practical measures can be taken to ensure the relationship develops appropriately, including accountability for the relationship and personal faithfulness to God. One area of caution is helping a non-Christian through a temptation that the Christian himself has not fully overcome. Assuming the believer's relationships with God and other believers

32. Henderson and Hunter, *Outsider Interviews*, 97-101.

33. Kinnaman, *Unchristian*, 95-99.

remain steady and strong, there is no reason to believe that relationships should not be developed with people outside the church.

In addition to building relationships with non-Christians, attention also needs to be given to building relationships with those who have participated in Christian circles but fell away for whatever reason.³⁴ In the Bible, the only acceptable response to a returned believer is joy, as demonstrated in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). It is not the believer's job to be skeptical of the other person's motives or to judge that person's ability to truly surrender his life to God. In these relationships, the believer is responsible for embracing the other person and making him feel welcome in the church, possibly one's home, and certainly in the relationship, as Jesus did. It is impossible to know how many people may have sought after God a second time in their lives, but chose to stop the pursuit because of the feeling of shame impressed upon them by members of the modern American Church.³⁵

Unfortunately, the modern American tendency is reminiscent of the attitudes of the Pharisees. Because their reputation depended so heavily on strict adherence to the law, Pharisees could not tolerate relationships with social pariahs. Additionally, as in the case of the adulterous woman, emphasizing others' sins elevated their own righteousness even greater.³⁶ Self-generating righteousness was the norm for religious leaders, as opposed to God-generated righteousness within a person who believes and obeys him.

Contrast in Evangelistic Methods

34. Rainer, *Essential Church*, 3-4.

35. Henderson and Hunter, *Outsider Interviews*, 84-87.

36. Schaper, "The Pharisees," 421-424.

At the most basic level, one principle for evangelism is the same with Jesus as it is with the modern American Church: a sinner who learns and accepts the Gospel will be saved from hell. Other potential similarities in the methods of evangelism begin to seem entirely insignificant when compared to the major differences that are in place. Although both parties bear the same goal, their means of reaching said goal are nearly opposite.

Fr. John Reeves demands that Jesus' sermons on evangelism be understood as a missional imperative.³⁷ Jesus commands his listeners to "go and make disciples" (Matthew 28:19). It is important to note what his intention would have likely been. Disciple, or *mathetes*, literally means a learner.³⁸ His disciples were people who learned, lived, and breathed his teachings. They were commanded to go and train other people to learn, live, and breathe his teachings.

The directive is simple enough, but it cannot be understood apart from the need for faith, which precedes all discipleship. Men are saved by the power of God, and their faith enables them to learn and understand the righteousness of God to build even greater faith (Romans 1:16-17). Indeed, the author of Hebrews asserts that Jesus is "the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). Jesus' methods of evangelism were certainly shaped by his understanding of these things.

He did not need to exert undue energy to convince a faithless person to worship him. For example, the rich young ruler of Mark 10 recognized at least some of Jesus' authority, but did not have enough faith to sell his earthly possessions. Jesus assured the man that he would have treasure in heaven, but the security of his earthly possessions

37. John Reeves, "The Nature of Evangelism," in the *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 42, no. 3/4 (October 1, 1997): 469. <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed January 1, 2012).

38. Mounce, *Expository Dictionary*, 183.

outweighed his faith in Jesus' promise of eternal riches (Mark 10:17-27). When the man "went away sad," Jesus did not offer consolation (Mark 10:22). He did not ask him to stay. He offered no encouragement. Instead, he "looked around" and began teaching his disciples, the learners (Mark 10:23). Jesus seems to be more concerned about teaching the people who had enough faith to witness the event and remain to listen than winning back a person whose faith has not prepared him to understand the saving message presented by the Savior himself.

Exposing the rich young ruler's most vital need was not an act entirely out of the norm for Jesus' evangelistic methods. Jesus describes his attitude toward people receiving the Gospel in John 6:37-40, saying:

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

Jesus admits that he will refuse to lose the people who are promised to him, the ones who have faith that he is the Messiah. Therefore, the people who reject him as the Messiah may walk away; Jesus will not stop them. Jesus continues to teach the crowd, instructing them to eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6:48-59). A crowd of people left, and Jesus was left with his disciples (John 6:66-67). Peter exhibited the faith worthy of Jesus' evangelism in John 6:68-69, declaring that they disciples cannot leave him because they know he is "the Holy One of God."

Jesus did not need to beg for the sake of the Gospel; he died for it. He knew his message was valuable beyond measure, and it would be senseless to force something so

precious on a heart that desired its opposite. His ministry concentrated on converting “ordinary men... into powerful people,” and counting on them to replicate the transformation in someone else’s life.³⁹ How interesting, then, is it that the modern American Church toils tirelessly to accomplish that which Jesus paid little heed?

In short, the typical evangelistic method of the modern American Church does not recognize people who exhibit initial faith and then train them up to be people, propelled by the power of God. In many cases, the church does little more than overexert herself to get bodies onto the campus.

The leniency of the modern American Church is pitiful. In *Church Evangelism*, John Mark Terry devotes a section of his book to discussing the importance of advertising the local church. He has advice on newspapers, local radio stations, television commercial ads, billboards, promotional pamphlets, and mass mailing. He suggests that if people do not know the location and reputation of the church, then the church is failing.⁴⁰ The idea suggests that if a person tries hard enough to publicize the church, unsaved people will show up.

Geoff Surratt analyzes the failures of church evangelism in his book *Ten Stupid Things that Keep Churches from Growing*. Many churches recognize that people love a show. To get unsaved people in the doors, they will put on a great show no matter the cost. In some cases, the cost is promoting strong talent on stage despite poor integrity.⁴¹

39. H. D. L. Abraham, “Church and Evangelism,” in *International Review of Mission* 45, no. 178 (April 1, 1956): 169-173. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 4, 2012).

40. John Mark Terry, *Church Evangelism*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 163-171.

41. Geoff Surratt, *Ten Stupid Things that Keep Churches from Growing*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 96-98.

Surratt, however, takes an interesting turn in his book to highlight the importance of location. He encourages churches to move out of dangerous locations unless, of course, “you have God’s blessing on your church, a great worship experience, and a gifted speaker.”⁴² If a church does not have God’s blessing, the location is likely the least of their problems. Jesus sought out these socially unacceptable circumstances, such as dinner with Zaccheus (Luke 19:5-6). Surratt explains that a church will get more people if it is in a safe location and easily accessible.⁴³ His unfortunate mistake is that he argues that the ease of attaining numerical growth supersedes the importance of easily reaching those who are lost and desperately in need of hearing the Gospel. If location must be highlighted as a major factor in evangelism, the focus should be on reaching the unsaved as much as it should be on disciplining the saved.

Other avenues of ministry have been popularized by the modern American Church that are foreign to the style of Jesus. Youth groups frequently establish various events to get lost people to the church. These events may include things like bands, food, dodgeball, mechanical bulls, rock climbing, and even celebrity appearances.

While the various aspirations of modern American Churches regarding evangelism are not inherently bad, they are not reflective of how Jesus reached the lost. On the other hand, some of the Church’s evangelistic practices are uncomfortably similar to Pharisee behavior.

Surratt and other likeminded leaders put a strong emphasis on church events and the people who attend them. Pharisees exercised great caution in being separated “from

42. Ibid., 119.

43. Ibid., 119-126.

the heathens and foreigners in order to preserve the identity of the Jewish people.”⁴⁴ It would be safe to assume that the Pharisees would not be keen on holding church services “under the freeway behind the abandoned Kmart.”⁴⁵ Their religious life “was centralized about the Temple and its services.”⁴⁶ Similarly, modern American Churches are catering their evangelism around getting people into their church services rather than getting into the tax collector’s house for dinner.

Another aspect to Pharisaic evangelism that echoes modern America is the promotion of an evolving message to reach an evolving people. The position of High Priest had to be given to a person from the line of the Zadokites, per the Written Law. High Priest Alcimus died in 159 BCE, leaving the position vacant and with no Zadokite successor.⁴⁷ The Pharisees manipulated the circumstances to their advantage by shifting “authority from the Pentateuchal precepts to a representative body.”⁴⁸ This representative body appointed a new High Priest in 143 BCE; the event was considered “a revolutionary act” and “an unprecedented procedure.”⁴⁹ They determined what aspects of Scripture were too strict and altered them to accommodate the masses.

Similarly, modern American Christians often alter their interpretations of Scripture based on what they believe is too strict. Even fundamental matters such as the existence of hell are dismissed. In the wildly popular book *Love Wins*, Rob Bell declares

44. Asher Finkel, *The Pharisees and the Teacher of Nazareth*, (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1974), 43.

45. Surratt, *Stupid Things*, 113.

46. Ibid.

47. Schaper, “The Pharisees,” 409-410.

48. Ibid., 410.

49. Ibid.

that Scripture is “fairly ambiguous at best as to what exactly [the afterlife] looks like.”⁵⁰ Bell questions the power and love of God, suggesting that God should be powerful enough to save everyone and loving enough to want to save everyone. Bell manipulates Scripture in order to establish a more marketable religion, much like the Pharisees in 143 BCE.

“Pharisaism was firmly rooted in the culture” much like Christianity is firmly rooted in American culture.⁵¹ When this type of culture infiltration takes place, people are enabled to participate in the religious culture without partaking in the religion itself. Potentially the most destructive result of this dynamic is that American Christian culture is indistinguishable from Christianity to a person who does not participate in either. Said person witnesses the inconsistencies and dismisses the premise of Christian faith as a whole.

How to Overcome

Much is at risk in the rise of American cultural Christianity. Many people will participate in the Christian culture without ever coming to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Their false assurance will betray them on judgment day. The perception of Christianity is determined by the perception of her participants. Outsiders have no way of distinguishing which participants are true Christians and which participants simply participate in the Christian culture. They develop their opinions based on all who claim Christianity and settle with an inaccurate understanding of the faith. As a result, they reject and often disdain Jesus Christ.

50. Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 65.

51. Schaper, “The Pharisees,” 419.

Curing a nationwide disease will be no simple task. It must begin with confrontation in the pulpit. Many pastors must embark on the task of “un-saving” their congregation. Congregants who need un-saving and then re-saving are often guilty of ignorance, not willful corruption. They were reared with a false understanding of Christianity and simply grafted themselves into the culture. Christians and “Christians” must be taught to lay their lives “bare before the eyes of him to whom [they] must give account” (Hebrews 4:13).

Pastors may begin the confrontation by teaching passages like Matthew 7:13-14.

In this passage, Jesus warns:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

If Jesus was telling the truth in this passage, Christians should feel motivated to analyze the fact that eighty-three percent of Americans are self-proclaimed Christians.⁵² Does eighty percent qualify as “a few” as Jesus said it? Are Americans the “few” while the rest of the world makes up the “many?” Self-proclaiming Christians must be taught that the gate is, in fact, narrow and that they need to be honest with themselves in dealing with whether or not they have an active relationship with Jesus Christ.

Pastors can encourage their congregants to meditate on Matthew 7:21-23 and discuss it with non church-going “Christians.” This passage brings to light the truth that some people will think they are saved up until judgment day, when Christ will “tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you’” (Matthew 7:23). The point of confrontation in a sermon may begin with the question “Do you know that Jesus knows you?” The pastor should be

52. Barna Group, “Barna’s Annual Tracking Study Shows Americans Stay Spiritually Active, But Biblical Views Wane,” <http://www.barna.org/congregations-articles/103-barnas-annual-tracking-study-shows-americans-stay-spiritually-active-but-biblical-views-wane> (accessed February 20, 2012.)

deliberate in identifying the ways the congregants may be responding to the question. For some of them, answering the question is easy. They know Jesus. They spend time with him, and they know he would not betray them on the day of final judgment. Others will be uncomfortable with the question. The pastor must assert that there is no gray area in this matter. A person either has a relationship with Christ, or he does not. A person who is unsure of whether or not he has a relationship with Jesus is obviously not actively participating in one.

This challenge will create unrest in the Church, but that is a good thing. Too much rest has put American Christianity to sleep. The true members of the Church must begin the task of internal evangelism. Internal evangelism starts with determining whether or not someone who calls himself a Christian is actually a Christian. God did not design a covenant that would leave his people fearful and confused about the state of their salvation. In his first epistle, the apostle John teaches his readers how to identify if someone is truly a child of God.

The first thing John explains as a Christian-identifier is righteousness. 1 John 2:5-6 says, “But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.” This passage does not mean that true Christians live perfect, sinless lives. However, it does mean that living a perfect and sinless life is the goal. Christians are not just good rule followers; that was characteristic of the Pharisees. Christians obey God’s commands because they deeply love God and have a motivating reverence for him. A Christian is a person who loves and seeks to glorify God through his actions.

Second, John teaches the social qualifier for identifying Christians. 1 John 2:9-10 says, “Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.” Having a relationship with Jesus Christ causes his love for humanity to be reflected in the heart of the Christian. The self-proclaiming Christians who have won for American Christian culture the reputation of being full of hate and anger would not have measured up to the apostle’s second identifier for people of The Way.

Lastly, John explains that the body of Christ is made up of people who know the truth. 1 John 2:22-23 says, “Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.” In a 2002 Gallup poll, about forty percent of Americans said they believe that Jesus was both God and man, the promised Messiah. Adherence to this basic belief is fundamental to the Christian life.⁵³

Exposing the “cultural Christians” to the truth will hopefully result in faith and life transformation. It is this kind of transformation that will begin to repair the church’s relationships with her communities. Until the issue of true salvation is fleshed out in congregations, Christians who have been redeemed and radically changed by the saving power of Jesus Christ will be indistinguishable from the modern American Church. It is the responsibility of true believers to present saving truth to the lost people both inside and outside the church.

Conclusion

53. George H. Gallup Jr., “Who is Jesus?” Gallup, Inc., <http://www.gallup.com/poll/7471/Who-Jesus.aspx>.

Christianity has become a cultural body in America, creating what this paper has deemed “the modern American Church.” The lines have blurred between cultural Christian norms and true Christian faith. As a result, the Church has developed a negative reputation despite its message of redemption and promise of eternal life.

Quite unintentionally, the modern American Church departed from Christ-likeness in many ways and became oddly similar to the Pharisees. Satan’s deception has turned Christ’s followers into replicas of Christ’s enemies. The first point of contention lies in the Christian mission. Jesus’ mission was to obey the will of the Father and reconcile creation to the Creator; the reconciliation ultimately brings glory to God. The mission of the American Christian bears little resemblance to the mission of Christ. Americans cling to their rights and tirelessly pursue success in their careers, finance, and social status. The concept of culture shaping the religion rather than religion shaping the culture was also prevalent among the Pharisees.

Comparing the lifestyles of Jesus, modern American Christians, and Pharisees yielded equally disappointing results. Jesus lived a sinless life. He broke bread with common men and socialized with sinners. Due to the importance of social status, Christians and Pharisees both favor social engagements that benefit their status. They also shy away from people who do not adhere to the rules laid out by Scripture to prevent any negative repercussions from being associated with sinners.

The evangelistic methods of Christians are hardly reminiscent of how Jesus presented the truth, but the Christian methods do bear resemblance to more Pharisaic tendencies. Jesus’ ministry focused on repentance and life change. He did not press the Gospel on people who did not have ears to hear it. The modern American Church tends to

be very numbers driven. Some of the methods of attaining church growth can actually hinder or prevent the Gospel from reaching places it is needed most. Manipulating Scripture to win converts or attain a preferable social standing is a characteristic of the modern American Church that is also found throughout the history of the Pharisees.

The problem of the modern American Church can and must be overcome. Pastors must preach true salvation from the pulpits. If this message of truth causes a member to leave the church, so be it. That person is free to warm the pew of some other congregation. When the people who are resistant to the truth are gone, the church becomes a safer and purer place for non Christians to seek the truth. It is better to lose a member to another congregation than it is to lose an unsaved person to an eternity in hell.

Christians must be confronted with the truth that not everyone who thinks he is saved actually is. These people need to be taught how to analyze their own life in order to know if they have come to saving faith through Christ Jesus. Many people will discover that they have been attending church for years without ever experience a relationship with God. Once these false cultural-Christians begin to grow in a true relationship with Christ, dynamics within churches will begin to change. Relationships with people outside the church will strengthen. The Gospel will be preached and if the church is faithful to the mission, the name of Jesus may be restored in the United States.

It is the mission and hope of this paper to identify the destructive status of cultural Christianity in the United States and to promote change that will renew the American Church.

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