

Some Thoughts about the Attractional, Sending, and Engaged Church

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Let me begin with an aside by noting the following: The world turns. Cultures transform. People change within those cultures. Worldviews broaden or shrink. Some values remain untouched, others adjust to fit the cultural winds. In short – change happens. And because it happens, both perceived good and bad accompany those changes.

History is often read through the eyes of the present. Unfortunately, present historical values and cultures often color the interpretations of the past. It is important to make every effort to interpret events through the culture and values and worldviews of those who lived in the times of the historical events being studied. Judging history based on present cultural values and norms alone may not harvest accurate interpretations. So . . . some thoughts.

The Attractional Church – Intentional or Not?

As a young boy in the late 50's and early 60's, I still remember Friday nights at church. Let me set the context. My congregation was a rural place (nearest town of almost 100 people was a mile away) as were most Lutheran congregations. Since my father was the principal of the Lutheran grade school, we lived next door to the school in the teacherage. Across the gravel road was the church and parsonage (and, of course, the cemetery). My back and side yard were corn or oats or alfalfa – depending upon what crop the farmer up the road decided to plant that year. The highlight twice/month was the drive to Green Bay (yes, I am a Packer fan) 30 miles away, to shop at Shopko and eat at one of the first McDonalds. Now back to the church on Friday nights.

At least once/month, if not more, all the high school kids in the church would meet for Walther League. They would go on hayrides, hang out, get together for whatever reason – I was never invited since I was still too young. But boy, I looked forward to that age when I could join in. It was the center of activity. Everyone seemed to be there. The guys brought their cars. They would toss around a ball or football. The girls would all be in their skirts or pedal pushers. And whether or not they studied the Bible or prayed or worshipped did not seem to matter. The activity (perceived as religious or not) was centered at the church. And that reality was not discussed, questioned, or pondered – it just was.

And this was not the just the case for the high school kids. The church was seen as an integral part of the community. When church activities occurred, the church took the lead. When community events occurred, the church had its voice there as well. When something happened, the church (represented by the pastor or other “employed” leadership), as part of the community, responded.

No one seemed to shy away from being associated with the church. It was expected that you were associated with the church. If you weren't, your personal voice was somehow weaker, less significant. And even if you were not part of the church, the voice and activity of the church organization in the community was welcomed. And though the local impact of the church might have been less in a city, it was still palpable. Church was significant – both for spiritual things, but also for physical things. The church mattered. It was attractional by its very nature. And as a result, very little needed to be done to make people aware of the local church. Its activity and visibility in the life of the community made it

known – both for what it was, but also for what it taught. As the saying goes, “Actions speak louder than words.”

As a result, people looking for a connection to the church didn’t need to look very far or do too much research. On the other hand, the church did not need to involve itself in much “evangelism” work. They were already doing it – even if it was not called evangelism. It must also be noted that the cultural worldview and value system in place during this season of history was quite different. For all the talk today about postmodernism, GenX, I-Gens, and a post-Christendom world, the church just described “lived” and worked within the Christendom world. Despite atheists and agnostics and even other world religions within the American context, Christianity was an accepted and highly valued worldview and posture. And the church was where Christianity resided and from out of which it lived and worked in the community. The church had a voice.

This reality does not need to be rehearsed for anyone over the age of 50. Most of them lived this reality.

The Attractional Church Becomes Unattractive

However as history marched on, the church became less involved in the community and became more and more only a source for spiritual help. Government agencies stepped up and began to provide necessary support and services. Other para-church organizations and NGOs took on the mantle of addressing community needs. In fact, the church began to be an inhibiting factor for need based ministry which required resources and funds. Access to those resources was limited if the organization requesting them was a church. The mix of church and state began to be closely watched and monitored.

Churches began to be less vocal about community issues and subsequently, less involved in the social ministries issues in the community. They did not withdraw entirely, but their voice at the table was limited. They were the church, not the government or a religiously unaffiliated NGO. Their role primarily became taking care of souls, not soles or hunger or housing or transportation. Yet, people still saw the significance of the church. It still had a voice, though be it spiritual, in the community for it brought a greater understanding to the things happening in the community – it brought God into the story. People still recognized the position of God in the world. And the way He was proclaimed still made sense.

The beginning of the disconnect between the church and the community and its local issues led the church to become less relevant and significant in the community (at least as the community interpreted the church’s activity). The church continued to offer spiritual answers to spiritual questions. But the church was seemingly not that interested in life outside the walls of the church. And people began to leave or drop out. It was not necessarily the result of anger against the church, although those narratives do exist. People simply became apathetic toward the church and its rhetoric. Not only was the church turning in on itself (mostly serving those who frequented the church), it did not preach a relevant message as interpreted by the community. People either didn’t like what they heard, found other options to consider, or decided that what they heard was just not applicable to their situation and context. The church talk and the truths it espoused were not speaking to people in ways which made sense in their live-a-day world. The attraction of the church was wearing off! Add to this a changing culture and worldview and value system toward a post-Christendom era, and the immigration away from church seemed almost inevitable.

Making the Church Attractive Again

As people left the church, the congregation was left offering spiritual help in a vacuum – no one was listening. The communication of the faith – the Good News found in Jesus Christ, justification by grace

through faith, reconciliation, redemption, Trinity, Christ's two natures – all of this was beginning to fall on deaf ears. The Good News was not understood or recognized to be good news for them. The words of Scripture – though powerful and life-changing – were not being perceived through a set of worldview lenses which connected those salvific words with daily life. The congregation's message didn't connect with those who were trying to listen, with those who were taking the time to do some searching, or even with those who were still engaged.

So the church began to take a closer look at its communication of the absolute truths of Scripture. It began to use the language and styles and forms of the people in order to connect the message with the life of those who came to listen. It started to speak the unchangeable truths of God into the ears of people in ways which connected with their lives. The church changed its communication style. It revamped its look. It began to offer all types of support helps and services to meet the needs of the community. It attempted to attract people back to the church where it then preached and taught Scripture in ways that made sense to people, in ways which required little if any translation work. It tried to become the spiritual voice of God relevant to post-modern (or whatever you want to call it) spirituality. It is still slowly working this path.

Some congregations were quite successful (if you count growth in worship attendance or other measures you might construct as a success). Of course, there are always those who question the veracity of the faith in those congregations which show this type of success, especially if they are using new or different styles or methods or strategies or forms which change practices of the past. But for all their successes and failures (assessed from both practical and theological positions), they were attempting to be a relevant voice to and for the community with the life-changing message from God in the Scripture. They focused on spiritual issues to help followers of Jesus apply and subsequently live that Christian life in the world – faith, forgiveness, walking with God, taking on life in the work place or home as a Christian. They were helping people to be faith-filled and faith-ful Christians in our quite changed and ever-changing world. And they did so by communicating that message in ways which seemed to resonate more clearly with those who listened and came to hear. Once again people were being attracted back to the church.

The New Attractional Church Becomes a Sending Church

These congregations were addressing spiritual issues and touching unchurched people in the community in spiritual ways which made sense to them as they applied that teaching in their daily lives. The spiritual message was connecting with their life in the world. Discipleship or catechesis became a primary focus. There was a new emphasis on discipleship applied to my life – not just teaching on the doctrine or theology or facts or information about the Bible and its truth. These congregations strove to apply the unchangeable truths to daily lives.

But some congregations began to add an important element which was missing. Discipling without understanding the breadth and depth of the reason for becoming a disciple was emerging as an important factor. The goal of a Christian is to bring God glory. Christians live their lives in praise and adoration to Trinity. This faith posture and practice has ultimate consequences – 1) salvation for the believer even here and now in this life, 2) salvation for the believer for eternity in heaven, but also 3) a message of salvation for those who do not believe who interact with these Christians in daily life.

God's mission through Jesus Christ was becoming the ultimate mission of the Christians in these attractional congregations. Ephesians 2:8-9, though clearly taught and understood, was not closely connected with Ephesians 2:10. But as these congregations wrestled with discipleship and God's mission, the good works described in Ephesians 2:10 were being seen as the works of Christian disciples which

bring them into contact with unbelieving friends, colleagues, and family members for the sake of the Gospel and their salvation. Christians found an extremely important role of their Christian life in Jesus and His mission found in Luke 19:10. As one congregation tells the worshippers each Sunday as they leave, “take it to the streets.” Not only were the worshippers more equipped to face the challenges of daily living, they were being equipped to share the reason for their ability to overcome the challenges in life with others. They were becoming missionary. People in these congregations, though not responsible for saving all lost people, were being taught they were partners with Jesus in His mission, and the works they were created to do proclaim the Savior Jesus Christ to the world. Congregations were beginning to see themselves as not only attractational churches, but sending churches.

What a refreshing turn of events in the life of the church. In the past, the missionary posture of Christians was seen active in overseas missionaries, evangelists, pastors, and other trained and professional servants of the church. Today, as the attractational congregations also see their role to be sending congregations, more and more Christians in the pew are “taking it to the streets” and sharing the Good News. As the scattered Christians in Acts 8, the disciplined missionaries from these congregations are “gossiping the Gospel” as they leave the worship center and engage the world.

The Attractional/Sending Church Takes Another Step

But congregations stop short of being all they could and should be. They continue to be (in light of the separation of church and state) the spiritual houses of the holy for forgiveness, sanctuary, discipleship, missionary activity and training, and safety for the community of the saved but not transformational voices and agents in and with their communities. Don’t misunderstand – missionaries who share Christ in the marketplace realize miracles as the Word changes hearts and minds and lives toward Christ. Transformed lives happen. But the voice of the church at the table with other community leaders as it relates to mercy and justice and subsequently community development and transformation related to these topics is just beginning to be discussed and discovered. And the actual activity associated with that discovery is still in its infancy.

Congregations are beginning to notice the gap Christians, even disciplined missionary Christians, face between Sunday morning and Wednesday night and the rest of the week. The questions being addressed and answered in the worship center are not related to school closings, poverty, joblessness, homelessness, housing, or justice. Worshippers are being disciplined and taught to live as Christians with God’s support through the power of the Holy Spirit, encouraged to be the missionary agents in their communities, but they are not given answers from the church related to these other social, seemingly “non-spiritual” topics which they read about in the papers, hear about on the news, and face every day in their work. In addition, their church is not in the community with them addressing these issues either.

Disciplined Christians approach the social issues with Christian core values and morals and with a faith-based response, but they do so on their own – both in coming to grips with an appropriate response, and as Christian individuals among many other individuals with opinions. But their church, the institution, is not in the same conversation voicing their opinion, developing answers, or giving the support in the marketplace alongside those the church serves on Sunday morning or Wednesday night. The voice of the institutional church at the table with the community leadership, except through members, is missing. And those members are developing their voice and responses the best they can on their own without any guidance from the church. The church simply has kept quiet on these issues.

Please don’t hear that the voice of Christians in the marketplace is not relevant or powerful. Just the opposite. But as noted earlier, in the past the church’s voice was heard not only on Sunday morning and

Wednesday evenings, but also during the rest of the week as well. If a local public school was closing, the church had an opinion, not only through its members, but through the organization as well.

This next step in the life of a congregation is important no matter where the congregation is located. In rural areas, the perception that the institutional church is still a player in the community conversations exists. But it certainly is much weaker than it was in the past. And in urban contexts, the institutional church's voice is silenced because it does not engage itself in the issues which the community is addressing. In fact, congregations are often not even aware of the issues with which the community wrestles.

So the next step in the effectiveness of the institutional church is for it to engage in the community in significant and relevant ways. The on-going mantra today regarding this issue is: "If your church were to close its doors today, would anyone in the local community care or even know?" Of course the members would know and be concerned, but would those who are not involved in the church be affected? And if the answer to this question is the obvious "no, no one would really know or care", the problem is just as obvious.

Congregations as organizations, as institutions, need to voice their care and concern for the community by becoming actively engaged in the community. The community needs to see and hear the congregation on the issues with which it wrestles on a daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly basis. Without the local congregation's involvement in those daily concerns, the church will continue to be seen as an institution interested only and solely in souls. And though this is very important, it will be interpreted in the community as work related to the spiritual and emotional lives of people, not the work of addressing the daily lives and livelihood of the people in the local community.

Theologically, this entire conversation grows out of the first article of the apostle's creed. The first article focuses on God the Father, Creator and Sustainer of all things. God is very concerned about His creation. He intends that His creation remains concerned about His creation as well. Of course, the ultimate goal of God's concern is the salvation of His special creation, humans who are just a little lower than the angels. Once they fell from grace in the Garden of Eden, His attention in Scripture and history turned to His salvation plan through Jesus Christ as it unfolds in the Old Testament, culminates in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, and continues even today as noted clearly in passages such as Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8.

But God never indicated He was less concerned with the rest of His creation and how it lived and worked together while it walked toward the cross and empty tomb. And He continues to be concerned even today that His first commission to humans is taken seriously by them. Found in Genesis 1:28, God tells His then sinless humans to take care of the earth, to subdue it, rule over it, and to fill it. That commission is no less powerful today than it was when God first gave it to Adam and Eve. As one speaker noted in presentation on this topic, the church is "a red dot in the middle of a sea of blue" (the connection to the political world is obvious). The church is concerned about forgiveness, grace, salvation, and the sins of homosexuality and abortion, but does not say too much about the environment, global warming, deforestation, school bussing, equitable taxation, homelessness, hunger, poverty, illiteracy, or access to rights. The local church continues to be a spiritual house of the holy, a place to go for conversations and activities about holy things. But rarely does the spiritual house of the holy engage itself in the "unholy" or "unspiritual" activities of the community. If issues related to theology or doctrine or spiritual living are involved – the church is there with answers and suggestions. But when the community meets at City Hall to discuss closing a local school, the church is absent – except for those members of the congregation

who are involved and wish to speak. But they speak first as Christian parents of children, not as members representing the congregation. And they speak after developing the responses themselves without guidance from the church.

Concluding Thoughts about My Thoughts and a Few Questions to Explore

If the church is to take seriously both the commission in Genesis 1:28 and Matthew 28:19-20, then it needs to reassess its ministry breadth, focus, and involvement in the community. As David Platt writes, “Anyone wanting to proclaim the glory of Christ to the ends of the earth must consider not only how to declare the gospel verbally but also how to demonstrate the gospel visibly in a world where so many are urgently hungry” (David Platt in Radical, Multnomah Books, Colorado Springs, CO, 2010, pg109).

The church can begin to move towards becoming an integral, relevant, and significant voice and player in the community, but it needs to engage itself in the activities and issues of the community – both through teaching and discussing them in the worship center and through active involvement as an organization in the community. If it does not do so, it will be evaluated as an organization voicing concern only about spiritual things.

There is still a lot to discover and discuss in this conversation. For example:

1. Where does engagement in the community overlap with evangelism? Or does it? Said another way, how do you make the decision between sharing Jesus or sharing a cup of water? Should Christians engaged in the community prioritize meeting physical needs (food, water, social justice, development) before they preach the gospel, or should evangelism always be given primacy? Spreading Christianity through deeds alone aligns with a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: “Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words.” But research suggests that non-Christians often miss the message without the words. What is the right response?
2. What community activities might become a platform for a congregation’s engagement? For example, should the voice of the congregation be in city hall?, at or on the planning commission?, at the table when the local community development council meets?, in the rotary club? And if present, does it chime in with opinions and subsequent activities related to issues these organizations address?
3. Are there some topics and issues and activities off limits? Some are not so controversial – serving in nursing homes or homeless shelters, gathering food for the hungry, meals on wheels activities, ESL, job search and job skill services, re-patriation of legal immigrants. But what about others? For example, should the congregation speak about and address gang activity?, drunk driving?, distribution of condoms in high schools?, appropriate TV shows?, violence on video games?
4. How engaged (voice?, activity?,) should a church become in social justice issues? For example, should it take a stand (give opinion and/or engage in activity) on immigration issues?, perceived unfair housing laws?, marriage laws?, civil rights?, war?, use of government funds for any number of issues?
5. Points #3 and #4 require a distinction between mercy and justice. In general, mercy is loving people, sharing what a congregation has, or being the Good Samaritan. Justice grows out of mercy living – being involved in the lives of people and then investing in changing the structures and organizations and rules and laws which govern and determine right and wrong. A short story told by Ray Bakke will help to illustrate the point. A pastor friend of his sat in a courtroom where several of his parishioners

were appearing related to unfair landlord practices. After several cases involving not only his own parishioners but others as well, the pastor stood up and addressed the court. He said, “Your honor, if I may say a few words.” The judge allowed him to speak and he said, “I have been in here most of the day, and time after time you have sided with the corrupt landlords. Where is the justice in this court?” The judge politely responded, “This is not a court of justice. This is a court of law. If you want justice, change the law.” Are congregations ready and willing to move past mercy activities and enter into the realm of addressing justice issues?

I hope these thoughts evoke some more thoughts from the readers. Maybe it will help to highlight some of the ways congregations can begin to think about and address their relevance in their own communities.