

6 Reasons Why the Church Needs to Embrace Liminality

Liminality is a concept and term that originated in anthropology. It refers to the ambivalence, confusion or disorientation experienced by people in a transitional phase when they find themselves in the “middle ground” between a previous state and a new state they are transitioning into.

Certain norms, roles and expectations may be suspended or redefined in this liminal state or in-between stage, leading to ambiguity or disorientation.

The characteristics of liminality were experienced by biblical characters such as Abraham and Moses (Heb. 11:8, Heb. 11:24-27). As a Christ follower for more than four decades, I have experienced states of liminality several times related to various stages of ministry. I have also observed many churches and spiritual leaders share this, especially since the pandemic.

My objective in writing this article is to assist and encourage leaders experiencing the fallout of transitional phases to gain further insight and not give in to negative psychological thoughts, stress and symptoms associated with these stages of uncertainty. To contend with liminality and its pervasive discomfort, developing stronger faith and maturity in faith and obedience is necessary.

The following are six reasons why the church needs to embrace liminality:

1. Instability breeds dependence upon God for sustenance.

Often, in times of stability and abundance, the human tendency is to rely on oneself or the material resources at hand. When the church experiences liminality, the instability forces us to shift our focus from our capabilities to God’s providence.

In periods of uncertainty, the reliance on God becomes more than a theological concept; it becomes a lived experience. Being in a state of liminality encourages the church to seek sustenance and guidance from a higher source of strength and knowledge-reinforcing the essential relationship between God and His people.

2. The greatest moves of God today are amid liminality. Some of the most powerful spiritual revivals and movements have occurred during societal upheaval or transition. Whether it's the Civil Rights Movement, which was deeply rooted in church communities, the Jesus revolution during the Vietnam War and civil unrest or contemporary spiritual awakenings happening in parts of the world undergoing intense persecution, liminality serves as fertile ground for God's work. In this "in-between" state, people are more open to question, seek and ultimately experience personal and systemic transformation. Thus, the church should embrace liminality as an opportunity for God to work miraculously.

3. The biblical narrative shows the connection between liminality and expansive growth. From the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years to Jesus' 40 days of fasting and temptation, the Bible is replete with stories illustrating the power of liminality. These transition periods were often followed by immense spiritual growth, supernatural ministry and expansion. For example, the Israelites emerged from their liminal experience with a set of ethical laws and a stronger sense of community and identity. Jesus emerged from the desert in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14). The early Christian church grew exponentially after the apostles had to navigate the uncertain period following Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. Liminality prepares believers for expansive growth by challenging their faith and refining their mission.

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4. Historic examples make the connection between abundance, stability and lukewarmness. The book of Revelation (2:1-8) warns the church in Ephesus that despite their good deeds and sound doctrine, they have lost their "first love." This serves as a timeless warning against complacency that can set in during times of abundance and stability. Historical examples, such as the lukewarm state of the medieval church that led to the Protestant Reformation, further emphasize that stability can breed spiritual stagnation. Liminality, in contrast, often results in spiritual hunger and a return to foundational principles.

5. The church must adapt to a world in constant flux. In an age of rapid technological, social and cultural changes, the church cannot afford to be static. Adaptability is crucial for the church to remain relevant and effective in its mission. Liminality provides the context in which the church can reevaluate its methods, adapt to new challenges and prepare for future opportunities. This state of flux is not to be feared but embraced as a divine tool for transformation.

6. During extreme persecution, the church often experiences liminality while continuing to grow. History shows that the church not only survives but often thrives under persecution. This resilience is a testament to the power of faith and community. During these liminal periods of extreme external pressure, the church tends to return to its roots: prayer, community support and a focus on the essential teachings of Christ. During such times, the church experiences its most genuine and rapid growth.

Although challenging, liminality offers unique opportunities for the church to grow, adapt and deepen its relationship with God. Far from being a phase to avoid, liminality should be embraced as a sacred space of divine potential. I know this is easier said than done; however, avoiding this phase in life is delusional and can lead to unpreparedness and instability.

It's far better to embrace it as a necessary phase for advancing Christ's followers who desire to shape the world positively. {eoa}

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