

Is the Local Church Becoming Obsolete?

Can you imagine a time when key apostolic leaders—both in the church and marketplace—would come together to exert strong influence over cities, communities and nations, with or without the cooperation or partnership of local church pastors and congregations? A time when the local church would almost be irrelevant when it comes to societal transformation because leaders would form their own ecclesia that would be mobile and not nuclear in nature? A time in which the local church would be relegated merely to shepherding our families, pastoral counseling, and Sunday school for our children?

There is a growing tendency in the body of Christ among practitioners in kingdom societal transformation to bypass the local church in order for the reformation of society to take place. This is due to the frustration of many marketplace leaders with the slow pace, bureaucracy, myopic local view and lack of high-level leadership found in many of this nation's congregations.

As more of us receive greater light regarding the kingdom, and we rightly go from a church mindset to a kingdom mindset, I am afraid some will have a tendency to go too far and jettison the local church altogether!

Further exacerbating this challenge is that many who are on the leading edge of cultural change are institutional (parachurch) or marketplace leaders who by nature are entrepreneurial, independent, high-performance leaders who have not always had a strong anchor in a local church, even before they came into the kingdom message. This independent spirit and impatience for change will influence their kingdom theology to the point of finding proof texts or doctrines that justify the bypassing of local churches.

It is my position that jettisoning the local church, or relegating it merely to the purpose of shepherding our families, would be a huge mistake! Whether we like it or not, God has chosen the local church to be the beachhead that facilitates social and religious change in the nations. We need to reform the church—not jettison it! We need to help transition the local church to becoming kingdom-centered. Being kingdom-centered and local church-centered need not be mutually exclusive. To be truly kingdom-centered, one must start with being local church-centered.

In addition, each local church needs to view itself as one congregation among many in a particular region that, combined, comprise the city church. The New Testament epistles, such as Philippians, Romans, Colossians, etc., all assume one church per city or region. Hence, this view necessitates cooperation and collaboration with other congregations as a biblical responsibility.

Likewise, pastors are never solely called to shepherd only their individual flocks, but are to be shepherds or chaplains to whole communities.

Let us now go back and attempt to understand the local church paradigm and pattern.

First, when God desired to reconcile world systems and redeem individual sinners He sent His Son—who didn't come as a political or business leader couched as a religious rabbi. Jesus began as an itinerant teacher of the Word of God (see Luke 4:18). Those with him in the synagogue were His platform for inauguration as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords (see John 18:37).

With Jesus and His people there is no separation of the offices of king and priest. Jesus was a combination of priest (His body was the sacrifice given once for all; see Heb. 10:10, 14), prophet (see Deut. 18:18-19) and king (see Rev.

1:5, 19:16). All three offices are completely summarized and unified in Hebrews 1:1-3.

The model of Jesus for reformation shows the most powerful and effective starting point and matrix to initially operate, for reformation is the so-called religious sphere of society.

There has been a popular teaching during the last ten years in which people are categorized as either functioning as priests or kings in the kingdom. However, marketplace leaders miss the mark when they say preachers of the gospel merely function as priests—whose primary role concerns the priestly duties related to “spiritual” things—while Christian political and business leaders function as kings who take the cultural lead in His kingdom.

It is clear Romans 5:17 was written for all believers. This passage shows that all saints reign as kings in this world. Ephesians 2:4-6 teaches that all saints are presently reigning with Christ in heavenly places.

In the book of Leviticus, the priests not only administered animal sacrifices but were also the ultimate authority, interpreting the Law of Moses to judges and kings (see Deut. 17:18). The 613 laws involved civic as well as sacrificial rules and regulations. Individually these priests even administered in the areas of health by regulating the Jewish diet (see Leviticus 11), examining homes for harmful mold and mildew, and even examining individuals to determine if they were physically clean or unclean (see Leviticus 13-14). Thus, these priests functioned in both the context of the temple and the community without a dichotomy between sacred and secular, or as we now term it, priest and king.

The later divisions between the priesthood, the prophetic, and the kings of Israel seem to separate these offices (read 1 Sam. 13:8-13 and 1 Kin. 12:32-13:6 when the kings were judged for offering priestly sacrifices). However, King David, who

was a prophetic predecessor of the Messiah, had a New Testament kingdom dispensation as he was able to approach God's presence and offer sacrifices (see 1 Chron. 16:1-2), eat the showbread (see 1 Sam. 21:6; Mark 2:25-26), prophesy (see Ps. 22;) and rule the kingdom (2 Sam. 5:1-3). Thus, all three functions were integrated in him.

Jesus said that even the least in the kingdom of heaven are greater than John the Baptist and all of the Old Covenant prophets and leaders (Matt. 11:11). This implies the prophetic, kingly and priestly functions are all combined in God's people in the kingdom age. Even so, with the advent of the kings of Israel, the priests still had to regulate societal functions for the community as written in the Pentateuch. Nowadays these functions would be classified by some marketplace leaders as kingly functions.

Furthermore, in what category would we place Joseph and Daniel? They both functioned as political leaders, but would also neatly fit in the category of priest because of their spiritual bent and prophetic lifestyles. Also, who would ever say that the prophets Elijah and Elisha were merely functioning in a priestly role? Both of them gave commands to political leaders (for example, the kings of Israel as in 1 Kin. 18:18-19), and framed major policy initiatives for societal reformation. Elisha even gave military advice to Israel when the nation was at war with Syria (2 Kin. 6:8-23).

I have never accepted the assumption that I, as a bishop, should function merely in the priestly realm and concentrate primarily on spiritual things, while Christians I work with in business or politics function as the kings in the kingdom who are responsible for governing and practical application of kingdom concepts in the natural realm. I have always functioned in both roles, and feel just as comfortable with both pastors and marketplace leaders. Furthermore, as a leader in my city, I have always been involved in community, business and political processes and decisions that help frame public

policy. I personally believe that my priestly roles of intercession, prayer and meditating on the Word of God empower me to act as a king by influencing my community and city in matters related to both the church and society.

Furthermore, the original apostles, who were given the command to disciple nations (Matt. 28:19) actually were commanded to leave their marketplace vocations and serve full-time in the religious sphere. In Acts 6:2 and 4, Peter said they weren't even allowed to wait on tables so they could give themselves fully to the ministry of the word of God and prayer. It was out of this powerful context of being in the presence of God, studying and preaching the word, and planting local churches in key cities that the first century apostles were able to "turn the world upside down" (Acts 17:5-7). Thus, reformation of society will not come outside of the local church or from a separation of kings and priests in the kingdom, or to the neglect of the local church authority in the kingdom, but out of the local church context.

We see this further unpacked in Ephesians 4:10-12. The primary call of church apostles and five-fold ministers is to prepare God's people for the work of the ministry which, as described in Ephesians 4:10, has as its goal to fill up all things. Thus, the center of power—equipping and releasing for cultural leadership—should emanate out of the local church context that houses the five-fold ministers.

First Corinthians 12 teaches that true local churches are first started by those gifted as apostles, then prophets. This has more to do with establishing cultural beachheads for kingdom purposes than just exercising spiritual gifts in a church building.

When we attempt to reform society outside of the context of the local church (which Paul calls "the pillar and ground of the truth" in 1 Tim. 3), we are attempting to have a missiology without a clear ecclesiology. This results in

having unaccountable marketplace leaders who are not groomed and disciplined in regard to their character development, family lives and personal emotional health—and possibly are in a place of power merely because of their giftings. (Although to be fair, the same can be said of pastors and church ministers who are not in accountable relationships with their peers and overseers.)

God is called our Father. The church is supposed to function as a family of families so that we can restructure, reform, and serve humanity, and build a healthy civilization that stands upon strong marriages and families. God told Abraham that in him all the “families” of the earth would be blessed (see Gen. 12:1-3). This is how biblical dominion and transformation will take place.

Separating the ecclesia from the local church will not accomplish this task because mobile churches in the context of a business or political system do not engender strong family structures, nor are they equipped or called to!

In the local church, older men and women are to be treated as fathers and mothers. Younger men and women are to be treated as our brothers and sisters, or sons and daughters (see 1 Tim. 5:1-2). This produces the greatest learning environment in which to teach discipleship, because the kingdom of God is based on relationships. This is also potentially the greatest equipping center to bring healing to individuals and enact policy change for cities and nations.

Separating business and marketplace leaders from the local church has historically been a disaster. It is also one of the primary reasons we have lost the culture in the United States. Mark Noll (read his great book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*) and others have done a great job documenting the fact that Ivy League universities abandoned the Christian worldview when pastors and clergy were replaced as the college presidents by business and community leaders during the 18th

and 19th centuries.

Recently, I spoke to one major Southern Baptist leader and asked why so many Christian colleges eventually lose their Christian identity and become bastions for liberalism. He told me the colleges that stay connected to a local church or keep their school under the auspices of the church usually stay biblically focused but those schools that separate from the local church historically become liberal, lose their Christian voice, and compromise biblical values within a few decades. Consequently, if Harvard, Yale, Princeton and the other Ivy League schools stayed under the guidance of local church leadership, they would still be churning out future presidents of nations and Fortune 500 CEOs for the kingdom and glory of God!

When it gets down to it, perhaps the real challenge we have is our lack of apostolic local churches led by apostolic leaders with a leadership lid capable of leading high-impact marketplace leaders called apostolically to culture. The answer isn't to jettison the church—which would be against the biblical pattern laid out in the New Testament—but to reform the church so that apostolic strategies and leadership become the norm, not the exception.

If you are a marketplace leader who is frustrated because your local church doesn't have apostolic vision, then ask the Lord what to do. Perhaps He will lead you to another church that is more regional and kingdom in its scope. But whatever you do, don't use your situation to change your theology in an attempt to justify your independence from the local church.