

Contrast Between the 21st Century Church and the 1st Century Church

by
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Introduction: In AD 112 Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, wrote to the Roman Emperor Trajan about the spread of the Christian movement. He said, *“This contagious superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts.”*

My opinion is that at some point the devil realized he could not stop the spread of Christianity so he changed his tactics: *“If you can’t beat them; join them.”* In AD 313, in the Edict of Milan, Constantine, made it legal for Roman citizens to be Christian. This move gave Christians freedom to practice their faith in public resulting in a shift away from an emphasis on home gatherings to gatherings in dedicated buildings, ie church buildings. That one alteration has led over the centuries to massive changes in Christian form and practice, particularly in the western church.

On several occasions I have had the privilege of ministering to pastors in Eastern Africa. The first thing I do when I stand before them is to ask them, *“Will you please forgive us for bringing the Gospel to you in a western box.”* Without fail, their faces are filled with looks of confusion. I then go on to explain to them what I have just written above and the following contrasts between what Jesus and the early disciples established and Church as we have come to experience it in western culture. I assure them that my goal is not to denigrate those who brought Christ to them, far from it, but to encourage them to rethink their own church traditions and hopefully, make room for the Holy Spirit to lead them to more effective forms of disciple-making. My prayer is the same for you as you study these contrasts.

A word of caution: it is not easy for us to work through this. We have inherited this system and it is the only one we know. Therefore, we are more tempted than we realize to defend it as if “it is Scripture.” Certainly there are many wonderful things about our church traditions, but we must be open to evaluate them in light of Scripture and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us forward as we all desire to be more effective in pleasing our loving Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. A dying world is waiting for us to “be the light set on a hill” NOT “under a bushel basket” aka church building.

One other word: I dream of a day when there is a gathering of believers within walking distance of every person in our region. Many of those, of course, will be in homes and businesses. Wouldn’t it be an amazing witness to the bonding love and Lordship of Christ if every person could walk down their street to gather for Bible study with a dozen or so neighbors on a week night. They learn that these are members of several different churches, and so when Sunday comes, they will be attending a variety of church services for worship.

21st Century Church

Come to the church

Institutional

Building

Attractional Model

“Come to church!”

Program Based

Discipleship = Learning

“Teach them!”

Add (to the church)

Staff are Ministers

Members are minor participants/observers

Formalized

Sacred Place (Church Building)

Sacred Day (Sunday)

Sacred Time

Sacred Dress

Sacred Language

Sacred Activities (Songs, Bible Study etc.)

(Unintended Message to Members: “If you do what is expected on Sunday, you can live as you like the rest of the week.”)

Many Churches in a City

Pastors don't know each other.

Pastors are competitive.

Leaders' Emphasis = Pastor the church!

Build MY church!

1st Century Church

Go to the world

Organic

Houses/Places of Business (Acts 20:22)

Incarnational Model

“Be the church!”

People Based

Disciple Making = Obeying

“Teach them to obey!”

Multiply Disciples

Staff are Equippers (Ephesians 4:11-12)

Members are Ministers

Normalized

Christ is with us everywhere we go!

Every day is to be lived for Christ!

We can focus on Christ all the time!

We always dress to please God!

We always use our voice to bless God!

All we do we do for God!

(Intended Message to Disciples: “All of life is Sacred! Live everyday to please God and to show His love to others.”)

One Church per City w/many assemblies

Pastors are friends who seek God together.

Pastors serve one another.

Leaders' Emphasis = Pastor the city!

Build GOD's Kingdom!