

MISTAKEN IDENTITY:
MATERIALISM AND CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICALISM

By

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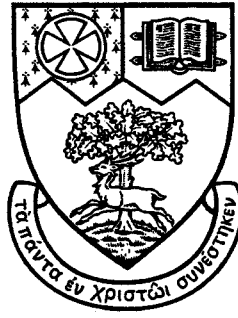
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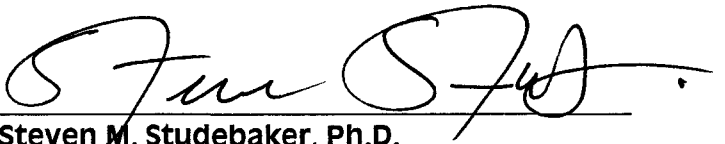
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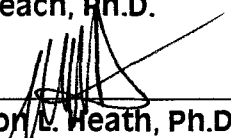
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ABSTRACT

“Mistaken Identity: Materialism and Contemporary Evangelicalism”

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Many factors shape the identity of the Evangelical church, some to its benefit, and others to its detriment. This thesis examines the relationship between materialism and Christianity through the framework of Jane Jacobs’ work on the existence of two incompatible systems in public and communal life, the commerce and guardian systems. The principles of materialism and Christocentric ecclesiology are shown to belong to these different systems. Joining the missional discussion, this project therefore seeks to correct the influence of materialism on the church’s identity by calling the church to a more Christocentric identity. Particular attention is paid to what a materialistic identity and a Christocentric ecclesiology mean for evangelism, church growth, and leadership. Following that discussion, the importance of three theological principles—transformation, incarnation, and service of others—are outlined.

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To my family, thank you for praying, encouraging, reading, making suggestions, and allowing me the time and space to write this thesis. Without your emotional and practical support I would not have been able to do this.

To my co-workers, your ongoing support of my pursuance of a Master of Divinity degree has been outstanding. During this thesis you have done much to encourage and uplift me. Special thanks to Heather Wiebe for patiently and diligently proofreading this document.

To the congregation of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Owen Sound- Thank you for your continued interest in all that I have been learning and doing. Your frequent asking of, "what's your thesis on again?" helped me to define more clearly for myself the aims of this project.

Merciful God, in your gracious presence
we confess our sin and the sin of the world.
Although Christ is among us as our peace,
We are a people divided against ourselves
As we cling to the values of a broken world.

Set us free to serve you in the world
As agents of your reconciling love in Jesus Christ. Amen."

The Book of Common Worship, the Presbyterian Church in Canada

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of identity has been recognized across numerous disciplines. In business and economics it appears in talk of mission and vision; defining what a particular business is like and what it is about. Identity is often expressed in the language of goals, core values, and credos. In psychology and counselling, much is made of the importance of identity in adolescent development as youth begin to make meaning of their world, and their place within it, based on who they are and to whom they belong. Great attention is paid to their birth family, their peer groups, their institution of education, and other cultural influences.¹ Within the sphere of science- and in particular medicine- the Hippocratic oath reminds physicians that their identity includes a commitment to healing, an implicit honesty that keeps confidentiality, and makes them preservers of life. It is clear, then, that in many areas of discipline or vocation the importance of identity is paramount. Who people believe themselves to be, what groups they perceive themselves to belong to, and the mores and norms of those groups, profoundly shapes how they think, what they believe, and the way they act. It is no wonder then, that so much time, energy, and money has been spent within the church considering these same issues. Who or what is the church? What is its identity to be? How does the church's view of the world through the lens of eternity and God's redemptive work, affect the way in which people live and act?

At the same time as the church has asked these questions, it has also had to recognize that there have been an unending number of people, places, and ideas that have sought to shape the church's identity. Interactions with the surrounding culture inevitably begin to

¹ Rowatt, *Adolescents*, 37–38.

shape the church. As people are educated by the culture, both formally and informally, they begin to adopt prevailing attitudes and conceptions of the way things are. Identity is shaped as people watch others thrive or fail within the dominant culture, and as they begin to internalize and display the behaviours that lead to success, shunning those that lead to failure. In fact, even the definition of what success is, is shaped by immersion in the dominant culture. The influence of cultural ideas and practices such as capitalism, consumerism, secularism, and materialism, must not and cannot be overlooked.

It is with an awareness of the importance of identity and the influence of culture that this thesis undertakes an exploration and discussion of the church's identity. What does it mean to be the people of God, called to a unique ministry of witness and transformation in this time and place? Considerable attention is paid to the challenge that a ubiquitous materialism presents to Christian identity. This thesis also considers the actions that flow from a particular understanding of the church of Jesus Christ. Consideration is given to the subtle and insidious ways that materialism shapes our life together as witness. Attention is also paid to the extent to which materialism causes the church to lose sight of its true and God-given identity.

The purpose of this thesis is not to demonize materialism as one of the dominant cultural forces of the modern era. It is important to acknowledge that to a significant extent the proliferation of materialism within society, and the willingness to syncretize the underlying assumptions of materialism into contemporary evangelicalism results from the strong emphasis on the importance of the "protestant work ethic" of the past. The emphasis of the protestant work ethic on earning money and amassing wealth as signs of God's sovereign plan and "divine blessing" on the lives of individuals has done much to

create a cultural and ideological bent towards materialism.² With this in mind, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that while there are some benefits to the philosophical concepts of materialism, there are also some very real threats posed to the life and identity of the church. These threats lie particularly in the area of identity formation, defining the end to which the church strives, and the actions that are inspired by each of these. At the same time, there is a need to recognize that some benefits have been gleaned from the incorporation of materialistic ideals into the Christian ethos. One of the ways in which the church positively benefits from a relationship with materialism can be seen in the extent to which the church now understands the created world in which we live. It is also true that classical materialism has enabled the church to affirm the ontological goodness of the material world and to accept more fully the materiality of our faith. At the time of creation God decreed that the created and material world was good. As Christians the temptation to hate, reject, or denigrate the material world must be strongly resisted. Throughout his ministry, Christ took ordinary, material things; water, bread, and wine, and made them sacred symbols of profound spiritual truths. Through these symbols the church remembers how Jesus died and rose again for our salvation, and how his disciples then die to sin and rise again to new life through the material act of baptism. These symbols, along with the physical postures of prayer, worship, and service, are profound aspects of our faith. Recognizing the materiality of our faith, however, is not the same as embracing materialism. Materialism is helpful only in so far as it enables us to avoid the temptation of the past to denigrate the material and elevate the spiritual.

² Gibson, "Protestant Ethic," 14.

Similarly, the church has positively shaped and influenced materialistic culture. The inclusion of charity and charitable acts in mainstream consciousness, the presence and practice of adoption, and the existence of hospitals to care for the sick are all cultural markers that can trace their origins to the witness and life of Christians throughout history.³ The Christian relationship with materialism then should not be over-simplified. The church cannot simply decry and reject any and all things that come from materialism. There is a need to think critically and theologically about the foundations, effects, and appropriateness of materialistic ideas before adopting them. This requires an intentional and directed consideration of what culture teaches, or assumes to be true, and the compatibility of these ideas with the Christian ethos. G. K. Chesterton, in reflecting on this challenge, notes that “it is always easy to let the age have its head; the difficult thing is to keep one’s own.”⁴

In many ways, keeping our own head as the church is the concern of this thesis. Joining those involved in the discussion of the missional church this thesis attempts to resolve the tensions between materialism and the contemporary North American church. If individuals desire to 1) see the church reject systems of identity that are not based in Christ, 2) to see the church further desire to know and participate in God’s knowing in the world, and 3) to encourage the church to meet people with the gospel where they are, then they must be willing to engage in a critical discussion. In his book *The Politics of Discipleship* Graham Ward states that his purpose is to help Christians develop a Christian theological imagination that will challenge those in the church to transform

³ Walsh, “Hospitals,” lines 1– 80.

⁴ Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 96.

aspects of their life that are antithetical to the Christian message.⁵ In a similar vein, the purpose of this thesis is to show that a Christocentric ecclesiology can enable the North American church to overcome the influence of materialism and consumerism on its practices.

Definitions

This section defines the critical terms used in this thesis. They are 1) materialism, 2) culture, 3) Christocentric, 4) gospel, and 5) ecclesiology. Setting forth the meanings of these philosophical and theological terms is essential before turning to the task of outlining the argument for a Christological ecclesiology.

Materialism

As consideration of the nature and underlining assumptions of materialism begins, Daniel Bell Jr. suggests that it might be helpful to hold in the back of our minds the following question from the Westminster Confession, “Does it enable and enhance humanity’s chief end of glorifying and enjoying God forever?”⁶ At the core of materialism is the confident assertion that everything comes from matter and its movements are based upon matter. This idea is neatly summed up in the idea of the earth as mother as the ultimate source of everything in the universe. In this view, all events and all truths can be explained in terms of material objects or changes and movements.⁷ Materialism precludes the possibility of any God, gods, spirits, or other abstract and immaterial entities. Materialists do not attribute to these any direction or influence over

⁵ Ward, *Politics*, 17.

⁶ Excerpt from the Westminster Confession as quoted in Bell, *Desire*, 88.

⁷ Stack, “Materialism,” lines 2–3.

nature, society, or the inner lives of humanity.⁸ In fact, some early materialists went so far in their rejection of the actions of any divine being that they created a coherent account of the creation of the world and mankind without bringing in the gods.⁹ It is also the case that materialism can offer no acceptable explanation for the intentionality of human thought, the ability to have self-knowledge, or any other purely mental reality.¹⁰

This rejection of anything spiritual, relational, or outside of the material world is so embedded in the philosophy of materialism that George Novak further asserts that, “it is now recognized, both by defenders of the faith and the advocates of materialism, that the materialistic standpoint is essentially hostile to religion and is the antagonist of all the gods.”¹¹ Because materialism rejects the interpersonal and relational ideas that are prevalent in all the world’s religions, atheism becomes the logical conclusion of truly materialistic thought. The unfortunate reality then is that in materialism, “[humankind] has learnt to cope with all questions of importance without recourse to God as a working hypothesis.”¹² Materialism believes everything is defined by the heights and limitations of human achievement and interaction with the material world for humanity’s benefit.

In its most dominant current form materialism also carries with it “a tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual values.”¹³ Or, as Thomas Troeger so nicely puts it, “Materialism is the religion that worships the acquisition of things.”¹⁴ The focus on material things and their use for

⁸ Novak, *Materialism*, 4 – 5. Stack also supports this in lines 3-6 of his entry in the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁹ Novak, *Materialism*, 87– 88.

¹⁰ Madell, *Mind*, 130.

¹¹ Novak, *Materialism*, 108.

¹² Bonhoeffer, *Christ*, 12.

¹³ “Materialism,” line 1.

¹⁴ Troeger, “Materiality,” 12.

survival has indeed led to a philosophical dependence and valuation of things above everything else. In materialism, all actions and attitudes flow from one's experience with things, how many things one has, and the acquisition of more and new things. Further discussion of the implications and manifestations of materialism will follow in Chapter One.

Culture

The term culture is a very nebulous one. It can mean different things within different contexts. For the purpose of this thesis culture refers to the values, social norms, mores, and influences (such as ethnicity, language, religion) that shape the way in which individuals and groups behave and conceive of themselves. To this list must also be added frames, repertoires, and narratives. The frame with which a group of people approach the world greatly affects their behaviour. A frame represents the way in which people, or groups, cognitively perceive themselves, the world, and their surroundings.¹⁵ Flowing from these frames come cultural repertoires and narratives. Repertoires represent preconceived strategies and actions that groups believe are appropriate in specific situations. These repertoires become part of the narratives and stories that people use to make meaning of the events of their lives.¹⁶ Throughout this thesis the focus is on a culture of materialism that emphasizes the importance of the accumulation of things for security, for prosperity, and for value. Under consideration are the practices of competition and consumption and their effects on how people think, act, and interact with others. This culture of materialism is shown to be in marked contrast to the culture of Christocentric ecclesiology.

¹⁵ Harding et al., "Culture," 14.

¹⁶ Harding et al., "Culture," 16.

Christocentric

Frank Matera notes that discussions of Christology have focused on how the Christological view was developed within the early church, and how the Christological titles used within the New Testament are to be applied to Jesus.¹⁷ These discussions have provided a multitude of images that can be used in describing Christ. In the book of Hebrews the predominant image is that of Christ as high priest in the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7). Others, such as Matthew and Mark, focus on Christ's role as the crucified Messiah and the obedient Son of God.¹⁸ For Luke, the role is expanded beyond Israel, to an emphasis on the Lordship of Christ over all things. This Lordship over all things and all people is further expounded in Acts (chapter 10, for example). There is a great diversity of understandings about Christ and his role. Yet, the number of views within the New Testament as to the Christly function should not distress us. All views represent, in some measure, an aspect of the importance and function of a very complex figure.

For the purposes of this discussion, particular consideration will be given to the means of the Christly work of Jesus, namely the incarnation, by which Jesus, as a fuller revelation of God, becomes our Christ and Messiah. Consideration will also be given to the ramifications of that Christly work, particularly in the church. This model of incarnation, as a bridge of revelation and experience between God and humanity, will be the focus of this Christocentric endeavour. The nature of Christ then, in the incarnation, is an important point for consideration in any discussion of the life of the church modeled on Christ. Who and/or what Christ was, is of incredible importance. So, attention will

¹⁷ Matera, *Christology*, 2.

¹⁸ Matera, *Christology*, 5.

first be given to differentiating a Christocentric ecclesiology from the views of Docetism and Apollinarianism.

Docetism and Apollinarianism wrestle with the nature and substance of Jesus Christ. Docetists held that all matter was evil, and that the divine was not capable of experiencing change or suffering.¹⁹ Such a view is a major challenge to the central beliefs of the incarnation, the crucifixion and resurrection. By decrying all material, and denying the ability of the divine to change, Docetism deems it impossible for Christ to be God and to endure the crucifixion and resurrection, which is the basis of salvation.

Apollinarianism questions whether it was possible for Jesus, as God, to have taken on a human mind. So Jesus is envisioned as having a human body with the mind of Christ.²⁰ This likewise becomes challenging, as it is the full humanity of Christ that enables him to save humanity from its sins.

Unlike Docetism or Apollinarianism, Christocentric ecclesiology rests solidly on the incarnation; the person and personality of God in flesh, fully human and fully divine.²¹ This thesis aligns itself with the Chalcedonian view of Christology and asserts both the full divinity and full humanity of Christ, and embraces the “paradox of the God-human.”²² Jesus Christ was very God and very man and is to be acknowledged as having two natures in perfect unity. A Christocentric approach to life and identity affirms the assertion of John 1:1–4 that,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life

¹⁹ MacLeod, *Christ*, 157.

²⁰ MacLeod, *Christ*, 158.

²¹ For biblical attestation to this fact see: Colossians 2:9, 1 John 4:2 and John 19:34 as a few examples.

²² Nestlehuft, *Chalcedonian*, 177.

was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Whereas materialism roots its practice and belief exclusively on interactions with the material world, a Christocentric approach finds its basis in the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. The Incarnation of God in Christ and the salvation wrought through his death and resurrection grounds the Christocentric approach to the world. It is through the incarnation of Christ and the contextualization of the character of God that humanity gains a fuller understanding of who God is, who he invites his people to be, and what it looks like to live out the principles of his kingdom.

Christocentric ecclesiology also makes theological claims about creation and redemption.²³ First, it claims that the Son of God created the world. A Christocentric church affirms that all of life flows from the Triune God, and that Christ, as a member of the Trinity, is the creator of all material things (John 1:1). Second, Christ redeems the world. The saving acts of Christ are the centre of all of human history.²⁴ In being a people rooted in Christ, the church, not the world, retains the right to determine Christ's place in the world.²⁵ Throughout the Gospels it can clearly be seen that Jesus perceived of his presence and work in the world as being a fulfilment of the Old Testament hope, by being the herald of the Kingdom of God and by dying on behalf of and for the people.²⁶ In becoming a more Christocentric people, the church seeks to model this example of Christ in proclaiming hope, in heralding the -already and not yet- nature of the Kingdom of God, and in sacrificing for the sake of others.²⁷ A Christocentric approach also

²³ Matera, *Christology*, 145.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Christ*, 62.

²⁵ Van Gelder, *Missional*, 72.

²⁶ Grenz, *Theology*, 440.

²⁷ Grenz, *Theology*, 442.

continually proclaims the self-giving nature of God, in offering and enabling our salvation.

Gospel

Bearing in mind the strong emphasis on the centrality of Christ outlined in the definition of Christocentric above, the gospel is equally Christ centred. There has been much discussion about the proper way in which to define the gospel. It has been fairly asked whether the gospel, as good news and truth, is best summed up by the text of the Nicene or Apostles creeds. Or, if instead, it should be understood as being simply the biblical account of the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It could also be suggested that the gospel is something that encompasses the whole story of salvation outlined within the biblical text. It may also be understood as the good news of the inauguration of God's kingdom because of the incarnation of Christ. For the purpose of this thesis the gospel is defined as being all of these things at once. This thesis affirms that "the irreducible essence of the Gospel...is that Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son, is the key to unlocking our human potential, both now and in the life to come."²⁸ The gospel then is something that the church professes through orthodox theological creeds, encounters and learns from in the biblical witness, is embodied in the already and not yet presence of the Kingdom of God, and is lived out in the world through the transformation of lives by the power of Christ. The gospel is good news, transforming news, which hinges on the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ.

²⁸ International Bulletin, "Gospel," 1.

Ecclesiology

In light of the above Christological ideas, how is the nature and role of the church to be understood? Presently, the church finds itself waiting for the fulfillment of the kingdom of God with the return of Christ.²⁹ Arising from this waiting, this thesis defines the church as “a people standing in covenant, who are a sign of the divine reign and constitute a special community.”³⁰ The church is primarily an interpretive community that proclaims the gospel in the place where it finds itself.³¹ This interpretive community stands in relationship with the God who saves, and with all of humanity. The church is “in Christ,” acts “through Christ,” and exists “for Christ.”³² This concept of the church is drawn from the early church’s understanding of itself as a unique people called together for a unique purpose in the world (I Peter 2:9).

In contemplating the form of our unique existence, the church strives to show emphatically that “Christ did not die for nothing.”³³ Through its corporate life, the church also aims to proclaim, through words and actions, the principles of God’s kingdom, thereby showing others what it means to live under Christ’s divine rule.³⁴ Strong attention must be paid to the ways in which the Christian community exemplifies the self-sacrificing love of Christ for the world.³⁵ The church is not of the world, yet is sent into the world to bring a saving knowledge of Christ.³⁶ How this reality is lived out in light of a Christocentric approach to life will be considered in three primary areas; evangelism,

²⁹ Matera, *Christology*, 248.

³⁰ Grenz, *Theology*, 604.

³¹ VanGelder, *Missional*, 111.

³² Matera, *Christology*, 249.

³³ Van Gelder, *Missional*, 66.

³⁴ Grenz, *Theology*, 629.

³⁵ Matera, *Christology*, 156.

³⁶ Matera, *Christology*, 250.

church growth, and Christian leadership. This will be done with a focus on “the reason for which we receive God’s grace in Christ: to empower us as God’s people to become Christ’s witnesses.”³⁷

Framework and Methodology

The discussion suggested above requires a clear framework and methodology. A helpful aid to our discussion will be the work of Jane Jacobs on morality in work and public life.

Two Systems

In her book *Systems of Survival*, Jacobs explores the moral underpinnings of work and politics. Her writing is set up in the fashion of a Platonic dialogue. Readers journey with a core group of characters as they discuss together the behaviours that make, and do not make, working life successful. At the core of the book is Jacob’s assertion that there are two syndromes or systems (she uses the words fairly synonymously), the commerce and guardian systems, which inform different fields of work.

Jacobs assumes that the problem faced by most people, in most situations, is not in determining what is wrong to do, but rather to determine and enforce what is right to do.³⁸ In addressing this problem, Jacobs undergoes a vigorous research process in which she looks for instances in which behaviour was rewarded, lauded, or viewed in an undeniably favoured light. She also takes particular note of behaviours that were

³⁷ Jørgensen, “Missional”, 555.

³⁸ Jacobs, *Systems*, 21.

shunned, scorned, or viewed in an undeniably unfavourable light. These behaviours are noted and, over time, provide the basis for her two-system hypothesis.³⁹

The first system that Jacobs identifies is the commerce system, which has to do with the production of goods, scientific work, buying and selling- all the typical functions of commercial life. Commerce is a system full of competition, trading, and getting ahead. The fifteen markers of the commerce system can be seen below.

Commerce System⁴⁰

Shun force	Come to voluntary agreements
Be honest	Collaborate easily with strangers and aliens
Compete	Use initiative and enterprise
Respect contracts	Be open to inventiveness and novelty
Be efficient	Promote comfort and convenience
Be thrifty	Invest for productive purposes
Be industrious	Dissent for the sake of the task
Be optimistic	

Core to this system is the presupposition that voluntary agreement leads to, or comes from, the presence of choice.⁴¹ All the characteristics of this system are related to, and dependent upon, one another. Competition automatically requires the respect of contracts. Coming to voluntary agreements while shunning force, requires honesty, sometimes dissent for the sake of the task, and industrious optimism. One can quickly think of how this system applies to banking, real estate, or business in any form. Chapter One will contain an exploration of the way in which a church identity, shaped by materialism, exists within the commerce system.

³⁹ Jacobs, *Systems*, 25–26.

⁴⁰ Jacobs, *Systems*, appendix.

⁴¹ Jacobs, *Systems*, 37.

The guardian system differs significantly. As the name suggests the focus is on that of acquiring peacefully, protecting, administering, and controlling pre-specified territories.⁴²

The fifteen characteristics of this system are as follows:

Guardian System⁴³

Shun trading	Be obedient and disciplined
Exert prowess	Adhere to tradition
Respect hierarchy	Be loyal
Take vengeance	Deceive for the sake of the task
Make rich use of leisure	Be ostentatious
Dispense largesse	Be exclusive
Show fortitude	Be fatalistic
Treasure honour	

As with the commerce system, the characteristics of the guardian system depend on one another to a significant extent. As governments exert prowess, (which Jacobs uses to mean persuasion), tradition can act as a kind of conscience in the task of guarding the truth.⁴⁴ If loyalty is to be a hallmark then the temptation that can arise with trading must be avoided, therefore, trading itself must be shunned.⁴⁵ Chapter One will seek to demonstrate the positive ways in which the church, as a Christocentric community, functions and forms its identity within the guardian system.

Disastrous Moral Hybrids

Jacobs demonstrates that harmony between the systems can only be found as each is allowed to maintain its integrity and uniqueness. By allowing each to maintain its unique identity it becomes possible for each system to complement and support the other in a

⁴² Jacobs, *Systems*, 28–29.

⁴³ Jacobs, *Systems*, appendix.

⁴⁴ Jacobs, *Systems*, 61, 64.

⁴⁵ Jacobs, *Systems*, 63.

symbiotic fashion.⁴⁶ For example, the commerce system needs the help of the guardian system to combat violent predation, to mandate honesty and to expose, disgrace and punish dishonesty.⁴⁷ Those working and living from a place in one system should not begin to, nor be forced to, conduct themselves as though they were functioning from within the other system. Jacobs deftly demonstrates that when one system tries, or is forced to incorporate into itself the principles and guiding behaviours of the other system, we end up with what she terms “disastrous moral hybrids.” By way of example, Jacobs invites us to consider the unfortunate practice of the past whereby priests and clergy would dispense indulgences, and provide impunity for having done wrong, in return for donations to their parish or other organizations. This essentially amounted to selling the spiritual protection and assurance that they were to freely dispense.⁴⁸

Those familiar with Plato’s *Republic* may be reminded of Socrates’ struggle to distinguish between three major groups and their purposes. The aim of that discussion was to determine what justice truly consisted of. At the end, Socrates ultimately determines that justice is to perform one’s own task and not to meddle with that of others.⁴⁹ Jacobs’ assertions on harmony and disastrous moral hybrids are undeniably shaped by this ancient work.

Jacobs, Materialism, and Christocentric Ecclesiology

So how does the work of Jane Jacobs relate to the current discussion of identity, materialism, and Christocentric ecclesiology? The answer is two-fold. First, in a fashion similar to Jacobs, this work will likewise consider what attitudes and behaviours

⁴⁶ Jacobs, *Systems*, 106.

⁴⁷ Jacobs, *Systems*, 34.

⁴⁸ Jacobs, *Systems*, 80.

⁴⁹ Grube, *Republic*, 443 d-e.

materialism and Christocentric ecclesiology will hold up as admirable, and what each will denigrate as having little use or posing a danger to its end. Jacobs' framework of two distinct systems that shape identity and that must maintain their uniqueness in order to maintain their integrity, form the foundation of this discussion. Jacobs did not specifically have congregational life in view when she conducted her research. She does, however, assign religious life and office to the guardian system. She even goes so far as to note the challenge that the church has felt because of the commerce system. Jacobs points out that on many occasions in history "religious reformers [were] catching up with existing commercial morality and legitimizing it."⁵⁰

Secondly, similar to Jacobs' work, this work will examine how borrowing or transferring precepts and practices is corruptive and results in disastrous hybrids. In order to do this it will be demonstrated that materialism best fits within the commerce system, and Christocentric ecclesiology within the guardian system.

Chapter Overview

The argument of this thesis proceeds in the following steps. Chapter One begins first with a consideration of the importance of identity formation. Second, the discussion will move towards a greater understanding of the missional church discussion; assessing where that discussion is currently at, and proposing ways in which it might help the church to reclaim its true identity as a Christocentric church. This will be done through engagement with H. Richard Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, and Darrel Guder. Third, this chapter considers why materialism best fits within the commerce system, and why Christocentric ecclesiology best fits in the guardian system.

⁵⁰ Jacobs, *Systems*, 49.

Having determined that materialism and Christocentric ecclesiology belong to different systems, their incongruity will be asserted.

The second chapter considers the effects of materialism and Christocentric ecclesiology on our practice of evangelism. Consideration is given to the merit of “selling” or “branding” Jesus and the validity of taking a commerce approach to the making of disciples. It is suggested and demonstrated that rather than relying on marketing, a missional approach to evangelism will focus on incarnation and the invitation to become disciples of Christ.

Chapter Three takes as its topic the practice of Church Growth. Effort is made to highlight the influence of materialism and consumerism in the literature and programs of the contemporary church growth movement. Particular attention is paid to the stated goals and the means and methods used to achieve the ends of church growth. These goals, means and ends will be brought into discussion with the New Testament. Flowing from this discussion arises a Christocentric approach to church growth that is based on the principles of loyalty to the gospel, restored relationships, and exclusive discipleship.

Chapter Four considers the underlying assumptions of church leadership and how these assumptions affect the way in which the church does ministry. This chapter, more than any other, employs the framework of Jane Jacobs’ concept of unique and categorically different systems, arguing that Christocentric and materialistic worldviews will lead to very different kinds of leadership. Particular emphasis is placed on service and transformation as defining influences on Christian leadership.

The fifth, and final chapter, considers the challenging question of the future. In light of the discussion of materialism, Christocentric ecclesiology, and the missional church, how

will the church fulfill its role and faithfully live out its unique identity. Taking into consideration the Christocentric principles of incarnation, service to others, new creation, and transformation, suggestions are made as to how a renewed commitment to the unique identity of the church can enable people and systems to be transformed and renewed by God. Theological principles, flowing from the idea of the congregation as hermeneutic, will be provided for use by congregations who seek to further proclaim the kingdom and kingship of God through their unique life together.

Chapter 1: Mistaken Identity: Why Materialism and Christianity Cannot Coexist

At the beginning it is important to determine why materialism is such a threat to the church. Taking a stand against the materialism that engulfs the West is not something that will only be done by Christians. As Graham Ward notes, most faith traditions, as well as postmaterialists, metaphysicists, non-governmental agencies, and philosophers can also be found arguing against the wide sweep of materialism.¹ For the church, which may be afraid any challenge to the place of materialism is unprecedented, this wide-spread resistance to the influence of materialism can be a source of encouragement.

One might expect then to find that the church's reaction has been one of resistance to materialism. Unfortunately, in contrast to taking seriously the threat of materialism, often it is uncritically accepted and integrated into the church's identity. Daniel Bell Jr. laments that, while the church has tried desperately to remain relevant it has been forced to compromise its place and message in society and this has often meant embracing and failing to challenge ideas that go against the gospel.² Embracing materialism in such a way is very concerning; for if Christian faith is reduced to a religious commodity that is consumed, but does not change or challenge people, it becomes possible to hold and act on beliefs that run counter to the gospel with no sense of tension at all.³

Similarly, Michael Goheen notes that the church has too quickly accommodated itself to its culture, thus becoming an insufficient critic of the idolatrous currents that shape that

¹ Ward, *Politics*, 23.

² Bell Jr., *Desire*, 17. Bell Jr. notes that Christian industry has likewise done much to accept, and exacerbate the threat of loving things and allowing them to define individuals, by the vast "cottage industry" of Christianized consumption of Christianized products. One might stop and consider whether the Christian "Testaments" are any more sanctified or inherently spiritually edifying than their secular equivalents, Tic Tacs or Mentos.

³ Bell Jr., *Desire*, 21.

culture.⁴ Tragically, the church has failed to embrace its unique identity as witness, servants of Christ in the world, and the embodiment of an *alternative* way of living.

Goheen argues, “The church is elected to responsibility, called to be the church to and for the world...to serve it by showing what redeemed human community and culture look like, as modeled by the One whose cultural work led him to the cross.”⁵ As such, the life together of the church must be radically different than that of the materialist culture surrounding it.⁶ The purpose of humanity is to worship, serve, and obey God.

Satisfaction, purpose, and meaning do not come from things, but rather from a life-changing relationship with God. The core tenants of materialism fundamentally disregard such a reality. Therefore, “the healing that Christ wants can come only after recognition of the conflict of values.”⁷

In order to consider this conflict it is necessary to consider what materialistic and Christocentric identities might look like for the church. This consideration of the conflict begins with a brief overview of the missional church discussion, looking at the works of Richard Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas and Darrel Guder. Following this literature review, consideration is given to how systems affect identity formation and how the commerce system is the most logical home of materialism, and the guardian system is a logical home for Christocentric ecclesiology.

⁴ Goheen, “Missional Church,” 484.

⁵ Goheen, “Missional,” 180.

⁶ This can be seen in everything from how it orders time around the person of Jesus Christ and the events of his life and predominantly focus on the future consummation of God’s kingdom as its orientation as it engages with the world. It can be further seen in the strong conviction and core belief that the Triune God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the centre and source of all human existence.

⁷ Ward, *Politics*, 282.

The Missional Church Discussion

Signs of change have emerged within the life of the church during the last century. Ideas about who the church is, and what it should be like, have once again begun to shift. Questions about the relationship with culture are arising. While some people seem eager to hang onto the power and influence the church enjoyed throughout Christendom, others are not so sure. This section will consider three volumes; *Christ and Culture* by Richard Niebuhr, *Resident Aliens* by Stanley Hauerwas, and *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* by Darrel Guder.

Christ and Culture: Richard Niebuhr

One of the most recognized voices within the church and culture debate in the mid-twentieth century was Richard Niebuhr. In reflecting on the difficult relationship between church and culture he stated that “in his single-minded direction toward God, Christ leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture. In its concern for the conservation of the many values of the past, culture rejects the Christ who bids men rely on grace.”⁸ In response to these inherent tensions Niebuhr proposes five typologies through which Christians might interact with culture. Following is a brief overview of these typologies. 1) The first is Christ against culture. Niebuhr explains that this approach “uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture’s claims to loyalty.”⁹ In practice this requires the Christian life to become one lived in a separated and new community. It is clear that Niebuhr admires the single-hearted sincerity of this position, even if it seems at times impractical. He concedes that

⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 39.

⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 45.

the element of removal is a necessary element in Christian life at times.¹⁰ 2) The second typology is the Christ of culture. Within this position Christians “interpret culture through Christ....they understand Christ through culture.”¹¹ This necessarily requires the view that the best parts of culture are in line with Christ, as well as a picking and choosing of aspects of the gospel and Christian doctrine that would “seem to agree with what is best for civilization.”¹² Niebuhr explains that for proponents of “Christ through culture” there is no inner conflict felt or experienced as a result of participation in culture.¹³ 3) A third position is that of Christ above culture. This position stems from the perspective that God and culture cannot simply be opposed and irreconcilable. It asserts that humanity is obligated to be obedient to God and this obedience is shown in the setting of natural, cultural life.¹⁴ 4) The fourth typology is that of Christ and culture in paradox. Those within this group view the Christ above culture folks as being too accommodating in their approach to the gospel. The Christ and culture typology views God and humanity as being in conflict, specifically with regards to the righteousness of God and the sinfulness of humanity.¹⁵ They believe that the “whole edifice of culture is cracked and madly askew” and therefore believe it to be in total oppositional paradox to the ways of Christ.¹⁶ 5) The final typology is that of Christ transforming culture. This position draws heavily from the gospel of John and affirms that Christian life is a transformed mode of cultural existence for the sake of the world.¹⁷

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 65 – 68.

¹¹ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 83.

¹² Niebuhr, *Christ*, 83.

¹³ He also points out that both churchmen and non-Christians object to this typology. Niebuhr, *Christ*, 108.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 118.

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 150.

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 155.

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 206.

Niebuhr's discussion of the identity of the church as representatives of Christ within culture is quite valuable. It begins critically engaging with the culture, wrestling with what a proper response to culture might be for Christians. However, the discussion is also quite general. Niebuhr himself notes that his examination is "unconcluded and inconclusive."¹⁸ Throughout his discussion Niebuhr fails to adequately recognize that culture and the church are not homogenous. Some facets of culture do not challenge the Christian identity to any significant extent, while others drastically do. The ideas presented by Niebuhr provide a nice foundation upon which to build a further discussion of the church's identity particularly in consideration of the way in which the church ought to interact with materialism. Each typology offers grounds for questioning the ways in which the church must at times oppose, agree with, or transform the culture of materialism. This thesis locates its argument from within the fifth typology of Christ transforming culture. The church, as a witnessing community, is the means through which God delivers the message of transformation. What this witness to the transforming power of God is to look like is further discussed in Chapter Five.

Resident Aliens: Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon

The discussion in *Resident Aliens* centers on the belief that, in Christ, God refuses to stay in the small and predefined space that society is willing to give him.¹⁹ The language of citizenship and transference is used to describe the conversion of the Christian and the resulting reality that Christians become "resident aliens" in the world. Christianity is seen as an outpost of Christian culture in the midst of an unchristian culture.²⁰ For Hauerwas and Willimon, it is of the utmost importance that the church no longer allows the modern

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ*, 230.

¹⁹ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Aliens*, 51.

²⁰ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Aliens*, 12.

world to circumscribe the questions of life, and thereby to limit the answers that Christians find. There is significant emphasis on the fact that “in Jesus we meet not a presentation of basic ideas about God, world, and humanity, but an invitation to join up, to become part of a movement, a people.”²¹

This thesis agrees with the basic claims made by Hauerwas and Willimon. Any critical challenge of materialism must be seen in the lives of Christians as they live within that unique colony of the church. Where Hauerwas and Willimon’s discussion remains largely theoretical, this project will seek to pick up the task of specifically considering what life as resident aliens might look like in evangelism, church growth, and leadership within the continually emerging church of North America in the twenty first century. This discussion takes place in Chapters Two through Four. Then in Chapter Five consideration is given to the shape of the church’s life and identity in light of being resident aliens.

The Continuing Conversion of the Church: Darrel Guder

In his many works, Darrel Guder puts forward a belief that the church must clarify what it means to be the people of God called as witnesses in the world. To this end, he helpfully looks at the idea of mission as something the church must always be doing. He asserts that the ideas of participating together in proclamation, community, and service, which are the “essential dimensions of the Spirit-enabled witness for which the Christian church is called and sent,” are core to a modern exemplification of life as a missional community.²²

Seven characteristics of Christian witness are; 1) it is theocentric, focusing on the saving activity of God; 2) it is Christocentric, focusing on the incarnation, death,

²¹ Hauerwas and Willimon, *Aliens*, 20 – 21.

²² Guder, *Conversion*, 53.

resurrection, and ascension of Christ; 3) it is pneumatological, initiated by the Holy Spirit; 4) it is historical, constantly pointing back to a set of specific events; 5) it is eschatological, declaring the inauguration of the kingdom of God and longing for its consummation; 6) it is ecclesiological, being lived out within particular communities; and 7) it is multicultural and ecumenical, disregarding barriers in the spread of the gospel.²³

In order for the modern day church to act on these principles, it must undergo a conversion process. At the heart of this conversion is the process of hearing and responding to the gospel which in turn leads to conversion. Thus the congregation is constantly and continually being converted through its encounters with Christ.²⁴

The work of Guder, plainly lays out the theoretical reasons for why the church must be engaged in mission and must allow its role as witness to shape and form its identity. There is no doubt that in its response to materialism the church will need to view itself as a community that is continually being converted. The theme of transformation into the people of God is central to any engagement with materialist culture. However, aside from pointing to the need for conversion in how churches worship, serve, and interact with the world, very few specifics are provided for what a continually converted community of faith would look like in practice. This next step is crucial to the living out of a particular identity and purpose as the church. This thesis strives to demonstrate the areas in which continued conversion is required and what the outcomes of that conversion will be.

Identity Formation

The brief literature review above outlines the conversation that this project is eager to join and continue. The task of claiming and living out a distinct identity as the people of

²³ Guder, *Conversion*, 62.

²⁴ Guder, *Conversion*, 151.

God is an unfinished project that those within the church are constantly striving to resolve in various ways.²⁵ In a further attempt to resolve this unfinished reality, consideration will be given to the ways in which participation in the commerce or guardian systems outlined by Jane Jacobs shapes identity.

The work of Jacobs with regards to the two dominant systems that govern public life is quite useful in considering the identity of the church. The system in which, or from which, the church finds itself living significantly shapes its identity. Materialism is an identity-shaping philosophy that belongs within the commerce system. Christocentric ecclesiology, on the other hand, belongs within the guardian system.

The Commerce System and Materialism

A key tenant of materialism is that the effectiveness of humanity's activities hinges on the level of our material production.²⁶ This encapsulates the commerce characteristics of efficiency, investment for productive purposes, industriousness, and thrift. In this view, humanity is permitted to begin viewing themselves as self-made individuals who use their property and their very selves to build themselves up no matter the cost to others. The sustained emphasis upon individuals that materialism encourages and requires, leads to the rejection of the idea that we have a shared purpose or common good that unites us.²⁷ Therefore, relationships with others become less about care, companionship, and support, and more about struggle, domination, and conflict; or as Jacobs suggests, competition.

For the church, integration of the commerce system can affect identity in many ways. It becomes much easier to care, first and foremost, for one's own congregation and to

²⁵ Ward, *Politics*, 27.

²⁶ Novak, *Materialism*, 25.

²⁷ Bell Jr., *Desire*, 101, 104.

justify doing whatever is needed- regardless of the cost to other ministers, churches, or denominations- to achieve what has been determined as the goal for success. Likewise, it becomes easy to give God a back seat to what “we” have done to build up the church and it is tempting to take credit for all success. While thrift and efficiency are not always bad things, when paired with competition within the broader system, they do become threats to the unity of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

The ability to be effective through use of possessions requires materialists to “attach a central role to possessions and to consider them the main source of happiness or, in situations in which the desired possessions are lacking, unhappiness.”²⁸ In placing such high value on things it becomes necessary to shun force, to collaborate easily, and to come to agreements in order to obtain the material things we desire and need.²⁹ The dangerous reality that emerges within the system of materialism is that there is no limit on what will be sacrificed for the sake of agreement. Corporations, individuals, and societies are willing to make significant sacrifice in order to obtain the desired object. Think, for example, of the willingness of North Americans to set aside ethical considerations concerning the wellbeing of workers in order to voluntarily reach agreement on a low price for clothing.

Within the church the threat of collaboration, shunning force, and voluntary agreements above all else can be seen in the area of evangelism. Further discussion of how this can be seen will take place in Chapter Two, but for now let it suffice to say that there is great danger that in collaboration there can be much at stake. Which portions of

²⁸ Pace, “Religion,” 26.

²⁹ For example, it will not always be the case that one can easily obtain from nature what they need to construct a house. Things, such as nails, shingles, and beams, might need to be obtained from another. If this is the case then a high level of barter or trade will be required in order to obtain the needed possession.

the gospel are able to be sacrificed or neglected in order to reach an agreement for conversion? How much can be given up in order to bring people into the church? These are serious questions that must be considered.

John Smith draws our attention to the fact that the consumptive nature of modern materialism instills within people an understanding of what it means to be happy, fulfilled, and flourishing. It teaches that, those who seek out, have, and consume particular things (and many of them), are the happiest and lead the most fulfilled lives.³⁰ Immersion in the practices of materialism trains individuals to desire and to love the things of earth more than the things of God.³¹ Not only that, but in embracing this view of things, identity and actions become primarily shaped by the promotion of comfort and convenience which is ultimately obtained through the use of initiative and enterprise in our consumption of things and inventiveness in how they are consumed. It may also be necessary to dissent for the sake of the task in order to get the things one wants or needs. It becomes difficult to conceive of how this can be done, while at the same time upholding the characteristic or principle of honesty. Here again, the threat to the identity formation of the church is real. If the primary focus of the church becomes the pursuit of convenience and comfort through things, what then becomes of the mandate to care for the sick, to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry? Churches that become primarily concerned with comfort are in danger of forgetting the importance of sacrifice and giving of oneself in order to serve and improve the lives of others. This is particularly evident in the discussion about Church Growth in Chapter Three. The Christ who is the centre of

³⁰ Smith, *Kingdom*, 94.

³¹ Bell Jr., *Desire*, 94.

Christian life is not one whose primary concern was with his own comfort and ease, but who bore the brunt of the sin of the whole world, all the way to the cross.

The Guardian System and Christocentric Ecclesiology

Whereas the commerce system and materialism revolve around trading, the guardian system and Christocentric ecclesiology largely focus on the work of protecting and preservation. That which is being preserved is the essential nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The life-giving and life-saving message of salvation through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ is worth protecting.

In considering the applicability of the guardian system it is important to bear in mind the way in which covenant people are to be loyal and exclusively dedicated to the one with whom they are in covenant. For the church, this covenant is with God, through Christ (Heb. 8), and is based on the wholehearted and exclusive acceptance of his call, and worship of him. The church is not to be ashamed of Jesus or of the gospel (II Tim. 1:8). The church is not to forget the faith, struggles, and sacrifices of those who went ahead in faithful service of God (Heb. 12:1). Adherence to tradition recognizes that tradition can act as a conscience in guardian work.³² In remembering and looking back to those who have gone before, wisdom is gleaned about how the church should conduct itself today.

Core to the identity of a Christocentric church is the constant affirmation of the hierarchy of Christ as the head, and the place of members as the body as it goes about its mission in the world (Col. 1:18). To fail to affirm the headship of Christ is to lose sight of the reason for the church's existence, which, amongst other things, is to shine like stars in the midst of a crooked and corrupt generation (Phil. 2:15).

³² Jacobs, *Systems*, 64.

The principle to shun trading is in place to ensure that individuals who guard and possess something valuable will not “sell out” or be tempted to act in a way that would jeopardize the integrity of the thing or people which they protect.³³ In the past, this principle has not always been taken seriously enough by clergy, thus we find the unfortunately common practice of clergy trading indulgences and spiritual services for donations.³⁴ Within a Christocentric ecclesiology, aversion to trading is seen in the unwillingness to compromise the content and message of the gospel regardless of circumstances. Paul provides an excellent example of maintaining commitment to the integrity of the gospel in Acts 28. Here, Paul is found under arrest by the Romans who request that he share his views with them. If there were ever a time when it could be understandable to trade some of the more difficult content of the gospel for a version more palatable to the surrounding culture, this would be the time. Yet, Paul boldly declares the gospel in its fullness with integrity (Acts 28:30). Likewise, the Christocentric church must boldly declare the whole gospel in the midst of materialism in spite of the cost.

The rich use of leisure values and elevates practices of creativity, rest, and restoration.³⁵ Throughout his ministry the church finds Jesus resting, healing and restoring the sick, and enjoying time with others as relationships are developed and strengthened. In this way, he does not shun leisure, but demonstrates a healthy approach to the idea of pausing from work and industry for the renewing and refreshing of life. Within a frenetically busy materialist culture, the church can witness to the need for rest

³³ Jacobs, *Systems*, 60.

³⁴ Jacobs, *Systems*, 61.

³⁵ Jacobs, *Sytems*, 77 – 79.

and restoration by encouraging the restoration of freedom for others and encouraging rest.

The principle of ostentation requires some thoughtful consideration. For Jacobs, “virtuous guardian ostentation isn’t self-indulgent...it expresses pride, tradition, continuity, stability...highly visible continuity with the past, implied continuity with the future.”³⁶ As the church richly and creatively worships, ministers, and displays the goodness of God, it will catch the attention of people. Careful use of symbols in many of the events that accompany church life, can speak to the materiality of our faith, while at the same time not being materialistic in focus.

The dispensing of largesse involves benefit for the recipient. “For the son of God, the incarnation meant a whole new set of relationships: with his father and mother; with his brothers and sisters; with his disciples; with the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees,; with Roman soldiers and with lepers and prostitutes.”³⁷ So it is to be with the church. Some of the largesse that the church has at its disposal is that of rich, whole, and renewed relationships, both with God and one another. In living as witness to the saving acts of God through Christ, the church declares that there is a new way of living, and invites others to discover the generosity of this other way.

The principle of prowess can be difficult to instantly apply to the church. Within Jacobs’ framework the exertion of prowess means to have power and use it effectively for the purpose of guardianship.³⁸ Within the context of Christocentric ecclesiology, Christ exemplifies the proper exertion of prowess in his willingness to suffer for the sins of the world. As God, Christ had the unique power to defeat death and provide a sinless

³⁶ Jacobs, *Systems*, 83.

³⁷ MacLeod, *Christ*, 180.

³⁸ Jacobs, *Systems*, 63.

sacrifice for sin. In choosing to make this sacrifice, he took the power available to him, and used it wisely. As Donald MacLeod points out, in the garden we see that Christ suffered *for* us and not simply *with* us.³⁹ This suffering required incredible discipline and obedience to the will of God. Christ also demonstrated significant fortitude in his willingness to serve humanity in such a way. For the church, the challenge is to find ways of recognizing and using power appropriately, displaying discipline and obedience, and embodying fortitude. As the church stands up to the threat of materialism and consumption, and models an alternative way of living, it demonstrates the prowess of cultural influence appropriately. This will no doubt require great fortitude as the church is faced with cultural challenges. Yet, it is the way of Christ and so it must be the way of the church.

Throughout this chapter the incongruity of materialism and Christocentric ecclesiology has become clear. The church must stop allowing culture and society to dictate the place of the church in the world and the content of the church's message. The church's identity is a unique one, based on the life, death, and resurrection of the incarnate Saviour. The writings and wisdom of Niebuhr, Hauerwas and Willimon, and Guder have been engaged, and materialism has been demonstrated to be a commerce reality while Christocentric ecclesiology has been shown to be a guardian reality. In the next sections of this thesis (Chapters Two-Four) consideration will be given to how the church's identity as a guardian organization centred on Christ affects evangelism, church growth, and Christian leadership. This is an important discussion to have, for ideas about Christ ought not to be simply doctrinal or ideological.⁴⁰ The church has not only known

³⁹ MacLeod, *Christ*, 175.

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Christ*, 53 – 54.

and received a word of revelation, but the church is made up of those who have in turn become a means by which the word of God is revealed within its cultural context.⁴¹

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, *Christ*, 58.

Chapter 2: Evangelism- Sales Pitch or Invitation to Discipleship?

Having determined that materialism is contradictory to the core beliefs and practices of Christianity, this thesis considers the specific ways in which materialism affects the church's practice. The first aspect of church practice considered is evangelism. The task of evangelism is an important one that began with Christ himself. Throughout his life and ministry he can be observed declaring a new era in God's reign over all things. Through his teaching and healing, he called men and women to a new and vital relationship with God. In his death and resurrection, he made that new and vital relationship possible.

Because of the important place given to evangelism by Christ and the early church, this discussion considers how it best can be undertaken. This is done through a short statement of the nature of evangelism, followed by a look at evangelism informed by materialism, and finally, evangelism informed by the Christocentric principles of incarnation and transformation. The argument is that, whereas materialism leads to the marketing of Jesus, a Christocentric approach focuses more on invitation and discipleship.

Following his resurrection, Christ called his disciples to the task of evangelism, which involves proclaiming the good news of the Gospel, announcing forgiveness of sin, calling people to repentance, and inviting people to become members of God's household and earthly community.¹ This wide definition suggests that the end toward which evangelism strives goes beyond the mere act of "winning souls" for Christ. The church lives out its evangelistic mandate through faithful and constant witness to what God has done, is

¹ Bosch, "Evangelism," 9.

doing, and will do in the lives of individuals and in the world. All of this is done with the goal of bringing people into the “visible community of believers.”²

Evangelism, Materialism, and the Commerce System

As mentioned earlier, the focus of materialism is on things as the basis for meaning and success. The accumulation of material commodities is seen as the source of extended capacity as individuals.³ Consumption is focused on obtaining whatever an individual perceives would lead to increased contentment, health, and prosperity. This impulse likewise applies to philosophical ideas, religions, and relationships. Therefore, even Christianity is not safe from the temptation of making Jesus and the Gospel consumable. When Christianity and faith in Christ becomes something that can be consumed, its value and usefulness becomes defined by individuals. This is problematic, as Christianity is ontologically valuable, as is the salvation that Christ provides through his death and resurrection. Within the materialistic approach, the high emphasis on commerce ideas such as shunning force, coming to voluntary agreements, collaboration with strangers and aliens, and dissent for the sake of the task pose a problem for evangelism. The embodiment of these principles places greater importance on the initiative of humans in determining the value of salvation, rather than on the initiative of God in offering salvation and providing the means by which it can be obtained. This is deeply problematic.

Marketing is a popular mode of evangelising. It is also one of the greatest threats posed to the church and the gospel that it guards and proclaims. Marketing refers to, and includes, “all the activities that help organizations identify and shape the wants of target

² Bosch, “Evangelism,” 11.

³ Miller, *Stuff*, 69.

consumers and then try to satisfy those consumers better than competitors do.”⁴ The marketing style of evangelism most often seems to be promoting a certain life-style that has very little to do with dusty feet, love of enemies, or lilies of the field. It leaves no room for the misfit, the poor, the suffering servant, or the outcast. These images are not depicted in the picture that is being marketed.⁵ As a result, several major concerns arise.

The first is that marketing evangelism communicates a distorted image of Jesus. This distortion of Christ poses a real problem as people are encouraged to align themselves with Christ, and to become followers of him without fully understanding who he is, or the nature of the relationship they are to have with him. Graham Ward points to the importance of how the image of Jesus is communicated by noting that early on in one’s journey to faith the only Jesus that can be identified or followed is the one created for the seeker by those who follow Christ. “Their stories, their images, and their representations” are what help new Christians construct their own Christology and their pattern for imitation and discipleship.⁶ How Jesus is portrayed, and what details are included or excluded from sharing with others about him, deeply matters. It is crucial then, that the church avoids all practices that may cause the gospel invitation and commandments to be distorted.

A second concern is the reduction of the gospel to being simply about personal fulfillment, and the elevation of the individual. Two examples of this reduction to self-fulfillment that quickly come to mind can be found in the teaching of two popular speakers; Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyers. Osteen is well known for his bold claims that

⁴ Wigg-Stevenson, “Brand,” 20.

⁵ Owen, *Image*, 36, 38.

⁶ Ward, *Politics*, 278.

God/Jesus (he uses them somewhat interchangeably) has no greater desire or purpose than to help people fulfill their destiny or dreams. As he puts it, “God has all kinds of ways to bring your dreams to pass...God promises your payday is on its way.”⁷ In the teachings of Joyce Meyers one of many messages that comes across is that God has no greater desire or purpose than to bring to fruition anything that is asked for and believed to be true. Accordingly, if someone wants something from God they must simply learn to “believe first, and then [they] will see manifested what [they] have believed (received, admitted in their heart).”⁸ Both of these teachers portray a narrow view of the gospel, in which Jesus/God becomes little more than a glorified genie who exists to do whatever one pleases, provided one knows how to ask properly. There is no mention of humanity existing for God (and not vice versa), of service to God and others, or of taking up crosses daily in order to follow Christ.

This sort of reduction results from compromising with materialism and the addition or subtraction of content that is not “attractive” to those with a materialistic mindset. The result is a “spiritual materialism” in which seekers become consumers as they pick and choose the portions that suit their needs.⁹ Yes, there is fulfillment in the Christian life, but it comes only as believers learn to seek God instead of themselves.¹⁰ The church has shied away from boldly and confidently declaring the parts of the gospel that challenge the materialistic goal of personal fulfillment. If the offer of a more self-fulfilled life becomes the central focus of evangelism, then evangelism will become nothing more

⁷ Osteen, *Your Time*, 17 – 18.

⁸ Meyers, *Yourself*, 147.

⁹ Finchman et al., “Material,” 6.

¹⁰ Wigg-Stevenson, “Brand,” 24.

than a psychological panacea and the gospel will have been degraded to little more than a consumer product.¹¹

Thirdly, marketing is not values-neutral. In order to market something it must first be made into something that can be consumed.¹² The will of the individual becomes paramount and casts the rightful Lordship of Christ into the shadows. This is concerning as the superiority of a particular brand or product is something that is given to that brand or product by the consumer.¹³ But this cannot be the case with Christ, nor with his gospel. His divinity and value are ontologically his own, regardless of human opinion. In the past, the emphasis in evangelism rested entirely on the actions of God in revealing himself to humanity in order to save them from their sins. Jonathan Edwards, for example declared that in evangelism and conversion the “surprising work of God” can be observed.¹⁴ However, at present, the focus of evangelism has become the sovereign will of the individual to choose, or not to choose, salvation through God. Evidence of this shift can be seen in resources such as “The Purpose Driven Church,” which focuses extensively on convincing a target group to choose to engage with the church and Christ. The answer is to figure out how to “catch fish on their terms.”¹⁵ By this logic, the church would then “catch” only those who chose to be caught. In reflecting on this unfortunate trend, Tyler Wigg-Stevenson asks whether seekers will find in the church the world-transforming body of the Lord and if they come with the expectation of something new to buy or consume will they instead be surprised by God.¹⁶

¹¹ Bosch, “Evangelism,” 14.

¹² Wigg-Stevenson, “Brand,” 22.

¹³ Wigg-Stevenson, “Brand,” 25.

¹⁴ Leonard, “American Life,” 104.

¹⁵ Warren, *Purpose*, 195.

¹⁶ Wigg-Stevenson, “Brand,” 26.

A final theological problem posed by marketing as evangelism is that the role of community in the life of new believers is significantly absent. It is, almost exclusively, a churchless evangelism. Even the *Four Spiritual Laws* fails to mention anything about becoming a member of the body and church of Christ when salvation is received. In the sales pitch, no mention is made of the ongoing process of sanctification and new creation as believers live out their conversion in the church and the world. Churchless evangelism absolves and encourages a consumptive view of soteriology, as “you (the consumer) invite him (the product) into your heart (brand adoption) and get saved (consumer gratification).”¹⁷ In this equation there is no need, nor any room, for community. Yet, Ephesians 2:19 strongly proclaims that believers are no longer foreigners to God, but members of his household alongside one another. This is serious identity-forming language! Yes, the decision to accept salvation is a voluntary one, but the church must stop behaving and preaching as if the decision to participate in the body of Christ and household of God is likewise voluntary. As Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen so aptly states, “...culture speaks in terms of isolated individualism, but the biblical message speaks for community and belonging.”¹⁸

Within a materialistic, commerce mindset the “strangeness” of the church becomes problematic.¹⁹ The conflict for many Christians lies in the difficulty of taking the principles and content of a gospel that is incongruous to a materialistic consumptive society and to find a means by which to make that gospel appealing.²⁰ As a result, many have been willing to use whatever means necessary, with little thought to the influence

¹⁷ Wigg-Stevenson, “Brand,” 22.

¹⁸ Karkkainen, “Prototype,” 31.

¹⁹ Stone, *Christendom*, 168.

²⁰ Owen, *Image*, 36.

those means might have on the message. Kyle Ilderman, lead minister at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, admits that in order to attract people to the church, in his preaching he frequently tried to make following Jesus as “appealing, comfortable, and convenient as possible.”²¹ When the strangeness of loving enemies, taking up a cross daily to follow Christ, or the warning against serving money rather than God became too awkward, they were eliminated from the message. Ilderman conducted himself as though D.L. Moody were correct when he declared that, “it doesn’t matter how you get a man to God, provided you get him there.”²² But was Moody right? Are partial truths, withholding of information, or false promises appropriate ways in which to invite someone into a life giving and life-changing relationship with Christ? The church would do well to recall the wisdom of Marshall McLuhan when he noted that the medium is the message.²³ In evangelism that medium must be lives that display the character of the God who saves, lived out within the community of faith. There is a highly subversive current to evangelism because it declares hope that the divine reign will eventually be consummated.²⁴ The centrality of this subversive view is bound to clash with materialism, yet it must not be abandoned. Rather, it must be included in the presentation of the gospel, and lived out in the community of faith.

Evangelism and the Guardian System

A Christocentric approach to evangelism aims to preserve and protect the Gospel as a call to a unique and alternative way of living in the world. Such evangelism finds its basis in the fact that God, through the incarnation, has revealed himself to humanity in a

²¹ Anderson, *Radicals*, 21.

²² Leonard, “American Life,” 106.

²³ Bosch, “Evangelism,” 12.

²⁴ Stone, *Christendom*, 167.

profound way. As we look at the life of Jesus, we see a multifaceted approach to evangelism that includes; preaching with the aim of conversion, the inauguration of a new kingdom, and the drawing together of a community to live out the principles of that kingdom.²⁵ The invitation that Jesus makes to each disciple is a disruption that sets their lives on an entirely different trajectory than had been previously in purview.²⁶ Following this example, Christocentric evangelism finds it necessary to link evangelism with discipleship. In seeking to base evangelism on the incarnational model of Christ, the church shuns trade, adheres to tradition, places great emphasis on obedient and disciplined living, and is fatalistic in its assertion that the salvation of souls lies in the hands of a Sovereign God.

Any frank assessment of the context in which evangelism takes place must begin with the acknowledgement that belief in Christ is in competition with materialism. Christ calls his followers to be committed to justice and mercy for others, and to be founded on faith in the God of the universe.²⁷ The call of Christ goes far beyond the time of conversion and includes the process of growing into the likeness of Christ. In evangelism, the church must acknowledge that everyone follows, or is the disciple of, someone or something. Disciples of materialism are focused on things, possessions, and getting ahead. Those who are evangelized by the church must likewise be disciplined by the church. Whereas marketing presents the gospel as something to meet the needs of an individual that can easily be accepted with very little upset to current lifestyle, discipleship evangelism believes that it is primarily about “an alternative way of being in the world for the sake of

²⁵ Stone, *Christendom*, 79.

²⁶ Brueggemann, “Evangelism,” 123.

²⁷ Brueggemann, “Evangelism,” 121.

the world.”²⁸ All too often evangelism has divorced itself from discipleship, understanding the goal as simply preaching the gospel, helping someone pray the sinner’s prayer, or offering a compelling case for Christian belief. To leave things there is, in the words of a *Christianity Today* editorial, comparable to child abuse as the spiritual newborn is left without the necessary tools and practices to survive.²⁹

The imperative that Jesus gives to his disciples in Matthew 28: 16 – 20 regarding witness and evangelism is clear and firm; go, make disciples, baptize, and teach.³⁰ But how is this to be done? What model can be used to ensure that the gospel is not simply being branded or sold? Darrel Guder, Alan Hirsch and others suggest that looking to the incarnation of Christ as an example will be helpful.³¹ Using the incarnation as a model for evangelism will force the church to take seriously issues of incongruence between what is proclaimed, how it is proclaimed, and how it is demonstrated.³² Christocentric evangelism’s focus on discipleship is much more holistic than selling or marketing ever can be.

How should the church reclaim the relationship between evangelism and discipleship? In order to overcome the temptation of evangelism through a materialist approach, Lesslie Newbigin suggest that the church needs to courageously recognize the Bible as the real story, the true story, and the only story that explains the true state of humanity, where humanity comes from, and where humanity is going.³³ Affirming the truthfulness

²⁸ Brueggemann, “Evangelism,” 121.

²⁹ “Disciples,” 28.

³⁰ Brueggemann, “Evangelism,” 128.

³¹ Both of these men, in their respective works, place a high emphasis on the role of incarnation in God’s self-revelation to humanity and in our revelation of God to others.

³² Guder, “Incarnation,” 181.

³³ Newbigin, “Context,” 49.

of the Bible as the real story refocuses the identity of the church through the lens of the gospel, and differentiates it from the world.

When someone is converted to Christianity they are accepting a “different narrative account of reality,” which is the reality of God’s transformation and salvation of the world.³⁴ Accepting this reality requires the shunning of narratives that deny the presence of an active and self-revealing God. The church cannot replace this ultimate reality with half-truths, false assumptions, or self-aggrandizing ideas. The work of discipleship evangelism begins with the guarding and maintaining of the integrity of the story that it has been given to share. To declare such a story boldly and completely requires that the church will always be ready to demonstrate effectively that Christians are to be conformed into the likeness of Christ who is the human prototype.³⁵ In doing so the church must bear in mind the fact that many people feel the need for a spiritual alternative to materialism. The focus on always increasing material benefits becomes empty. In light of this, Frances Adeney reminds the church that the good news of the gospel is its own advertisement, its own motivation.³⁶ Therefore, it does not need to be sold.

Evangelism and discipleship are vital parts of the community of Christ. Discipleship evangelism encourages believers to commit to meet regularly with a group of believers, participating with them in the body of Christ. Newbigin suggests that as Christians share in the life and worship of the church they begin to indwell the story of faith and to show

³⁴ Brueggemann, “Evangelism,” 124.

³⁵ Karkkainen, “Prototype,” 30.

³⁶ Adeney, *Graceful*, 64.

it forth in daily living, as well as in words, thus making for very effective evangelism.³⁷

In order to learn how to indwell the story of faith into daily life, the church has the privilege of learning from those who have gone before. The lives of the saints are examples that can be considered helpful by the church today. Of particular usefulness to discipleship evangelism are the various spiritual disciplines that many of these Christians have engaged in.³⁸ As the church faithfully lives out the gospel before its neighbours, and identifies with people in their situations just as Christ did, then it will find that the “sovereign Spirit of God does his own surprising work.”³⁹

The prospect of evangelism under such terms is at the same time exciting, exhilarating and life-giving, but also daunting, and difficult. Affirming the call to evangelize through acting for changed lives and to invite new Christians into the process of being made new and transformed is easy. More difficult is to live the life of obedience, discipline, and fatalism that it entails. The obedience and discipline of members within the church, and of the church as a whole community, are seen in the ongoing process of conforming to the will of God. “Christian discipleship has one goal, conformity with Christ. There may be other by-products, salvation, the forgiveness of sin; the coming of the kingdom; the acting out of justice, truth, goodness, and beauty in and through the body of Christ; the preaching of the gospel-but these are all effects of a more profound operation.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Newbigin, “Context,” 151.

³⁸ The use of spiritual disciplines in evangelism and discipleship are also supported by Brueggemann in “Evangelism,” 131.

³⁹ Newbigin, “Context,” 154.

⁴⁰ Ward, *Politics*, 276.

This model of evangelism requires that the “strangeness” of the gospel be maintained and that the church be unafraid to be different from the world for the sake *of* the world.⁴¹ Just as Christ’s incarnation and the subsequent offer of salvation was for the world, so the life of the church as a transformed, conforming community of disciples is for the sake of the world. The values of the kingdom of God, worked out through the lives of persons called to do the work of God, proclaim the gospel in powerful ways.”⁴² The role of fatalism in this instance is to accept that there is very little that Christians can actually do to illicit or cause a conversion within another. The work of converting, saving, and transforming individuals is God’s work, in which the church is privileged to take part.

As this discussion on evangelism draws to a close it is important to remember that evangelism is much more than simply selling a product, or marketing Jesus. Evangelism is a life- changing activity that invites people to know, and to be known by, Jesus Christ. It is a practice that proclaims the gospel in all its wonder and challenge. It is a practice that does not get discouraged but keeps on persevering because of the conviction that the life to which Christ invites all people is one of tremendous significance. Evangelism is first and foremost an invitation to choose life.

⁴¹ Stone, *Christendom*, 177.

⁴² Adeney, *Graceful*, 22.

Chapter Three - Church Growth: Who Says Bigger is Better?

Having explored the way in which evangelism is affected and loses its focus as a result of materialism, this chapter looks at the subject of church growth. Church Growth and evangelism are fundamentally connected to one another. How the church, and each congregation, views evangelism to a large extent determines the approach that is taken for church. Also, evangelism and church growth often have overlapping goals as they seek to encourage individuals to come to faith in Christ. This consideration of church growth begins with an overview of the movement's purposes, and a consideration of four types of growth.

An Overview of Church Growth

Since the 1970's church growth has been a popular topic of discussion. At its best, church growth is meant not for the benefit of the congregation, but is primarily for the benefit of those who desperately need to know Christ.¹ This is true as the church seeks to grow through the spreading of the good news of the gospel. Proponents of the movement, such as C. Peter Wagner, state the motive as to "make more effective the propagation of the gospel and the multiplication of new churches."² Because of this laudable goal, many feel that the need for church growth cannot be overstated. George Hunter III points out that, the church in North America today finds itself in a position where more and more people have lived their entire lives outside of the influence of the church, and subsequently, of Christ.³ For many, the movement represents the most significant attempt by the church in North America to "grope toward a new stance in a society that sidelines

¹ Werning, *Strategy*, 7.

² Guinness, "Idols," lines 9 – 10.

³ Hunter, *Apostolic*, 1.

faith.”⁴ Because faith has largely been sidelined, there is a great need for the gospel to be proclaimed, for converts to be invited and welcomed into faith communities, and for those faith communities to be willing to grow as Christ’s body expands.

How growth occurs is usually broken into four categories. 1) Internal growth, which refers to an increase in competent Christians who know the Bible and practice their faith; 2) expansion growth, which involves new people joining the church either through conversion to faith or transfer from another church communities; 3) extension growth, in which a ministry or church is set up to reach those outside of its current geographic range; 4) bridging growth, which involves cross-cultural ministry among a population vastly different than the sending church.⁵ This thesis particularly considers expansion growth and the concepts of transfer and conversion growth.

Church Growth and Materialism: Local Congregation-centric

While the intentions of the church growth movement are to be applauded, a deeper look shows that the approach to church growth has been gravely affected by the influence of materialism and marketing evangelism. Good intentions have been eclipsed by a competitive, divisive, and business-like approach to the task of growing and increasing the body of Christ. As a reflection of materialism the primary focus of the church growth movement is too often upon the growth of individual and local congregations at the expense of other congregations. Unity between churches is too often sacrificed for the sake of one individual congregation. Indeed, within the literature of the church growth movement, little is ever said about the growth of the universal church, nor of the

⁴ Guinness, “Idols,” lines 60 – 61.

⁵ Hunter, *Apostolic*, 6 – 12.

relationship between individual local congregations or denominations. The reasons for this are explored below.

Competition

The primary concern is how materialistic church growth fosters competition and division between local congregations. Too often individual congregations “simultaneously thrust up super-churches and impoverish other churches and the overall work of God in a local area.”⁶ Whether the impoverishment of other churches and the overall work of God are intended or not, critics feel that proponents of church growth “advocate an ecclesiastical food chain in which the bigger church feeds on smaller ministries that are less adept at survival.”⁷ There is no doubt that this is because under the influence of materialism, church growth has been fully infused with the spirit of competition.⁸ In some ways, this spirit of competition is not surprising, for, as Stanley Hauerwas reminds readers, “...our church lives in a buyers’ market. The customer is king.”⁹ What the customer wants, the customer should get.

Evidence that this “buyers market” mindset is prevalent within the church growth discussion can be found in the teaching and ideas of leaders such as Rick Warren. In *The Purpose Driven Church* the chapter “Who is Your Target?” reads like a marketing playbook. The demographic profiling recommended is extensive and is fully intended to give one congregation a winning edge against another.¹⁰ This is quite concerning. What does a congregation do with people who approach their church but do not fit their target?

⁶ Guinness, “Idols,” lines 99 – 101.

⁷ Chadwick, *Sheep*, 27.

⁸ Gibbs, *Churchmorph*, 22.

⁹ Hauerwas, *Aliens*, 142.

¹⁰ Saddleback wants to know; age, marital status, income, education, and occupation about their targets. Warren, *Purpose*, 163.

Does the church turn them away or simply refuse to invite them into the life of Christ?

Does the church leave them on their own to find Christ and his offer of salvation? These are serious questions that must be considered.

The effects of church growth in a competitive system can be further seen in the trend of churches growing more because of transfer growth from other congregations than from conversion growth.¹¹ Because the church exists within a buyers' market, fueled by the want for more things, the church becomes just another thing to compare and "shop" for. Each church must look out for itself. Within this environment there is no room or time for consideration of how the actions of one church affect other Christian communities. Rather than the health and growth of all churches, and the universal church, the focus becomes on success and growth at an individual congregational level, often by whatever means necessary.

The pursuit of success, and how it is defined, is a further concern. Within materialism, success is equated with wealth, prestige, and power. The more a church has, the more successful it is deemed. But what if success was defined as "a person [or thing] doing what they were created to do."¹² In the case of the church, this would be witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ, in unity with other believers and congregations. By this definition, numerical growth becomes much less important, as ministry and conversion take primacy. But it is easy to become overly concerned with a growth by numbers. The book of Acts is pointed to as evidence that numbers matter, at least to some extent. However, the numerical information recorded in Acts is not always positive or inspiring. In looking closer it is clear that within Acts there is an emphasis on both quantitative and qualitative

¹¹ Gibbs, *Churchmorph*, 18.

¹² Chaney and Lewis, *Design*, 189.

growth.¹³ Luke is quite honest when he talks in Acts 1:13—15 of there being only eleven apostles left, and one hundred and twenty followers at the first prayer meeting. These are not the most encouraging numbers, yet, in spite of the low numerical success, growth happened as the message reached people with common backgrounds, cultures, and geographical locations.¹⁴ Despite small numbers, big growth took place.

There lies within the focus on numerical growth the temptation to give in to the fallacy that quantity will always measure quality. Throughout the rest of the New Testament greater attention is paid to the quality of the believers' faith than to the number. Much more is said about the state of their faith, character, and godliness.¹⁵ Where numbers are mentioned with relation to the church it is to indicate the way and speed with which the gospel spread after the ascension of Christ. Apart from the book of Acts, which recounts this spread, no mention is made as to the size of any of the early New Testament churches. When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi giving thanks to God for their faithfulness no mention was made of their size. It was the quality of faith within that community that was noteworthy, not the size of the gathering. The modern church would do well to bear this truth in mind when thinking of growth.

The Promotion of Convenience and Comfort

Flowing from this climate of congregational competition is the issue of transfer growth, as believers and non-believers alike “shop” for a church that will appeal to them. The primary causes for transfer growth are no doubt varied and complicated, but one problem underlying them is that of churches promoting convenience and comfort in order

¹³ Werning, *Strategy*, 10.

¹⁴ Trites, “Acts,” 3.

¹⁵ Guinness, “Idols,” lines 317 – 18.

to retain or obtain congregants.¹⁶ The promotion of convenience and comfort is seen in two ways; in a comfortable acceptance of transfer growth that allows congregations to place less emphasis on evangelism and outreach, and in the attitude that churchgoers take towards their faith community. If a church is growing numerically because of transfers from other congregations it becomes easy to set aside the discomfort and inconvenience of evangelism. Similarly, within the market of competitive church, if the faith community a person currently participates in becomes too uncomfortable a simple change can be made to another down the street.

Not only is transfer growth common, but often the receiving church is delighted to welcome transfers. Some pastors are willing to accept transfer growth as inevitable, and view it as quite helpful. They suggest that both the believer and the congregation benefit, as the believer becomes more likely to “grow and serve” and the congregation gains new people to help “serve those in need.”¹⁷ The author of this thesis is not suggesting that churches should fail to welcome or incorporate transfers, but rather that they should not be satisfied to grow only through transfer. Congregations also have a responsibility to ensure that they are not actively fishing for, or exploiting, congregants from other Christian communities. Transfer growth, while perhaps inevitable and helpful to a local congregation in a limited way, is far from the acceptable model. As Erik Raymond states, “if all we did was just trade sheep from church to church like fantasy football, eventually

¹⁶ It bears mentioning that there are many legitimate reasons to leave one’s church and to seek out another faith community. In view here are not those who leave because of doctrinal or moral concerns, or to seek Christian Education opportunities for their children, but rather those who simply desire to become part of the “newest” or “trendiest” congregations simply because of those labels.

¹⁷ Raymond, “Transfer,” lines 6 – 19. To be fair, he also assumes that this transfer growth is predominantly happening when people have “real non-disciplinary issues at other churches that require them to leave.”

the church would become obsolete.”¹⁸ The New Testament states clearly that God desires his kingdom to be spreading, and if churches simply become satisfied with transfer growth this is not really happening. The core aim and concern of church growth must be the expansion of the kingdom of God and the body of Christ through conversion.

Initiative and Enterprise, Inventiveness, and Novelty

A third assumption of materialistic church growth is that growth always follows the use of new methods and techniques as a way to obtain numerical success. Therefore, less emphasis is placed on the importance of ongoing and constant things such as discipleship in community. Discipleship in community is exchanged for attractional tactics that are designed to attract the attention, and therefore the loyalty, of uncommitted believers, persuading them to attend church.¹⁹ Some popular attractional ministry models in the recent past have included the inclusion of coffee shops in church foyers, moving worship services from churches to theatres, projecting the same service to multiple sites, and the creation of themed churches (i.e. the Elvis church, or the Biker church).

There is plenty of room within Christianity for innovation and inventiveness. As Os Guinness notes, the Christian faith cannot be rivalled, in terms of innovation and adaptation, amongst the world religions. However, he also notes that the danger of innovative genius is that it leaves the church prone to compromise with the spirit of the age.²⁰ New innovative methodologies can easily become viewed as the “salvation” of congregations. But, as Sally Gaze reminds us, it is the transforming grace of God that makes new life, new growth, and new depth take place in the church, with or without the

¹⁸ Raymond, “Transfer,” lines 22 – 23.

¹⁹ Gaze, *Mission-shaped*, 107.

²⁰ Guinness, “Idols,” lines 68 – 71.

addition of new ways or approaches.²¹ The tendency to equate growth with innovation and enterprise becomes particularly grave as leaders and congregations begin to talk, think, and act as if the mission they are undertaking, and the success that is occurring because of innovation, is their own and not God's.²² This attitude is often espoused by experts in church growth who declare that in order for churches to grow, leaders must decide that they "really, really want to grow... [because]the primary barrier to church growth is desire [or lack thereof]."²³ These sorts of statements take the impetus and causation of growth within the church out of the hands of God and into the hands of ministers and congregations. This is, no doubt, a dangerous and faulty line of thinking.

Christocentric Church Growth: An Ecumenical Approach

In contrast to accepting a focus on individual congregations, Christocentric church growth is an ecumenically concerned perspective. Within this model the question that must be answered is, "do I care about the growth of God's *whole* church, or about the growth of *my* church?" Christocentric church growth remembers that the kingdom of God is larger than any one congregation. It acknowledges that churches are to be working together towards the same goal instead of competing. This goal is the salvation of souls as they witness to an alternate way of living. Paul does not discuss Christ as the head of many bodies, but of one body. The challenge lies in finding the place of each congregation within the whole of the Church.

²¹ Gaze, *Mission-shaped*, 103.

²² Gaze, *Mission-shaped*, 5.

²³ Warren, "Eight Steps", lines 6 – 7.

Allison Trites suggests that what made the early church a successful witness was the cohesiveness of their unity.²⁴ Similarly, unity of purpose will be important today. In a practical sense the early church was very divided, with different factions preferring different apostles. But what was not factious was the centrality of the message of Christ in its life together. The very fact that such diverse groups of people would all strive to unite under one banner, followers of the way, provided witness to the culture around it that Jesus transforms and reforms his disciples as they live out the kingdom of God. The attempt of the church to be united in spite of its diversity is meant to reflect the unique diversity that exists in perfect unity within the Trinity. If the church of North America is truly concerned about growth through conversions, then it must be prepared to work together in unity and purpose. In working together the witness of each individual congregation becomes greater, and the kingdom of God expands.

Loyalty to the Gospel

Flowing from this unity of purpose and message, Christocentric church growth requires loyalty to the gospel. The temptation is to stop at the concept of preaching, teaching, and living in ways that are biblically focused. This is but one facet. Loyalty to the gospel is also seen in the church's thinking about what the church is, how it lives, and what it understands to be true about the world. Key to the church's thinking about identity is a defined theology of what the church is to be like. In other words, there is a need to be loyal and faithful in theology and theological application. Unfortunately, within the church growth movement, and its literature, theology is relegated to a marginal

²⁴ Trites, "Acts," 14.

place, supplanted by methodology or technique.²⁵ This supplanting is seen in the elevation of focus upon methodology and technique above all, including theology and theological application. The challenges posed by this disproportionate emphasis upon technique as opposed to theological identity poses many questions. If the church does not have an idea of its theological purpose and the ramifications of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension driving their praxis, then how can it be sure it will not go off track? What does such a neglect of theological thought say about God's place in the process of growth?

Dispensing the Largesse of Restored Relationships

Keeping the church's relationship with God in mind, church growth should reflect that the church of God is most truly and fully the church when it lives, thrives, and pulses with God's truths and resources.²⁶ This is best demonstrated in the language, actions, and attitudes of the church towards other believers and communities of believers.²⁷ The church as a dispenser of largesse is not something that is typically discussed. However, if largesse is seen as being the act of liberally giving something to another, there can be no doubt that God dispenses great largesse to his church through grace.²⁸ It was suggested in Chapter One that some of the largesse the church has to liberally dispense of is that of rich, whole, renewed, and gracious relationships; with God and with one another. These relationships must be talked about, must be lived out, and must be intentionally cultivated. While it seems obvious, Chaney and Lewis remind us that in order to grow

²⁵ Guinness, "Idols," lines 112 – 114. It is alarming how infrequently the nature and role of the church is discussed in Church Growth literature. This further begs the questions, "who's church is it really?"

²⁶ Guinness, "Idols," lines 174 – 75.

²⁷ Several Scriptures come to mind on this theme; Philippians 2:1 – 4, Ephesians 2 and 4, and Jesus' prayer for the unity of his future believers in John 17.

²⁸ "largesse" <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/largesse>

through conversion, and not primarily because of transfer, Christians must go out into the world and meet unchurched people.²⁹ Having met those people, they must in turn invite them to church, where those new people will be able to experience the largesse of a restored relationship with God and holistic relationships with others. This requires those within the church to leave the comfort of weekly programs behind, and to set out into the world as witnesses to the unique nature of the body of Christ and the message of salvation and new life.

Exclusive, Honourable Discipleship

As the church sets out into the world offering the generous blessing of renewed relationships, the practice of exclusivity becomes the key to its witness. Rather than selling faith and participation in the church as a commodity, the church needs to discover the power of discipleship as a countercultural lifestyle.³⁰ Discipleship requires Christians to be exclusive in terms of who they worship and follow daily. Contrary to their neighbours, this exclusivity will be seen in their honourable discipleship as they become servants, display humility, and courageously declare their love of God and his love of them. As the body of Christ together, congregations can encourage those seeking a different way of life to give Christ a chance by together celebrating God's everyday presence, and sharing that celebration with others.³¹ As a community the church of Christ will grow as the ministry of evangelism is understood as a ministry of introductions and not a sales pitch.³² Howard Hanchey reminds us that "God is always about the business of

²⁹ Chaney and Lewis, *Design*, 51.

³⁰ Gaze, *Mission-shaped*, 108.

³¹ Hanchey, *Growth*, 10.

³² Hanchey, *Growth*, 11.

bringing folks to church.³³ As the united witness and community of Christ, it is the church's privilege to take part in that ministry of growth.

By now it has become clear that the aims and methods of church growth under the influence of materialism differ greatly from those seen, observed, and inspired by a Scriptural consideration of Christ and the early church movement. Dismissed is any practice that encourages or embodies a competitive, convenient, or comfortable method of growth. Churches become no longer satisfied with simply growing in numbers through transfer from other congregations, but rather desire and strive to see new conversions lead to the expansion of the whole church. The exclusivity of the church's discipleship is lived out honourably, gracious relationships are freely offered, and the gospel of Jesus Christ reigns supreme. The church, as witness, will delight in the privilege and honour of enabling others to experience the wonderful transformation of life inside the Christian faith.

³³ Hanchey, *Growth*, 14.

Chapter 4- Leadership: CEO or Disciple Among Disciples?

Having considered the effects of materialism on evangelism and church growth, this discussion now considers the topic of leadership. “Leadership is such a broad term that it can die the death of a thousand qualifications and definitions.”¹ There are certainly a number of ways in which this topic could be approached. The emphasis of this thesis is on the role of the primary minister within a congregation. This decision has been made for several reasons. 1) It is the primary minister role that is the subject of most of the Christian leadership material. 2) The ministries of evangelism and church growth are undertaken by particular congregations under the leadership of the primary minister. 3) The role of primary minister is where the CEO and business mentality is most clearly seen.

This discussion begins with a look at the commerce system values of industry, efficiency, and thrift which flow from materialism. Consideration is given to the ways in which the CEO or business management model of leadership ensconces these values above all others and the conflict that it raises for the church. The discussion then considers the guardian values of hierarchy, fortitude, and a rich use of leisure looking at how these values are in line with a Christocentric focus on transformation and sanctification in leadership. The model under consideration in this section is that of the pastor as a disciple amongst disciples, leading through their practice of followership under the headship of Jesus Christ.

¹ Chandler, *Courageous*, 8.

Materialism and a Commerce Approach to Leadership

At the outset of this section it is important to state the belief that the church should not just simply and uncritically follow the leadership insights and models of the business world. Yet, it must also be recognized that there are indeed some helpful things within that model that can be transferred into the church context. For example, the idea of “values-based” leadership which focuses on the gifting of others and the sharing of work is complimentary to a Christocentric practice of leadership.² What is under scrutiny in this section is the success driven, task driven model of leadership that places the majority of authority in the hands of one single, human leader.

The leadership literature of Saddleback and Willow Creek defines a good leader as first and foremost a good manager. The qualities listed for effective ministers read like the ad for any CEO; visionary capacity, inspiring communication, strategic planning, organizational agility, initiative, ego strength, and personal resilience are just some examples.³ The dominant emphasis is on vision casting, vision communication, goal setting, and strategic planning. While it is true that leaders need some sense of the future, what is unfortunate is that no mention is made of pastoral care, theological reflection, or relationship building. It is true that management is one of the ways that leadership manifests itself in the church. Within the listing of gifts Paul clearly mentions the administrator-but as David Bartlett fairly asks, was the administrator also the preacher, the teacher, or were these three different people? Does managerial, administrative work need to be done by the pastor, or can it be given to groups within the church?⁴ Don

² Gibbs, *Leadership Next*, 21.

³ Beaumont, *Competencies*, 44 and McCollum, *CEO*, 29.

⁴ Forney, *New Testament*, 78.

Cousins of Willow Creek certainly assumes that the responsibility for management lies with the minister. In addressing pastors overwhelmed by the need to manage he again takes up the theme of vision casting and goal setting. What is missing is any allusion or statement of the need for all of these things to come from God. In fact, in the two pages written on the subject, God appears only once and no mention is made of the Bible or theological consideration.⁵ When theology finally does come into the discussion, it is in a final, brief paragraph.

When management becomes the primary task of a minister and the success of the church is based on their success as a leader, the competition and dependence upon human effort found in materialism begins to sneak into the church. As John Roxborough so poignantly reminds us, “management culture is a system of organization which is geared for success in the face of competition and where the essential metrics of that success are financial. Can a system to that end also serve the needs of the Christian church operating with different values and with a different ‘bottom line’?”⁶ In the managerial model which views the minister like a CEO, the minister is forced to compete with regards to; preaching style, leadership style, charisma, education and other markers of efficiency. This, by extension, leads to congregations competing against one another. The dominant focus on task will also lead to the neglect or abandonment of more pastoral and personable aspects of ministry. If the minister is first and foremost the manager, how do they minister to the woman with throat cancer, or the hungry family down the street?

This managerial leadership style is seen in the centralization of decision making, goal setting, and vision casting power into the role of one person, the minister. The role of the

⁵ Anderson et al. *Management*, 26 – 27.

⁶ Roxborough, *Leadership*, lines 80 – 84.

community in determining the direction of God's church is practically and plainly denied.⁷ This centralization flows from a misunderstanding about the nature of the church. When viewed primarily as an institution, rather than an organism, it becomes acceptable for one person to wield most of the power. Alan Hirsch notes that within institutions "it is the human institution that confers the power to an individual to perform a certain task."⁸ This is concerning for two reasons, 1) it denies the power of God to call and authorize leaders, and 2) people become defined by their role within the institution rather than their place within the organism of Christ's body. Also, no relationship is required between the leader or head of the institution and the other members. By contrast, in an organism, each member is essential to the wholeness of the being. They must know one another well in order to function well. Authority lies with the head, which in the case of the church is clearly Jesus Christ. Functions of members are honoured, but do not define them.⁹ Rather than an institution or simply an organization, the church is "first of all a fellowship, and secondly, an organization...the foundational language is fellowship-love, not organization-structure."¹⁰

In order to convince his readers of the validity of a CEO styled leadership, Bill Hybels in *Courageous Leadership* attempts to force the ministry of Jesus into the modern managerial paradigm. In doing so he speaks of Jesus' well planned evangelism strategy that proceeded in concentric circles, and of Jesus' three year recruitment plan as he built the "dream team."¹¹ While there is no doubt Jesus employed some strategy to his ministry, it is hardly fair to characterize it as managerial or CEO styled in

⁷ Anderson et al. *Management*, 59.

⁸ Hirsch, *Forgotten*, 117.

⁹ Hoeldtke, *Theology*, 36 – 37.

¹⁰ Forney, *New Testament*, 79.

¹¹ Hybels, *Courageous Leadership*, 71 – 72.

implementation. Often he was inefficient and unpredictable by modern standards. His practice of suddenly deciding without warning to leave a place where his ministry was meeting some success (Mk 8:1—10) would not qualify as efficient or wise in strategic planning in the managerial model. The ministry that Jesus is seen doing is primarily that of teaching, and signs and miracles. He did not elevate or reward the ambitious, and in speaking to his own disciples who requested power and leadership, he invited them to share in the cup of his suffering (Mk 10:35—44). Elevating their ability to share in the cup of his suffering is hardly the character of a predominantly task, vision, and strategy driven leader. When we look to Christ we see that leadership involves choosing to “spend” oneself on behalf of others to “nurture, support, and build up the one with whom [they] are in relationship.”¹² What is found is a picture of a thoughtful, intentional, and relational leader who had a vision, God’s vision, for his life and ministry.

Christocentric Leadership

Leadership under a Christocentric model looks quite different. It takes seriously Leith Anderson’s belief that rather than being run like a business the church must be run “with a commitment to people and a passion to fulfill the church’s mission.”¹³ A competitive, managerial model sets aside commitment to people, replacing it with a commitment to efficiency, industriousness, and task. Clearly another form of leadership must be considered by the church. As the need for a different leadership style in the church is conceded, it is interesting to note that reconsideration is also taking place in the business world. Eddie Gibbs points out that, the emphasis in the for-profit world is leaving behind the management driven approach to leadership and has begun to speak of humility and

¹² Hoeldtke, *Theology*, 25.

¹³ Anderson et al. *Management*, 51.

servant leadership.¹⁴ If even the business world is beginning to reject the autocratic model of efficient, industrious, single leader driven practice, why on earth would the church insist on maintaining it?

Key to a Christocentric practice of leadership is a healthy understanding and appreciation of the hierarchy of the church. Most leaders in the church, including those critically engaged with in the section above, would concede to the reality that Christ is the head of the church. But what does that actually mean and look like? Regarding this reality Hoeldtke reminds us that, “He is not head emeritus. He is not some titular ‘chairman of the board’ who is given nodding acknowledgement while others run His organization. He is not the retired founder of the firm.”¹⁵ Christ is to be an active part of the life of the church, leading it through his Holy Spirit, informing the decisions that are made and the actions that are taken (through consideration of his own example), and providing the source of the church’s values and way of living. The vision of a leader within the church can only be Christ’s vision. Whatever the role of human leaders within the church may be, it is never to replace or supersede the role of Christ as head (Eph. 1:22—23).

If Jesus is the head, then every member of the church, including the minister, lives as a follower of him. As Gene Wilkes points out, when we look at the gospels we see Jesus showing greater interest in whether or not his disciples can and will follow him than in their ambition to hold places of power (Mark 10:35—40).¹⁶ Anderson further supports

¹⁴ Gibbs, *Leadership Next*, 22. This move towards servant leadership is so prevalent that it even features as the subject in an online post on Forbes magazine, May 1, 2013.

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/hbsworkingknowledge/2013/05/01/why-isnt-servant-leadership-more-prevalent/>

¹⁵ Hoeldtke, *Theology*, 14.

¹⁶ Wilkes, *Jesus*, 73.

this assertion by noting that within the gospels Jesus says comparatively little about leadership and a great deal about followership. “Jesus did not invite Peter, Andrew, James, and John to become leaders immediately. He said, ‘Follow Me.’”¹⁷ That is the same invitation that Jesus makes to Christians today, and no one should embody a positive response to that call more than the Christian leader. It is as followers of Jesus that leaders are transformed by God and can begin the work of equipping others for transformation. A large part of this equipping takes place through modeling the transformation that Christ brings about in the life of his followers within the life of the minister. The Christian leader then must be a fellow disciple among other disciples.

Robert Dale addresses the need for leaders to be first and foremost followers in his article, “Leadership-Followership: The Church’s Challenge.” In this article he helpfully demonstrates the ways in which the disciples’ following of Jesus strengthened and complimented their future ministry as leaders. He points out the way in which Peter’s following Jesus caused him to mature and become less impetuous in time as his trust in Jesus and his plan increased.¹⁸ In the case of Andrew, as a follower he implicitly trusted Jesus for direction on a consistent basis. As a leader he was quick to view problems as another opportunity to introduce someone to Jesus.¹⁹ Even Thomas, who is often looked down on in the church, receives gracious attention from Dale. Thomas was brave enough to take the initiative in asking Jesus difficult questions. As a leader, he showed remarkable devotion to the direction that Jesus had set.²⁰ In the same way, the active followership of Jesus’ modern disciples is intended to impact, shape, and inform their

¹⁷ As quoted in Wilkes, *Jesus*, 60.

¹⁸ Dale, *Followership*, 25.

¹⁹ Dale, *Followership*, 26.

²⁰ Dale, *Followership*, 27–8.

leadership style and approach. It is a shame that the need for followership amongst leaders is so rarely addressed in the vast amount of Christian leadership material being published. The following warning, given by McCollum, should not be ignored. “If they are not careful, senior pastors can lose perspective...and consider themselves to be running fiefdoms.”²¹

Having recognized Jesus as the head of the church, Christian leaders should look to him to learn how to lead. As they do so, the relational and servant aspect of the ministry of Jesus should be given special attention. “No Christology can ignore the fact that Christ ‘emptied himself’; or that, being rich, he made himself poor.”²² Paul, in Philippians 2, goes to great lengths to clearly communicate the way in which Christ accepted the limitations of humanity in order to save us. Accordingly, no Christocentric approach to leadership can overlook the sacrificial and serving nature of Jesus as leader and head of the Church. In Jesus’ sacrificial acts; washing feet, healing the sick, associating with the outcast, and accepting death in spite of his innocence we see a leadership that is “non-coercive power that influences people through sheer spiritual power.”²³ Unlike the managerial leadership of materialism, servant leadership involves setting aside position in order to do what is necessary and is clearly modeled by Jesus in situations such as the upper room and the crucifixion.²⁴ Within the church this means that far from expecting to be elevated, the minister rolls up their sleeves and goes about the ministry of the church alongside others. No task within the life of the church is viewed to be below them. Their

²¹ McCollum, *CEO*, 29.

²² MacLeod, *Christ*, 212.

²³ Hirsch, *Forgotten*, 117.

²⁴ Gibbs, *Leadership Next*, 114.

concern is for the people whom God has placed within their sphere of influence as they seek to model for their congregants the serving nature of Christ.

Not only was Jesus' leadership characterized by service of others, it was also a deeply relational leadership. Dale draws attention to the way in which Jesus cultivated his relationships with the disciples on an ongoing basis, regularly inviting his disciples to "be with him," (Mk 3:14—15).²⁵ By spending time with him they were observing and participating in the kingdom. Relationships matter more than many leaders are willing to admit. Both Hirsch and Robert Cueni affirm the need for relationships, attributing the level and quality of one's authority as a leader to the quality of their relationships.²⁶ As Hirsch puts it, moral authority comes from our personal integrity, our relationship with God, and the wealth of our relationships with those whom we lead.²⁷ It is at this juncture that the guardian system principle of making rich use of leisure becomes quite useful. Leaders who desire to have strong, healthy, and productive relationships with their congregations must invest time in getting to know them, not just through ministry, but as people. Viewing leisure time spent with others as a key component of one's leadership strategy is quite countercultural. One might argue that nothing is getting "done" when a leader and some followers have coffee, or go for a hike together. However, as can be seen with Jesus and his disciples, some of the best relationship building and authority formation took place as they rested and ate. The high value that Jesus placed on relationship and people, can be further noted in his encounters with; the woman at the well (John 4), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1—10), and the woman who anointed his feet (Luke

²⁵ Dale, *Followership*, 27.

²⁶ Cueni, *Disciples*, 226.

²⁷ Hirsch, *Forgotten*, 118.

7:35—50). Any Christocentric approach to leadership then must place a high value on the importance of people and relationships.

This discussion will finally look at the role of fortitude in Christocentric leadership. Throughout the gospels, there is no doubt that Jesus keeps the vision of God the Father in view at all times. He is a fully obedient participant in the unfolding plan of salvation. Yet, it should not be assumed that Jesus' task or leadership was always easy. A quick look at his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:42) shows that following through on what he knew had to happen required significant fortitude on Jesus' part. Yet, in spite of the difficulties of his task, he went through with it and as a result the church reaps the benefits of salvation through grace. As leaders who are first and foremost followers of Christ, ministers likewise must pray and hope for the fortitude to follow the course set out before them by God. Leading, and following, will not always be easy. Leading and following where God calls will often cause discomfort and dissonance with the dominant culture, such as materialism. Early church leaders, just like leaders today, knew it was true that sometimes the path God calls leaders to take will be steep, lonely, and difficult. One leader felt this reality so keenly that he wrote to the Hebrew church encouraging them not to give up, and to continue moving forward. In Hebrews 12:1-3 all the saints, and leaders amongst them, are encouraged to run with endurance. They were to persevere in a lifestyle that was different than those around them, characterised by gratitude to God and to Christ.²⁸ Leaders looking at the example of Christ can rest in the knowledge that God knows the conditions in which they will find themselves, and he sends Christ on

²⁸ DeSilva, *Perseverance*, 427.

ahead of them.²⁹ Armed with this confidence they can then carry on leading and following in the new, exciting, and transforming direction that God sends them. Their success and authority does not rest in themselves, but in their faithful obedience to God and his vision.

Throughout this chapter it has been demonstrated that Christian leadership is best seen as the journey of a fellow disciple among disciples. Through the practice of followership, the leadership of individuals is greatly increased. As leaders follow the example of Christ they will engage in servant leadership that focuses on the importance of well nurtured relationships as the means of authority. Not only will they serve others, they will also pray for and display the fortitude to follow Christ and the vision of God wherever it may lead. Gone from Christian leadership will be the cold and impersonal, individualistic, task driven managerial models. Concerns for efficiency and industry will be secondary, as the quality of one's discipleship becomes the truer test of one's leadership.

²⁹ DeSilva, *Perseverance*, 429.

Chapter 5: Reclaiming the Church's Identity

This thesis has sought to show the complex and total way in which materialism skews three dominant parts of the church's identity and mission. The effects of materialism on the church's identity have been shown to be significant and far reaching. While the syncretism of materialism into the life and identity of the church may concern, or even discourage Christians, it is not particularly surprising. As John Stackhouse Jr. notes, "because of the confusion and enticement and oppression in ourselves and our surroundings, our lives often do not reflect what we profess about the mission of God and the vocation Christ has given us."¹ In a similar vein, David Platt fears that, "individualism, materialism, and universalism," have neutered American Christians' witness.² Acknowledging these realities, the question that must now come under consideration is, "how does the church move forward?" "How does change take place within the identity formation of churches and Christians, and in their living out of the faith in the world?" The concept of witness as it arises from viewing the church as an alternative community can be used to answer these questions. This witness is demonstrated through three theological underpinnings; the incarnation of Christ and our attempt to practice incarnation, the reality of existing for others as demonstrated through active service of the world, and the theological truth of transformation through the power of Christ as the church becomes a new creation. These concepts will be further explored below.

¹ Stackhouse Jr., *Making*, 313.

² As quoted in Anderson, *Radicals*, 20.

The Church as Witness

There is a tendency within the church to think about witness as something the church sometimes does, alongside worship, service, and other programs, or more honestly as something that the church ought to do, but generally avoids. Witness is at the very least something the church and Christians feel like they should be doing, but generally avoid at all costs. To think of witness as simply a verbal or written retelling of the gospel story beginning with sin and ending with conversion, is to miss the point. The first active step the church can take in moving forward and away from materialism is to stop thinking of witness as something the church *does* (or doesn't do) and begin thinking about it as the essence of what the church *is*. The distinction between witness as something the church does and something it is, is an important one. In speaking of the church as being witness, one begins to unpack the identity and nature of the church within the world. The church is witness amidst the cultural milieu of the place where it finds itself. Identity is difficult to change or alter once it has been given. Witness as something that is simply done, on the other hand, is much easier to abandon as it becomes an optional activity. Darrel Guder has been a dominant voice in proclaiming that witness is the comprehensive definition of what a Christian is.³

If witness is what a Christian is, then it must also be what the church as a gathering of Christians is to be. Consider the ways in which Jesus describes his followers within the gospels. He speaks of them as being salt, light that shines forth in the darkness, and yeast that spreads throughout the world and improves it. All of this living is to be done in such a way that it will cause others to "see [their] good works and praise your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:13-16, Mt. 13:33). Those outside the church can only see the good works

³ Guder, *Missional*, 428.

and praise God when those works are in marked contrast to the rest of society. Again at the time of his ascension, Jesus lays before the disciples the task of being witness. The language of “you will be” is identity giving and more than just incidental. It was Christ’s intention that his followers would be witnesses to the kingdom of God and that this would form their identity. The church’s life together then must permeate and flow into the sent-out and scattered life of the church as it lives as witness to God’s kingdom and salvation. What is known and experienced within the body of Christ is to be practiced and shown in the world. “As we share in the life and worship of the Church, through fellowship, word, and sacrament, we indwell the story and from within that story we seek to be the voice and the hands of Jesus for our time and place.”⁴ The way the church deals with grief or discipline, the ways in which particular members conduct their businesses, the decisions a congregation make about cleaning supplies and landscaping- all of these things, and so much more are to be tangible marks of witness to the role of Christ in our communities.

Transformation and New Creation

In seeking to be witness there are three theological concepts that must be considered and applied. These three theological concepts equip the church for the task of challenging the practices of materialism. The first theological concept is that of transformation and new creation. Fundamental to the witness of the church, in word and deed, is the reality of having been transformed and made new in Christ. This transformation affects the spiritual future of Christians, but also affects the life and mission of the church as a congregation, and as part of the universal church. The way in which Christians think

⁴ Newbigin, *Gospel*, 151.

about themselves as communities and individuals must be transformed. Karl Barth argued that the classic definition of a Christian as someone who enjoys the benefits of salvation needed to be replaced with the realization of each Christian's vocation to act as witness.⁵ The power and reality of Christ must transform souls, the way in which the church thinks about its identity, and the way in which the church lives and moves within society. As an alternative community that embodies witness to the grace and transforming power of God, the church becomes a sort of object lesson for the society around it.

Transformation must be total and ongoing in nature. The role of seeing and hearing is an integral part of living out the transformation. As one sees the new life being lived and hears the narrative outlining why the change has been made, transformation begins to be embodied and observed.⁶ Accordingly, both action and education through narration become of paramount importance. Preaching and the crafting of worship services are two of the predominant ways in which Christians will encounter and be reminded of the transformation and new creation that they are to be embodying. Yet, as Chan notes, "all too often the modern sermon is singularly calculated at satisfying the consumer demands of the modern churchgoer."⁷

Preachers seeking to inspire congregants to desire transformation will need to be brave in declaring the entire gospel, even the uncomfortable parts, with a passion and grace that only God can give. The importance of solid preaching as a form of adult Christian education is vital. The Search Institute of Minneapolis found in a recent study that the most significant factor which contributed to the transformation of mature, well

⁵ Guder, *Missional*, 428.

⁶ Belo, *Materialism*, 249

⁷ Chan, *Spiritual*, 117.

balanced, well integrated Christians was adult Christian education.⁸ What a shame then, that so little time and energy is given to this important task. The process of transformation that the church is called to is not a simple one. It is important to note that the transformation that takes place may be characterized “as much by disruption, change, conflict and adversity, as it is by planning and strategy.”⁹ Yet, transformation is truly worth pursuing for, “if the Church is to be effective in advocating and achieving a new social order in the nation, it must itself be a new social order.”¹⁰

Incarnation

The action that flows from transformation has much to do with the theological concept of incarnation. Just as Christ entered into his time and place and embodied the truth of the kingdom of God, so the church, as a people under transformation, must begin to think of itself as incarnational as well. Undoubtedly the nature of the church or any individual within it is inferior to that of Christ, but the idea of indwelling a place, of being with the people, and of relating to those around us is something the church can embody. It is quite tempting in reading about other churches, such as Saddleback, Willow Creek, or the Meeting House, to simply attempt to supplant their strategy into a different location. However, each church is in a very particular place. Far from being able to apply a strategy that worked somewhere else, each congregation has the exciting task of figuring out how to witness in their unique setting. Action will be a significant way in which the church does this. The church in essence has before it the exciting and yet challenging task of acting its way into a new way of thinking.¹¹ This new way of acting

⁸ Stackhouse Jr., *Making*, 315.

⁹ VanGelder, *Corporate*, 445.

¹⁰ Newbigin, *Gospel*, 231.

¹¹ Hirsch, *Forgotten*, 123.

and thinking flows from God. It was God the Father who sent God the Son to carry out the work of reconciliation; it is God the Father and the Son who sent the Holy Spirit to gather, empower and send out the church to “be Christ’s witnesses.”¹²

What does the action of incarnation look like? Practicing incarnation as a form of witness involves activities like cultivating and expressing the virtue of hope in the face of violence as an expression of certainty that the kingdom of God is already present, and will in the future become consummated.¹³ In the midst of violence and talk of war, the church must continue to actively seek ways to work for and make peace. In 2003 a young couple in Durham, NC started Rutba House. Rutba is an intentional community that has come up with numerous practices that the community live out in their neighbourhood in order to challenge the worldliness of the church. These practices include showing hospitality to the stranger. They lament publically and privately, for racial divisions in the church and society, and pursue reconciliation. Care is expressed for God’s earth and every attempt is made to support local economies. They are peacemakers in the midst of the violence of their city, nation, and world. They also include more monastic marks such as sharing of finances and property.¹⁴ While Rutba house may not be a traditional congregation, they are embodying the kinds of incarnational activities that churches can and should be engaged in. In statements like “follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” or “give to everyone who begs from you,” or “in everything do to others as you would have them do to you,” Jesus is giving his disciples teachings that could be, and were to be embodied.¹⁵ It is as the church seeks to embody Christ’s teachings that it truly

¹² Guder, *Missional*, 425.

¹³ Chan, *Spiritual*, 103.

¹⁴ Hirsch, *Forgotten*, 112.

¹⁵ Brown Taylor, *Incarnation*, 39.

becomes a bright city on the hill displaying diversity in unity, cooperation, creativity and discipline rather than being “an anarchy of self-centred and small-minded individuals and factions.”¹⁶ As the church looks to the concerns of the marginalized, the forgotten, the hated, or the oppressed it proclaims with its actions the grace of God in the midst of the cruelty of our world.

Service to Others

A third important theological concept is that of the church existing to serve others. Unlike gyms, service clubs, or sports teams, which exist for their own benefit, the church exists for the world. Embodying this concept will once again require a significant transformation in the thinking of many Christians and communities of faith. There is a dominant attitude in church today that the church exists to fulfill the spiritual wants and needs of its members. Yet, as the discussion on evangelism and church growth demonstrated, the church is meant to be more concerned with inviting people to know and follow Christ, than with their own convenience, comfort, and satisfaction.

In order to serve the world, the church may find that it often has to go against the ways of the culture in order to encourage the culture to become what it is intended to be, seen through the serving model and witness of the church.¹⁷ The church exists for the world and when opposition to culture takes place, it is for the world's sake. The church is a community that is deeply concerned with the needs of its neighbourhood.¹⁸ At the same time, the church may also find that there are many places and things in the world which are already fulfilling-in a small way-the goals of the kingdom. An example would be the

¹⁶ Stackhouse Jr., *Making*, 330.

¹⁷ Metzger, *Word*, 95.

¹⁸ Newbigin, *Gospel*, 229.

excellent work done by various secular charities that provide emergency aid in times of disaster. Recognizing this care of the destitute, hungry, or homeless as being in line with the principles of God's kingdom, the church should frequently, and gladly, join in this good work. The witness of God's grace is expressed as much in what the church does do as in what it does not.

The church through service as witness calls the world back to the Word, Jesus Christ. In March 2013 *Christianity Today* featured an article entitled "Here Come the Radicals." This article examined the trend of a self-termed radical kind of Christianity; one that takes the gospel commandments and the exhortation to consider the needs of others first, quite seriously. The article also had as its topic the need for the church to serve the world, and consideration of how that might be done. The suggestion was made that while radical acts such as sharing property in common were certainly valid, Christian witness is much more complex than grand gestures of this nature. By the end of the article, Matthew Lee Anderson had come to the conclusion that, "we begin to fulfill the command not when we do something radical, extreme, over the top...but when in the daily ebb and flow of life, in our corporate jobs, in our middle-class neighborhoods... we stop to help those whom we meet in everyday life, reaching out in quiet, practical, and loving ways."¹⁹

The embracing and prayerful embodiment of the three theological concepts outlined above will go a long way in beginning to reshape the identity and practice of the North American church. The journey will no doubt be one fraught with challenge and discouragement, yet it is one that the church embarks on with the presence of its gracious head, Jesus Christ. The church has never been, and will never be alone. The identity to

¹⁹ Anderson, *Radicals*, 25.

which it has been called is beautiful in its simplicity. May the church prayerfully and eagerly embrace the call to be an alternative community.

Conclusion

As this thesis draws to an end, it bears saying that the identity which the church has been given as witness to the gracious, transforming work of Christ is worth taking seriously. “The church is elected to responsibility, called to be the church to and for the world-not in order to save it or conquer it or even transform it, but to serve it by showing what redeemed human community and culture look like, as modeled by the One whose cultural work led him to the cross.”¹ As the church seeks to do this it must depend fully on the power of God through the Holy Spirit. It must look constantly to Christ its head, and it must seek vision for the future from God. The temptation to accommodate or alter its identity to be more in line with forces such as materialism is a grave one. Yet, recognizing the shortcomings of such philosophies the church now, more than ever, must hold firmly to the gospel.

Jane Jacobs’ conception that there are different systems from which groups can act, and her explanation that two of these systems; commerce and guardian, are incompatible with one another, has provided a framework through which this discussion could take place. Through consideration of the values and characteristics of materialism and a Christocentric ecclesiology and engaging with the two system framework of Jane Jacobs it has been shown that materialism and Christocentric ecclesiology are fully incompatible. In each chapter the materialistically informed practices of evangelism, church growth, and leadership have been examined and shown to be of a different system, and thus incompatible with the Christocentric approaches to these same three aspects of church life.

¹ Smith, *Desiring*, 207.

When the values of materialism are brought into the church's practice of evangelism the result is acquiescing to the temptation to market Jesus, thus making the Saviour and the gospel little more than another commodity to be accepted or rejected and consumed. In contrast it has been shown that when viewed as an invitation to discipleship and new life, the practice of evangelism is more in line with the call of the gospel and the life of Christ. Similarly, church growth has been shown to be negatively affected by the influence of materialism, fostering competition between churches and focusing primarily on comfort and convenience. When the focus of church growth becomes Christ and his ministry the church makes faithfulness to the gospel and the headship of Christ their first priority. Finally it has been demonstrated that a CEO or managerial model of leadership negates the Christocentric model of leading through service of others and authority based on relationships. As the church seeks to more fully embrace its identity as witness it must do so through the lens of transformation, incarnation and service of others. The church is called into being and sent out into the world by God. It is the hope of this thesis that the church will ever increasingly embrace the wonder and challenge of its unique identity.

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