

Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

February 10 2012: What Do Pastors Mean When They Say "Church"?

Just as a quick throw-it-out-there, I have heard preachers utter this statement:

A person cannot love a man and yet hate his bride. In the same way, a person cannot love Christ and hate His church.

This line is used against those who criticize the pastor's management of the local, institutional church of which he is the pastor. The unspoken implication of this idea is that the person who "hates the church" is not really a true Christian.

Alright, let's start. If it is the case that the pastor is trying to deflect criticism of his policies, and he is indirectly denouncing his critics as not being true Christians, when he says, "church", he is actually referring to *his church*, or the local body which employs him as pastor. In this case, he conflates *his local church* with *The Church, the Bride of Christ*. This is of course fallacious, but fallacious reasoning and other forms of rhetoric and sophistry are well-established tools in the typical preacher's bag.

This confusion takes other shapes. Often, a church will undertake a project for evangelism, to "win the lost", or youth activities to attract more "lost" teenagers, and that sort of thing. They will launch these programs to enhance *their church*. Should they make a new convert, the assumption is that the new believer will attend *their church*; it would be the farthest thing from the church member's mind to recommend a different church (maybe closer, maybe with a ministry more aligned to the new believer's life setting). I've never known or heard a pastor encourage his members to consider this. This focus on the pastor's own church body is a major reason it is so difficult to undertake evangelism projects ("crusades") or youth rallies or other multi-church activities - every pastor is afraid that potential converts

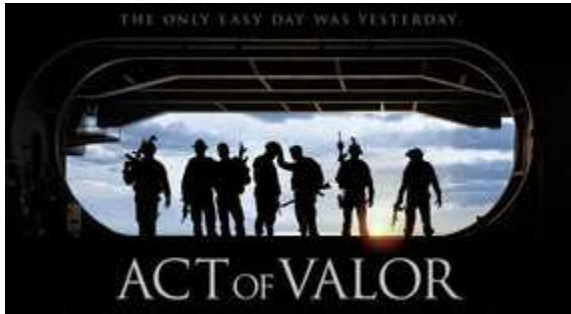
will be "stolen" by a "competing" church. When such large-scale events occur, it is almost always because a parachurch organization (like Billy Graham Evangelistic Association or Josh McDowell Ministries) does the setup, and even then, it is difficult to get churches to participate.

The fallacy is resolved with the understanding that *the local church* is NOT equivalent to *the Bride of Christ*. The Apostle's Creed (which we are memorizing right now as a family) says, "I believe an holy catholic church" (Article IX), but we certainly understand that "catholic" refers not to "the Roman Catholic Church", but to the worldwide universal assembly of believers. It is in this context that I can "hate" a local church (or, rather, disapprove of its actions or values or the policies of its pastor) but love and embrace the larger Church. I will note that the Church includes not only the local church of which I may be a member (even if not in good standing), but other churches, and independent Bible studies or smallgroups or house churches, and also those parachurch ministries that so often are more effective at extending the Kingdom than those inward-focused tradition-bound self-promoting individual local churches.

The final note I'll make of this whole line of critic-deflecting argument by church officials is that they pretty much said the same thing of Luther and the Reformers. I don't presume to put myself in the same camp with Luther and Hus and Wycliffe, but it is manifestly obvious that they loved the True Church even as they were denounced - and in some cases martyred - by the "church" that felt the bite of their criticism. Now, as in their day, the church is in dire need of Reformers.

Love for the Bride of Christ, the universal Church, the worldwide fellowship of unbelievers, is not reduced or negated by analysis, criticism, even rejection, of a local church, the traditions of contemporary evangelicalism, or the model of the institutional established church.

February 10 2012: Act of Valor



The radio show [Hugh Hewitt \[1\]](#) was promoting the new film [Act of Valor \[2\]](#) as very authentic and using real Navy SEALs and intense realistic battle action, so I was already inclined to see it. Then my brother called to invite us along with he and his oldest son and my

dad, so now I had an excuse.

It is very authentic. There are real Navy SEALs. The battle action is realistic and intense. It powerfully conveys the sacrifices - in some cases, the Ultimate Sacrifice - by our servicemen in the defense of our nation against implacable and resourceful enemies. I left the theatre quite moved.

Part of that sense of being "moved" was reflecting on the commitment of those servicemen. Since I am employed in the defense industry, I have worked with Army soldiers and Navy and Marines officers, and I certainly recognized the same dedication (and, unfortunately, the salty language), so I can testify to the authenticity.

But part of the "moved" was irritation, even anger, over the formula line that the officer says to the hero's widow in the last scene: "The president appreciates his sacrifice", knowing, of course, that the current president would most certainly NOT appreciate a soldier's or sailor's sacrifice of his life unless it improved his chances for reelection.

Which thought leads to the next: How much does this nation really deserve the dedication and self-sacrificing service? What are they fighting and dying for in places like Iraq and Afghanistan (and maybe now, central Africa, maybe soon Syria)? So unborn babies can be killed? So homosexuals can be married? So half-dressed middle school girls can walk around draped over their gangster-wannabe boyfriends in shopping malls surrounded by excessive consumption? So baby boomers with pensions crippling over-regulated companies or cash-strapped governments can retire to play golf and have their lives unnaturally prolonged by subsidized healthcare? So politicians can secure their next term in office by burying the nation deeper in debt and destroying the future for the very children of those dedicated servicemen? It certainly seems to me that such sacrifice requires or

assumes a foundational public morality and recognition of national purpose beyond satisfying selfish appetites.

It goes further than that. The film begins and ends with the squad's lieutenant writing a letter to the deceased man's infant son, extolling manliness and urging the boy to service and to not fear death, and otherwise expressing other traditional virtues commonly recognized in and by the armed forces. First, where do those virtues spring from? They must originate in a truth model that entails a transcendent morality - namely, the Christian foundational truth model of the United States and the Western world. Second, how long can those virtues survive in a culture that is abandoning, even suppressing that foundational truth model? Even in the armed forces, the cultural powers are forcing non-traditional and actually immoral concepts like accepting homosexuality and placing women in combat roles, while chaplains are forced to constrain themselves within politically-correct boundaries. The services have retained vestiges of that Christian foundation longer than the larger culture, but this condition cannot last. How long can it be before professional warriors become essentially mercenaries, serving a role for pay, or even out of a relish for cruelty and violence (like the video games that the next generation of soldiers are being brought up on)?

And finally, what hope is there for the larger culture, that both is protected by and erodes the virtue of the armed forces, to experience any transformation given the current nature of the only proponent of that foundational Christianity - the church? One of the basic principles of my critique about the church is that our society is dying, and the church is still doing the same stuff it has always done. It is failing to be "light and salt". Are those soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines fighting and dying so that "church people" can continue to attend "worship services", sing songs, and expect flowery but ineffective sermons? Furthermore, our nation's warriors train for years with the clear objective in mind of defending the nation's interests and the Constitution, and enter battle willing to sacrifice all to achieve their objective. Has "Sunday School" or "Bible Study" ever been so goal-oriented, or the participants held accountable for their training and then their engagement with the world outside the church walls?

Thank God there are still some fighting, mostly para-church ministries, and a few churches led by pastors with a greater vision than continuing denominational traditions or attracting more paying members. They should not be the exception to the rule.

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1. hughhewitt.com
2. actofvalor.com

February 9 2012: Paganism, Formal Christianity, and Drama

My oldest daughter Charity is enrolled at Northern Arizona University as a Theatre Arts major, taking classes in acting and other dramatic techniques. As such, she has opportunities to audition for plays put on by the department, and recently landed a part in the Fall 2012 production of [*Dancing at Lughnasa*](#) [1], written by Irish playwright Brian



Friel. Because opening night was on the Rodeo Days weekend, we did a family trip to Flagstaff to see it. It was pretty good, and all the actors and actresses did a creditable job. I also noted in the program that the stage and tech crews were billed before the cast! As it should be!

(Charity played the role of "Rose", the mentally defective sister. That is her seated on the bench.)

The main theme of the play, beyond the setting of the unmarried sisters struggling to make a living in rural Ireland as industrialism is replacing home crafts and dealing with the stigma of the youngest sister having born a child out of wedlock, is the interplay of the cultural catholicism the family has embraced and the latent paganism still present in their culture. The "Lughnasa" of the title is a harvest festival, formerly dedicated to the god Lug but still celebrated locally. The "dancing" is the desire for the four main character sisters to dress up and go to dance with the young men of the area, as they did in their younger days. The sister "Katie" disapproves of this and other forms of immoral frivolity from her fairly rigid catholic sense of piety. The conflict is centered in the uncle character "Jack", who is a lapsed catholic priest who went to Africa as a missionary and was "drafted" as a chaplain by the British Army (which adds to the family's stigma in anti-English Ireland of the day) who observed that the pagan religious customs

practised by the Africans were more engaging and "real" than the catholicism he came to convert them to. After he returned, stricken with malaria and unable to remember much of his former life, it becomes scandalous to "Katie" that he prefers the African paganism to his own official faith and has no intention of conducting mass or otherwise resuming his role of catholic priest.

As I watched the play, one thing occurred to me above others: Brian Friel may have understood the shallow, legalistic, ritualistic, traditional catholicism practised in his nation, but he did not understand Christianity. He ably captured the tension between two inconsistent religious systems. Had he himself been a real Christ-follower, he could have inserted another character, even one of the sisters, who was an authentic Christian, a three-way contrast against "Jack" the pagan and "Katie" the formal catholic. A character who would have celebrated her Irish heritage at Lughnasa without buying into the paganism underneath, shown mercy and understanding to the young single mother *and* the travelling salesman who put her in this situation, not minded the stigma or "Jack's" involvement with the British. A catholic who rejected the error of "Jack's" pagan sympathies as well as "Katie's" judgmental and legalistic attitudes.

Of course, if he had been a real Christian and shown it in the above way, his plays would probably not be as popular as they are. It would be hard to find producers who put them on stage, or directors willing to be fair to the script, or players who would not be afraid to risk their reputations. I don't know what Broadway is like, but if it's anything like Hollywood (and its people certainly operate from the same secularist worldview), an open Christian, or anyone who does not share the same political and cultural values of the rest, will be effectively "blacklisted". A Christian who wants to achieve success in Hollywood must keep his or her beliefs under wraps. Or, abandon Hollywood and participate in the counter movement.

This brings me to the second thought that occurred to me as I watched the play. It's hard for Christians to escape the values of the established stage and film culture. During the play, most or all of the characters uttered either profanities or blasphemies. You could not play a part in the play if you were unwilling to do this, so already you would have to surrender your convictions about personal holiness and purity. Then, the actress who played the younger sister, who still loves the salesman who landed her with an illegitimate child, performed a full-on lip-to-lip kiss with the actor. Now, I am convinced that a lip-to-lip kiss is a sexual act, obviously not on the same level as other acts, but still an expression

of physical intimacy reserved for married couples. Again, a budding actor or actress would have to sacrifice their purity in order to get a part in a play; refuse on grounds of principle, and the result would be a reputation that would exclude future opportunities.

Where does one draw the line? If one accepts blasphemy, why would they refuse a kissing scene? If one accepts the kiss, where *does* the line lie? As it is, movies with R ratings are becoming nearly pornographic.

This attitude even extends into high-school drama departments. Even at Christian schools. A few years ago, a girl I know had the leading role in *The Music Man*, and at one point she "kissed" the leading man. I don't know if it was a real kiss, maybe a cheek-to-cheek fake kiss, but it was a bit scandalous for the parents and relatives in the Christian high school audience to see it. Maybe it was fake, maybe it wasn't; a mutual friend told me that the girl mentioned to him that she regrets surrendering her first kiss to a boy she didn't care for in a high school play. Recent productions are even more convincing, with less assurance that the kiss is fake; it makes me wonder if the drama teacher has abandoned the attempt to safeguard the purity of the students in the cause of authentic modern drama. Furthermore, there is less sense of scandal in the audience; it is as if those Christian parents and relatives have been desensitized.

This sort of thing strengthens the position of creating a counter-culture Christian drama and film movement. Drama, film-making, and other art forms should emerge from an encompassing Christian worldview, which is incompatible with a secular or atheist culture that is intent on suppressing or excluding opposing viewpoints. But then, this would require a more intentional effort to inculcate a Christian worldview in students, drama teachers, and parents and relatives. I'm still waiting for that one.

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1. northernarizonanews.com/blog/2012/02/19/dance-of-lughnasa/
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January 23 2012: Smallgroups



As I've been cruising around Tucson churches, both institutional and (mildly) emerging ones, I notice a trend toward including a smallgroup program. I say "program" because in just about all of them, the identifying feature of the church, and the aspect that gets the most resources and effort, is the

"worship" service, and perhaps in second place is the Sunday School system, and the smallgroup is an option or an opportunity. Smallgroups might be mentioned occasionally, and they might be listed in visitor literature, but in pretty much every case I've seen, the pastor and staff are focused on the "worship" service and preparing the sermon and the music and making sure the nursery is staffed, so the smallgroups are pretty much on their own, and the smallgroups are pretty much on their own. In fact, it seems that the staff ministers who are most keyed in to the smallgroup idea and actively expect their "flock" to participate are youth and college pastors.

This is a shame, because I am coming around to thinking smallgroups may be as important to the [Ideal Church](#) as (1) Corporate Prayer, (2) Intentional Church, and (3) De-emphasized Preaching Service. Or perhaps, the smallgroup is the appropriate Discipleship and Fellowship implementation of the Intentional Church.

Now, there is another facet of the smallgroup concept as practiced by institutional churches, and even emerging ones with a lot of "church people" who bring their expectations - the smallgroup is primarily a "Bible study". Yes, there is some "fellowship" (*eating, refreshments*) and maybe some prayer, but the acknowledged purpose and the greatest commitment of time is running through a structured lesson from the Bible or some other book using a study book or quarterly or some other literature. So it's *head knowledge*. Yes, it is often "life application" or some other practical intent, but the smallgroup is not set up to follow through. There's no accountability for actually performing what has been "learned". Furthermore, the study is a denominational curriculum, or material that the group votes on or that the leader selects, or perhaps the church pastor mandates the use of a study to support some current church-wide emphasis like an evangelism thrust or strategy

change. The last could actually be useful for a church, to reinforce a common vision. However, the overall problem is that this concept of "smallgroup" inherits directly from the previous "Sunday School" concept (in fact, a number of Tucson churches relabel their Sunday School classes *as* "smallgroups") - which, again, has not proved to be particularly effect for either disciple-making or community-building. This is not surprising, since those setting up the smallgroup program, leading the groups, or choosing to participate all come out of the "church people" cultural background.

This is a shame also, because the smallgroup can be so much more than Sunday School can be. But it has to be done *intentionally* by the church leadership, as an explicit departure from the familiar "Sunday School" structure. Here is my take on what the smallgroup could be or ought to be, versus what it is as Sunday School:

Ideal Smallgroup	Standard Sunday School
<p>Fellowship Intimate, mutual interdependence; <i>koinonia</i>. (Requires living in community, or at least geographical proximity).</p>	<p>One-hour-a-week "friends", shallow socializing, eating. (Accommodates "drive-ins" from long distances)</p>
<p>Discipleship Training in "how to feed yourself", for disciples to do their own studies and devotionals; provide, recommend, and critique resources. Theological foundation - systematic, intentional [1]. Training in worldview application [2].</p>	<p>"Bible Study": shallow textual analysis, emphasis on "life application" and affirming denominational interpretations ("proof-texting"). Most "students" already know the material; not much "learning" occurs.</p>
<p>Accountability Report on personal studies, devotional habits, ministry activities, efforts towards holiness and integrity, struggles.</p>	<p>None.</p>

Pastoral Care

Hospital visits, emergencies, offering a shoulder, etc.

Distributed within the group; men (husbands, fathers) take the lead.

Smallgroup leader trains, leads by example, and coordinates.

Mostly left to staff pastor and deacons.

Helping with a move, funeral meals.

Prayer

Community season of prayer. Search for God's direction, individually and as a group (a la *Experiencing God*).

Prayer list distributed, telephone "prayer chain"; a member utters a 3-minute prayer at the close of class. Sick people, lost people, jobs, etc. (God as a "vending machine").

Family Life

Family-integrated; younger people learning from older people.

Training for parents to take responsibility for the upbringing of their children.

Age segregated.

"Gifted" teachers expected to impart spiritual growth to children, youth.

Emphasis on age- or life-setting related concerns.

From this list, it's pretty clear I don't have a good opinion of Sunday School - it's something that probably played a positive role in the past, in certain contexts, but it has become institutionalized and inculturated and formalized; less *alive*. So there's quite a gap between what typical evangelical Sunday School *is* and what the smallgroup *could be*. In fact, what I describe as smallgroup would actually be closer to a cell church, where the larger church consists of a collection of these largely autonomous smallgroups, and provides structure, a unified strategy, resources, and (hopefully) (1) a large, church-wide corporate prayer meeting, to supplement rather than replace the smallgroup prayer activity; (2) a intentional discipleship system of classes (*head knowledge* again, see below), ministry activities, and missions opportunities; and (3) a weekly preaching service aimed at lost people, with the clear understanding that the weekly service is **NOT** an alternative to smallgroup participation for members and is **NOT** the most important thing the church does or the basis for identity of the church.

THAT is the kind of church I am looking for!

My "smallgroup ideal" is also a pretty good description of a "simple church" or "house church", where the group is a cell church per above but without the overarching structure. I see this is a growing movement in America, very emerging, and very appealing to me. There is even a hint of [a house church network in Tucson](#) [3], but it seems remarkably elusive.

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1. Smallgroups should not be for doctrinal or theological training (church history, apologetics, comparative religions, etc.). Ideally, these would be *classes* offered by the church, with trained teachers, lesson plans, homework, tests, grades, and attendance expected for church members. In lieu of this, or in support of this, smallgroup members should be encouraged/expected to study such materials independently, and report (accountability) on what they have learned.

2. Worldview training is a crossover subject. "What it is" should be a class (think "Truth Project" - www.thetruthproject.org). "How to do it" is the proper domain of the smallgroup.

3. www.simplechurchtucson.com

January 3 2012: The "Occupy" Movement

Last week, we were attending a show at the excellent Beowulf Alley theatre downtown, and afterward, we drove down Congress to get to the Art Museum complex, where the traditional Nacimientto display lives in the old Cordova House. As we got up to the Viente De Agosto Park (where the detested statue of Pancho Villa stands), traffic was being necked down to one lane, and we could see bright work lights and flashing police car lights. As we slowly passed the park, to our amazement we saw that the police were evicting [Occupy Tucson](#) [1], picking up the tents, and cleaning out the park.



My amazement was due to the fact that this was the liberal Tucson city council that finally authorized the action, the council that includes the

recently-elected Regina Romero, whose first act upon winning the election was to proclaim her sympathies with the movement and state that she believed they did not need to obey the park closing times ordinances or obtain a permit, that their "first amendment right to freedom of speech" trumped any local laws for civil order. This is, of course, one of the most obvious important cultural markers of the "Occupy" phenomenon - the asymmetry of how public expression is treated in American society anymore. The "Tea Party" demonstration (and other "conservative" activities, such as National Day of Prayer activities) was conducted lawfully (in spite of official hostility and roadblocks), with permits and sanitary facilities and litter being put in trash cans and well-defined ending times. Had it been otherwise, it would have been fodder for propaganda about the "violence" and "hypocrisy" of the "right-wingers". Yet no such expectation exists for "left-wing" activities like the "Occupy" movement, not by the government authorities, and not by the media services. I note that blogger Matthew Knee makes an interesting point, proposing a standard for how protest activities should be tolerated by asking, ["Would it be acceptable if it were an anti-abortion protest against Planned Parenthood?"](#) [2]. The forces of the cultural Left are eager and effective at getting court-ordered "bubble zones" imposed on anti-abortion protesters, but reasonable, existing, non-controversial laws cannot be enforced on "occupiers".

However, it isn't just government and media and judicial elites that hold these asymmetric opinions. There's a broad segment of American society that equivocates between the "Tea Party" and "Occupy" expressions, as indicated by comments to this [John Mark Reynolds commentary about the "Occupy" movement](#) [3]. In fact, some of those comments are downright hateful and intolerant, and suggesting or threatening violence to "right-wingers". I don't need to point out the hypocrisy of that side of the house that loudly insists on "tolerance". But the aggressive action, even violence, doesn't end with words.

- They shut down a [Burger King restaurant](#) [4]
- Violence, disruption of traffic, trespass in [Washington DC](#) [5] (Interesting in that the protesters express moral outrage over police not arresting a driver who hit a protester blocking traffic, but see no wrong in what they themselves are doing.)
- [Other examples of Occupier evil and violence](#) [6]

To say nothing of assaults, rapes, and suspected murders that occurred within the Occupier camps. Now, the Occupy movement will attempt to divert blame for these latter type of incidents by hypothesizing

homeless or mentally ill persons who attached themselves to the Occupy camp (no way they can wriggle out of the examples above, where it is clearly the Occupiers committing the deeds). This doesn't work, for those criminal types were sheltered and fed and enabled and emboldened by the general atmosphere of lawlessness and anger that characterizes the Occupy camps.

But that's enough political commentary, and I don't really need to hear from people offering "the other side of the story". What is primarily interesting to me is what all of this signifies from a Christian or Church perspective.

First, this is just more evidence of a disintegrating society. These (mostly young) people have a message of moral outrage against "the one percent" (supposedly the rich people who "aren't contributing their fair share", but apparently including any business owner or other sort of capitalist), economic conditions that make it hard for (these apparently otherwise unqualified in spite of having college degrees) people to get jobs, and other issues including the threat of loosing entitlements and opposition to universal health care. Yet in voicing their message of moral outrage, they break the law (camping in public parks regardless of park hour laws), prevent other people from enjoying the parks, intimidate and terrorize local business owners and their patrons, block and disrupt traffic (occasionally, putting their own children in harm's way to make their point) - but see nothing wrong in what they do. The root problem is: They have no objective basis for morality. "Wrong" is what they don't like. "Good" is anything they do to fight against "wrong".

Second, despite the obvious threat to civilization of a self-serving moral impulse based on emotions, there is the problem of reaching this people group with the Gospel. The only way to head off this threat is to install a consistent, objective, reality-based moral system. The moral system foundational to the United States and the western world is Christianity. Only real Christians can succeed at this moral system, which is rooted in *agape* love for other people and a servant relationship with the Infinite God - anything else is just rule-keeping. Now, Christianity starts with an acknowledgement of your own evil - **SIN** - and your need for a Saviour. However, people with a solipsistic emotion-based morality *cannot* recognize their own evil. They are also not going to be told so - this is the culture that reacts against anything less than full agreement by screaming names (e.g., homophobe or racist or, in this case, one-percenters). It is an irrational position that defies engagement and discourse.

So here we have a social movement convinced of rightness, impervious to rational discussion, and willing to undertake disruption and violence against any institution they oppose or feel threatened by. Talking to it is dangerous. Serving it (e.g., food distribution) enables it. What to do? Some thoughts:

Abandon them; it's a nut too hard to crack. This would seem to be the default position of the evangelical church, which really effectively only reaches out to people who stand a chance of becoming church members and attending services. And, for the most part, the church does a poor job of reaching even those. Occupiers don't fit that mold. But Occupiers are *human beings*, made in the image of God, with eternal souls, and worthy of honor.

Okay, then they are a *mission field*. The idea of the "missional" church is that we should be approaching *our* culture just like foreign missionaries approach the cultures to which they are sent. How does a missionary deal with contemporary youth culture? One example is Francis Schaeffer, who set up L'Abri in Switzerland as a "commune" explicitly to engage young people (traveling on the cheap). He earned their trust. But then, the world was different in his day; we are further down the "How Then Shall We Live" road and society is deteriorating to the point where his sort of philosophical dialogue may not work (at least not to *this* people group; there are others - university students, urban intellectuals (a la Eric Metaxas, "Socrates in the City") - who might be more open to this approach). Well then, a violent, half-savage tribe... like the Huaorani Indians. Elizabeth Elliott succeeded in reaching them (after a long time) by living with them, setting the example, teaching, and earning their trust. Or perhaps any number of medieval or eighteenth century missionaries who went to barbarian tribes or foreign nations, giving everything, even their lives. Are Occupiers and the culture they represent worth reaching at the cost of martyrdom? If not of life, then of health, or financial security, or family?

How far does "missional" go?

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But then I get back to my original, ultimate bugaboo: After you reach them... *what then?* Jesus said, "make disciples". After reaching them with the Gospel and seeing conversions, you are obliged to disciple them. But it is manifestly obvious that the institutional church in America is the *wrong* place to expect disciple-making.

I'm really coming around to the perspective that "church" is a *culture* of its own - the primary feature of which is the worship service, with singing songs (often 200-year-old ones) and listening to a speech. Converts are expected to engage in this *culture*. Church people don't even give much mind to "disciple-making" beyond Sunday School and Bible Study Groups (more church *culture*). So... are we really reaching people for Christ? Or for *church culture*?

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1. occupytucson.org
2. legalinsurrection.com/2011/11/how-would-they-view-occupy-planned-parenthood-a-proposed-paradigm-for-protest-propriety
3. www.scriptoriumdaily.com/2011/11/09/wrong-messengers-wrong-message
4. www.thegatewaypundit.com/2011/11/oh-good-grief-occupy-la-goons-shut-down-burger-king-video
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