“And I’ll Blow Your House In”:
How Church Planters Can Rebuild the Church as the Spiritual Home for Families

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Once upon a recent time, three little church planters set off to seek their fortune in the wide world. The first one met a church planting consultant with a load of straw, and said to him, “Please, man, give me that straw to build me a church.” Which the man did, and the little church planter built a church with it.

Presently, along came a wolf who knocked on the door and said, “Little pastor, little pastor, let me come in.”

“No by the hair of my chinny, chin, chin,” cried the little church planter.

“Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your church in,” smirked the wolf. So he huffed, and he puffed, and he blew that little church in.

The second little church planter met a professor of church planting with some wood and said to him, “Please, man, give me that wood to build a church.” Which the man did, and the little church planter built a church with it.

Presently, along came the wolf who knocked on the door and said, “Little pastor, little pastor, let me come in.”

The church planter indignantly replied with much bravado, “Not by the hair of my chinny, chin, chin.”

“Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your church in,” cried the angry wolf. So he huffed, and he puffed, and he blew that little church in.

Now the third little church planter met a hoary pastor with a load of precious stones and said to him, “Please, man, give me those stones to build a church.” Which the man did, and the little church planter built a church with them.

As certainly as the sun rises, along came the wolf who knocked on the door and said, “Little pastor, little pastor, let me come in.”

“No by the hair on my chinny, chin, chin,” said the little church planter bravely.

“Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your church in,” growled back the wolf. So he huffed, and he puffed. And he puffed, and he huffed. But he could not blow that church in.

In our homely allegory the wolf is the god of this world, working through this world system to blow apart the structure of the church. As we consider how church planters may make the church a spiritual home for families, we must lay some groundwork by briefly describing one of the fundamental characteristics of our age, namely, liberal modernity. Perchance this may help us apply the Scriptures wisely to our church planting endeavors.
 Liberal modernity is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, but its basic outlines are distinguishable enough. Two primary streams have come down to us today: the more conservative liberalism represented by John Locke (1632-1704) and Adam Smith (1723-1790), and the more radical liberalism which snaked its way through men such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Karl Marx (1818-1883). However, both streams are united in a fundamental presupposition that the self-sufficient individual is the basic unit of meaning for understanding human life and society.\footnote{A variety of other influential persons can also be associated with self-sovereignty, ranging through Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Friedrich Nietzsche, to twentieth century existentialist and feminist Simone Beauvoir. For a helpful discussion, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, Sovereignty: God, State, and Self (New York: Basic Books, 2008).} This vigorous idea was no doubt designed to combat abuses of power and authority, yet it had serious genetic flaws which would make its progeny dangerous. Charles Taylor says that the “Modern Moral Order”

“…starts with individuals, and doesn’t see these as set a priori within a hierarchical order, outside of which they wouldn’t be fully human agents. Its members are not agents who are essentially embedded within a society which in turn reflects and connects with the cosmos, but rather disembedded individuals who come to associate together. The design underlying the association is that each, in pursuing his or her own purposes in life, act to benefit others mutually. It calls for a society structured for mutual benefit, in which each respects the rights of others, and offers them mutual help of certain kinds.”\footnote{A Secular Age (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 447.}

This trend of modernity strengthened and ramified over time, bringing us to the place where even our public philosophy and our laws presuppose this idea of freedom – complete self rule. As Michael Sandel says, “The central idea of the public philosophy by which we live is that freedom consists in our capacity to choose our ends for ourselves.” This “aspiration to neutrality,” he says, “finds prominent expression in our politics and law.”\footnote{Public Philosophy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 9. Sandel would not share our Christian worldview, but I cite him to demonstrate that even he recognizes the great impact our ideas of freedom have had on our laws. Robert Bork writes of the 1960’s, “It is not too surprising…but a mood of radical autonomy or, if you will, moral relativism began to appear in the jurisprudence of the Supreme Court…. But the rise of moral relativism – perhaps a better term would be moral chaos – drove constitutional law in a new but no more respectable or rational direction” (“Olympians on the March” in Lengthened Shadows, ed. Roger Kimball and Hilton Kramer [San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004], 198).}

One notable example of this showed through Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy’s opinion in Planned Parenthood v. Casey (1992), “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”\footnote{“PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF SOUTHEASTERN PA. v. CASEY, 505 U.S. 833 (1992),” Accessed October 17, 2011, http://laws.findlaw.com/us/505/833.html.} We should take care to note that this conception of liberty based in the self-sufficient individual is not limited to the contemporary Left.\footnote{For one full-blown defense of the modern liberal order from a more “leftist” perspective, see Martha C. Nussbaum, Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America’s Tradition of Religious Equality (New York: Basic Books, 2008).} It also permeates much thinking of the Right. Milton Friedman, for
example, clearly operated from a voluntarist definition of freedom which informed his economic perspective.  

Breathing the atmosphere of liberal modernity had its effects upon the church and the family, and thus upon the ideals relating to the church’s ministry to families and the family’s relation to the church.

The modern moral order has clearly molded ideals of the family. For brevity’s sake, I cite John Witte’s description of this historical evolution:

“Enlightenment thinkers pressed Locke’s ‘impious hypothesis’ to its logical and legal ends, and grounded their sentiments in a new secular theology. The essence of marriage, they argued, was not its sacramental symbolism, nor its covenantal associations, nor its social service to the community and commonwealth, as was traditionally taught. The essence of marriage was the voluntary bargain struck between the two parties. The terms of their marital bargain were not preset by God or nature, church or state, tradition or community. These terms were set by the parties themselves, in accordance with the general rules of contract formation and general norms of civil society.”

This kind of thought is easily seen in various thinkers. John Stuart Mill believed in “the liberty of each to govern his conduct by his own feelings of duty, and by such laws and social restraints as his own conscience can subscribe to.” On this basis he argued for nearly unlimited grounds for divorce. Friedrich Engels wrote in The Principles of Communism that communist society “will transform the relations between the sexes into a purely private matter which concerns only the persons involved and into which society has no occasion to intervene. It can do this since it does away with private property and educates children on a communal basis, and in this way removes the two bases of traditional marriage – the dependence rooted in private property, of the women on the man, and of the children on the parents.” Simone Beauvoir wrote, “The ideal [marriage]…would be for entirely self-sufficient human beings to form unions with one another only in accordance with the untrammeled dictates of their mutual love.” Thus

Also note that the hodgepodge called postmodernism does not deviate from the modern moral order in this area. David Wells accurately states, “There are important threads of continuity between modernity and postmodernity and not least among these is the fact that at the center of both is the autonomous self, despite all the postmodern chatter about the importance of community” (Above All Earthly Pow’rs [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 67-8).


8 The Subjection of Women (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), 179.


the modern moral order remakes the family into a purely voluntary unit without any higher principle than the autonomous fulfillment of those involved.

The evangelical church in America also reflects what Taylor describes as the modern moral order. According to populist evangelicalism, the church became in principle unnecessary to participating with God, although it may be pragmatically useful. George Marsden says that around turn-of-the-twentieth century America, “the institutional church often had little standing except as a convenient pragmatic device to facilitate God’s work in the individual heart and in the nation.”

Individualism set the stage for what the American church was to become in the twentieth century. Baptist historian Gregory Wills sums it up by saying:

“The changing character of individualism is an important part of the story of the transformation of American evangelicalism. The church-oriented evangelicalism of early nineteenth-century American Protestantism continued the Puritan pursuit of the pure, primitive church. Twentieth-century American evangelicalism preferred pietism’s traditional approach: the promotion of an individual spirituality that was loosely connected to the institutional churches. Evangelicals were no longer convinced that there was a divine mandate to establish pure churches as the kingdom of God on earth. The kingdom was within. Individual piety required no mediation of the ecclesiastical institutions. The role of the church changed.”

The teachings of influential Bible teachers corroborate this historical assessment. C. I. Scofield wrote, “The visible church, as such, is charged with no mission. The Commission to evangelize the world is personal, and not corporate….So far as the Scripture goes, the work of evangelization was done by individuals called directly by the Spirit to that work.” Lewis Sperry Chafer also taught, “No responsibility or service is imposed on the church per se. Service, like the gifts of the Spirit by whom service is wrought, is individual. It could not be otherwise. The common phrase, ‘the church’s task,’ is, therefore, without biblical foundation. It is only when the individuals sense their personal responsibility and claim personal divine enablement that Christian work is done.”

In such an atmosphere, it is extremely difficult to have any coherent conception behind social institutions. They are merely a collection of individuals. Thus, there is no internal logic to generate a sense of one’s place in the larger whole, neither are there widely shared expectations as to the proper roles and responsibilities of the larger whole to the person, and vice-versa. All internal logic must bow to “freedom” – the right of the individual to define himself and his relation to the whole as he wishes.

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12 Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South 1785-1900 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 139.
13 Michael D. Williams, “Where’s the Church? The Church as the Unfinished Business of Dispensational Theology,” GTJ, vol. 10, no. 2 (Fall 1989), 175.
14 Systematic Theology (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 4:149.
The Modern Moral Order of the Family Compared with Scripture

Without evaluating the entire scope of the modern moral order, we can at least consider what light Scripture sheds upon its conception of the family and the church.

In the beginning, God created his glorious kingdom by his powerful word out of nothing in six days. This universe had an abundant, beautiful earth as the centerpiece of God’s action. But the high point of God’s creative work was a unique creature called man. God created man in his own image, and he created man as male and female. This was not an accident or an afterthought, as God’s first words to mankind demonstrate. “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen 1:28). God planned for mankind to form covenantal, one male/one female units (Gen 2:24-25) which could multiply, and these are called families. What was his purpose for the family? The immediate purpose for the family was to rule the earth for God (Gen 1:27-28), which entailed reproducing God’s image-bearers (Gen 1:27-28) and rejoicing in one another as God’s good gift (Gen 2:18-23). This immediate purpose finds its greater significance in the ultimate purpose of the family - reflecting Christ and his church (Eph 5:32). At our stage in God’s great plan for human history, the family is both provisional and indispensible.

The Family Is Provisional in These Last Days

When Jesus came as King, he came as part of a good human family, and he clearly upheld the OT ethical teaching on the family. Yet immediately his priorities became evident when he said to his parents, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house” (Lk 2:49)? Throughout his earthly stay, Jesus continued to keep the priority of the kingdom and his kingdom mission. He made it very clear that he was forming a family which would transcend earthly families (Lk 8:19-21; 9:57-62). This priority would at times divide earthly families (Lk 12:49-53). The call to follow him was a higher call than the call to a family (Lk 14:25-33; 18:29-30). The apostle Paul continued this line of thinking when he wrote, “Let those who have wives live as though they had none….For the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor 7:29-31).

Jesus and Paul spoke this way because of the time in which we live in God’s plan. As Paul wrote, “The appointed time has grown very short” (1 Cor 7:29). After this life is over, our earthly family will be no more. It will have accomplished its purpose and will pass away. We have not yet reached that point in God’s plan, but with the coming of Jesus the Kingdom of God has been brought near. Everything the OT taught about the family is still true, but it is also temporary. The church is now the primary vehicle of God’s plan. The church is eternal, and we find our ultimate identity by identifying with Christ and his cause in the church.

However, none of this means that we should abandon normal family living. The purposes for which God created the family still exist today. This leads us to the next point.
The Family Is Indispensable in These Last Days

Husbands and wives should go on in their married state (1 Cor 7:1-5). Wives should still bear and rear children (1 Tim 2:15; 5:14). Fathers should still provide for their families (Eph 5:25; 1 Thess 4:11-12; 1 Tim 5:8) and train up their children (Eph 6:4). Why? If the family is provisional, what makes it important?

From the epistle to the Ephesians, we learn that all of these things we do as families are actually connected to the ongoing spiritual warfare of our day. In chapters 4-6 of this epistle, the apostle Paul applies the doctrines of chapters 1-3 by teaching how the new humanity ought to live in the here and now. Walking in wisdom (5:15) specifically applies to our family life as wives, husbands, parents, and children. He then concludes the letter with a call to be strong in the Lord in the spiritual battle of life (6:10-20). Our families are not a place of retreat from the spiritual battles of life; our family life is a major theater of spiritual conflict. The way wives submit to their husbands, and husbands love their wives, and children obey their parents is all part of standing against the schemes of the devil. Family issues are ultimately spiritual issues.

Because this is so, we must use spiritual weapons to accomplish God’s purposes for our families. Family members must be girded with God’s truth, practicing God’s righteousness, secure in the gospel of peace, resolute in their faith in God, conscious of their salvation, wielding the sword given by the Spirit, which is the word of God. This must all be done in a constant state of prayer.15

Seeing the family as provisional keeps us from making idols out of our families. Yet seeing the family as indispensible keeps us committed to living our lives for Christ in the way that God has designed. In this way we advance the claims and cause of Christ against the god of this world.

Note well that the idea of the family advanced in the pages of Scripture contrasts sharply with the metaphysic and ethic of the modern moral order. Human beings are not self-sufficient monads who exist solely for personal fulfillment, however that may be defined. They come into existence already embedded within a creational and social framework which they did not choose. The will of the individual is not the ultimate arbiter of reality or truth. Marriage is not reducible to two contracting parties who get to decide for themselves what their relationship will entail.

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Contrasting Views of Marriage

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<th>Modern View</th>
<th>Christian View</th>
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<td>• Changes through evolution.</td>
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<td>• Expressed in individual rights.</td>
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<td>• Goal is personal fulfillment.</td>
<td>• Goal is to glorify God through productive dominion and procreative discipleship.</td>
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The Modern Moral Order of the Church Compared with Scripture

As we have seen, the modern moral order deinstitutionalizes institutions *in principle*. Autonomous creatures by definition cannot be limited by the restrictions inherent in the rational structure which enables institutions to accomplish their ends, ends which are larger than any one individual. This is no less true of the church than it is of the family.

Contemporary professing Christians have strong tendencies to conceive of the church as merely a collection of spiritually disembedded individuals whose relationship to one another in the church is purely voluntary or contractual. One’s relationship to God has no necessary connection to one’s relationship to the body of Christ. This is an incorrect view of the church as described in Scripture.

While we cannot develop a full ecclesiology here, it is pertinent to our purposes to note that the church is the assembly of followers of Jesus which is called the body of Christ (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 10:16-17; 12:12-31; Eph 1:22-23; 2:16; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:30; Col 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15). The body of Christ can refer to the heavenly, eschatological assembly in which all believers participate and to the specific manifestation of that body in a particular place. As the body of Christ, the church is an organic unity formed by the Spirit. The Spirit brings about this union by faith. The ordinances are primary means of participating in this unity (1 Cor 10:16-17; 12:13).

1 Corinthians 12:13 explains how the body is one (v. 12) by saying, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” In this text we have both the spiritual power and the spiritual action performed which result in the body of Christ. An expanded paraphrase of the text helps to make this clear: “For in the realm of one Spirit we were all immersed [by Christ] so that we become one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we have all experienced the one Spirit.” The point of the text is to emphasize the unity that all the diverse members of the body of Christ share (cf. Eph 4:1-6). Christ baptizes his people in one Spirit which makes them his body.
I emphasize this because in our day it is common to make human will the decisive factor in forming the church. If I decide that I want to build a church, I can, and no one can say otherwise. If I decide to join or leave a church, I can, and no one can say otherwise. It is really up to me to decide. This thinking is usually “baptized” by calling it the leading of the Holy Spirit, but it is rather ironic that the Spirit is invoked to justify the opposite of what the Scripture says that He does, which is to produce a unified body. Certainly there is human responsibility and human choice involved in building the church. However, just as in conversion, this choice is only one aspect, and it is not the ultimate aspect. The work of Christ by his Spirit is the ultimate aspect.

As the body of Christ, the church is composed of many different members with differing gifts and functions. Every believer is given grace by the Spirit for the purpose of serving the body. Every believer is necessary to the body. As the body of Christ, the church is compelled to mutually serve one another, which is an aspect of total commitment to Christ (Rom 12:1-2). This is an expression of our unity in Christ.

As the body of Christ, the church is under the sovereign leadership of Jesus Christ. Christ’s cosmic lordship is for his church (Eph 1:21-23). As the body of Christ, the church is the place of reconciliation – Jews to Gentiles and both to God (Eph 2:16). Since there is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, and one baptism, believers must endeavor to maintain the unity produced by the Spirit. This comes about as Christ’s gifts to the church equip the saints to minister to one another so that the whole body attains the unity of the faith in Christ-likeness (Eph 4:1-16). As the body of Christ, the church receives its life and growth from Jesus Christ (Col 1:18, 24).

The church is also known as the temple of God (1 Cor 3:9, 16-17; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:21; 1 Peter 2:5) because God’s Spirit dwells in her midst (1 Cor 3:16). Connected with the temple, the Scripture teaches that believers compose a priesthood serving God. R. Stanton Norman rightly says that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers “refers to believers gathered together under the lordship of Christ, not to individual believers serving God alone. As the people of God, the church is now a ‘royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:9) and ministers corporately in the name of Christ.”

Timothy George writes,

“God has so tempered the body that we are all priests to each other. We stand before God and intercede for one another, we proclaim God’s Word to one another and celebrate His presence among us in worship, praise, and fellowship. Moreover, our priestly ministry does not terminate upon ourselves. It propels us into the world in service and witness. It constrains us to ‘shew forth the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light.’”

As priests in God’s temple, believers render a service of sacrifice, including giving their own lives as living sacrifices to God (Rom 12:1-2; Phil 2:17; 2 Tim 4:6). Other sacrifices include doing good to others (Heb 13:16), supporting missionary work (Phil 4:18), and offering up new

16 The Baptist Way (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2005), 96.
17 Timothy George, cited in ibid., 99.
converts to the Lord (Rom 15:16). As priests, believers render a service of witness. In the OT, 
the priests taught the people God’s law (Mal 2:7). In the NT, the church proclaims the gospel. As 
priests, believers render a service of intercession (Acts 12:5, 12; 13:3; 14:23; Eph 1:16-23).

The temple is also the place of relationship. “The Spirit mediates our relationship with 
God, communicating his presence and power and sanctifying us.” Furthermore, “the Spirit joins 
together believers as the stones in God’s temple through his creation of fellowship.”

In addition, the church is described in Scripture as the family of God (Rom 8:15-17; note 
use of “brothers” throughout the NT). God is the Father (e.g. 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3), and 
all the redeemed people are his children (Gal 4:1-7). Jesus is the firstborn among many brothers 
(Rom 8:29). The church is God’s household (1 Tim 3:15). Consequently, believers treat each 
other as family members (1 Tim 5:1-2). We care for each other’s needs (Acts 4:34; Gal 6:10; 1 
Tim 5:3). Overseers demonstrate their ability to manage God’s household by managing their own 
families (1 Tim 3:4-5).

This little foray into the doctrine of the church reveals that the modern moral order is 
corrosive to a biblical conception of the church.

So What?

Now it is time to ask what effects the modern liberal order has had upon churches in their 
ministry to families and what church planters can do about it.

Consumerism

Nearly everyone recognizes consumerism as a problem in today’s church culture, but it 
seems that few do anything substantial to combat it. In order to make some progress in this field, 
I would like to critique a critique. David Wells has done as much as anyone to point out the 
pervasive effects of consumerism in American Christianity. While greatly appreciative of 
Wells’ work, Carl Trueman argues that Wells’ criticism is not deep enough. Trueman says,

“There is a sense in which David's critique itself is somewhat muted because (I suspect) 
of its cultural context. Consumerism, along with its cognates, is a term bandied around 
(and I am as guilty as anyone here) in Christian circles and presented, generally speaking, 
as a very bad thing; but consumerism is itself a function of the wider phenomenon of 
capitalism. Now, if one were to substitute consumerism with capitalism throughout the 
book, the argument would remain a cogent and powerful one; in fact, the critique would 
arguably be even more powerful because it would reveal to us the full power of the forces

18 John S. Hammett, Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 49.
19 See the appendix on the church as a voluntary society.
20 See also David M. Doran, “Market-Driven Ministry: Blessing or Curse? Part 1,” DBSJ 1 (Spring 1996), and 
at play in the transformation of church life here....Of course, as soon as one uses the word capitalism, one is going to be suspected of incipient Marxism; but one does not have to be a Marxist to acknowledge the powerful impact that capitalism and the free market have on all aspects of life, from the cost of living to the way we think.”

Trueman is on to something here, and there is much we can consider from his critique. Nevertheless, I would argue that we should not substitute “capitalism” for “consumerism.” Capitalism as an economic system does not determine that we will all define our success by our consumption. If instead we recognize that we have been shaped by an individualism which defines freedom as the fulfillment of our spontaneous personal desires, then this may put us in a better position to see “the full power of the forces at play in the transformation of church life.”

In a consumerist society, people will consider the church to be a purely voluntary arrangement for the satisfaction of their spiritual needs. They will evaluate the church according to whether or not they believe it satisfies their needs as they define them. They will hold a no-fault divorce view, believing that they can come to the church and leave the church at will. They may even participate in several churches simultaneously in order to get what they want from each one. What they want will vary widely. It may mean having children’s programs such as Awana, or it may mean not having children’s programs at all. It may mean having rock music in the worship service, or it may mean not having rock music. It may mean having a college outreach, or it may mean not having a college outreach. No matter what their desires may be, the fundamental premise is that they are free to determine what is best for themselves, and the church must conform if it is to get their business.

Such a scenario presents a great dilemma to a doctrinally-oriented church planter. He does not wish to make his church market-driven, yet the entire society in which he ministers is built upon that manner of relating to one another. He knows that everything he does will be interpreted according to the meta-narrative of liberal modernity. He wishes to build a house with gold, silver, and precious stones, which will withstand the huffing and puffing of the world.

What Is to Be Done?

While there is no silver bullet with which to shoot the wolf, there are crucial practices which, by God’s favor, may pry families out of the world’s mold and bring them into the church’s fold.


22 As an example of an influential capitalist economist who nonetheless recognized the limits of capitalism, I would point toward Wilhelm Röpke, A Humane Economy: The Social Framework of the Free Market, 3rd ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1998). This is not to say that Röpke’s thought was without flaw; nevertheless, I think he does demonstrate that it is possible to keep capitalism within a moral framework. Consider also the even more suggestive work done by John D. Mueller, Redeeming Economics: Rediscovering the Missing Element (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2010).
Retrain Expectations

Families have to be retrained in their expectations of what the church is and what the church is for. They must understand that the church body is the outworking of the eternal purpose that God has accomplished in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:11-3:13). It is not an adjunct to one’s relationship to God. It is the result when the gospel seed takes root. There is one body in which the Spirit produces unity. There are real people with whom we must live in unity, not some abstract and invisible church (Eph 4:1-3). Christ has lavishly distributed gifts to his body so that it will grow up to his full stature, including biblically qualified church leadership (Eph 4:1-16). It is rather ironic that many families believe that they can do without the church, when the ultimate reason for their existence is to reflect Christ and the church (Eph 5:32). Families are created by God and are responsible to him (Eph 3:15), and they show that by walking wisely in the context of the body of Christ (5:15ff).

Therefore, be sure to promote your church with biblical expectations in view. Be sure that it is abundantly clear that you are inviting people to be disciples of Christ, not to a self-help program or an entertainment venue or a social club. Teach families who come what they ought to expect from a church, which primarily entails public worship, the preaching and teaching of the Word, the administration of the ordinances, and basic biblical body life. Membership classes are one tool which can help to set proper expectations at the beginning.

Require Commitment

The church must not flirt with people by offering spirituality without commitment. Rather, the church courts and calls people to covenant commitment. There is no such thing as spiritual “friends with benefits.” Biblical conversion finds its natural fruit in church membership (e.g. Acts 2:41-47). Reserve the Lord’s Supper for those who are members of a true church. From the very beginning, make genuine membership an integral part of the church. Biblical church membership clashes with the modern moral order and thus forces families to come to grips with finding their spiritual home in the church. Be very clear on the biblical evidences for formal church membership, since many professing Christians have little understanding of it.

- Practical or historical evidences:
  - Numbers were known (Acts 2:41; 4:4);
  - Special rolls were kept (1 Tim 5:9);
  - Officers were chosen from the group (Acts 6:2-5);
- Theological evidences:
  - Church discipline necessitates a roll (1 Cor 5:13);
  - Elders’ responsibilities necessitates known membership (Heb 13:17);
  - Biblical body life – the responsibilities of members one to another – necessitates known membership;

23 Ephesians 3:15 most likely makes the claim that every family grouping is responsible to God as its sovereign creator. See Andy Stirrup, “From Whom Every Family in Heaven and on Earth is Named,” Journal of Family Ministry 1 (Fall/Winter 2010): 28-35.
Conversion includes baptism which necessitates church membership in a particular manifestation of the body of Christ (Acts 2:38-41);

- The Lord’s Supper requires some discernment of who may be admitted to the table and who may not (1 Cor 5:11; 11:27-32);
- If, as I believe, the local assembly is a manifestation of the heavenly, then Hebrews 12:23 may provide a theological argument by analogy for “enrolling” church members.

Along with this, refuse to take people from other true churches without that church’s full knowledge and consent. Church planters do a disservice to the cause of Christ when they refuse to respect the commitments of Christians to other churches. Although it is often tempting to indiscriminately encourage people to come to your church, this shows a tremendous lack of love for other churches, and it encourages unfaithfulness to your own church.

Reinstate the Internal Logic of Productive Family Life, and Encourage It to Function.

This is a huge topic which cannot only receive an insufficient notice here. The companionate, contractual marriage is an emaciated view of marriage which resembles a famine victim. It is hardly recognizable when compared with its healthy and well-fed alternative. The healthy covenantal marriage is invested in accomplishing serious goods. Paul’s instructions about the family in Ephesians are a recognition of this fact. In order to provide a spiritual home for families, churches must encourage families to live up to all that God calls them to be. This means that husbands and wives must see themselves as one covenantal unit in production and reproduction. They must not be two separate individuals pursuing their own ends.

This implies also that families have serious ends in their own right and do not exist to be used by the church, just as the church does not exist to be used by families. In other words, churches ought not to treat family members in isolation from their covenant commitments. Churches ought not to subsume family responsibilities into themselves in order to extract labor from the now isolated individuals. Churches should not construe participation in the body primarily in terms of programs and ministries. Churches help families to participate fully when they construe participation in terms of worship and service.

In my view, churches must teach and disciple against virtually everything modern feminism and the sexual revolution stands for, which has now become standard fare in American society. Families need constant encouragement, reinforcement, and training in productive dominion and procreative discipleship.

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Remember Love

Scott Yenor observes, “The claims of love and Christianity seem to stand or fall together. Marriage’s move from sacrament to contract is a move from love to reproduction and from mysterious unity to individualism. So deep has modern thinking penetrated our minds that we cannot quite explain what love is.”25 This is true of both the church and the family, and one of the greatest gifts churches, even brand-new churches, can do is to build their community on love.26 Love is a commitment of my whole person to seek the best interests of another. It is favorable desire for another which leads me to give myself. It is a desire to bring about sincere affection and heartfelt loyalty as bonds of peace. Love seeks union, and hence communion. Or, as Jonathan Leeman defines it, love is “the lover’s affirmation of and affection for the beloved and the beloved’s good in the Holy.”27

It is no accident that Jesus said that all the law and the prophets hang on the commands to love God and love one’s neighbor. We are to be rooted and grounded in love (Eph 3:17). We are to come to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge (Eph 3:19). We are to speak the truth in love as the means by which we grow up into Christ (Eph 4:15, 16). We are to walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us (Eph 5:2). If this is taking place in a church plant, then that church will become a true home for families, and a home that will withstand all the huffing and puffing that the devil can muster.

Appendix: The Church as a Voluntary Society

The church is often called a voluntary society. I would suggest, however, that this terminology is misleading in our day. The church is not a “voluntary” society as we normally think of voluntary. Of course there is a choice involved in joining the church, but that choice is not the force which constitutes the church. This false idea has much more in common with the modern or Lockean (or perhaps even Rousseauean) conception of contract society than it does with the biblical picture of the church. Oliver O’Donovan is correct to say that “voluntary” usually connotes an association into which people contract optionally, i.e. not only without anyone forcing them to, but without any pressing need driving them to” (Desire of the Nations, 223). He continues, “A voluntary society is one that I could leave without incurring grave or irremediable loss, which might seem a strange thing for a Christian to think about the church” (ibid.).

Strange, indeed.

It is much better to think of the church as a believing or a called or a confessing community. Obviously our wills are involved in believing, but our wills are not the formative

25 Family Politics, 226.

26 See Jonathan Leeman, The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), for a strong description of how love works itself out in church membership and discipline.

27 Ibid., 107-14.
factor constituting the church. Faith is the gift of God, for it springs from the power of the Spirit who regenerates our hearts as the effect of God’s call. Christ baptizes us into the realm of the Spirit, who produces a unified body. In other words, church membership is not optional. To think that we can contract in and contract out of the church at will is to take the church out of God’s great plan and make it a purely human institution. It is to remove Christ as the head and bridegroom who died to purchase the church with his own blood, and to put in his place our own sovereign desires. It is to despise the work of the Spirit who makes us one body.

Note what some historians have said about our American tendencies.

“The agencies that gave evangelicals a separate identity from the Protestant mainstream transcended the work of local churches and denominations….In other words, the work of institutional churches had little bearing on evangelical institutions because these agencies were performing activities that although religious were not narrowly churchly…. “But these special purpose organizations did not simply exist alongside the churches; they began to compete with them for the religious identity of Protestants….The effect of this shift has meant that Protestant adherents in the twentieth century, especially evangelicals, are far more likely to identify themselves by the special-purpose groups in which they participate rather than by their church membership” (D. G. Hart, That Old-Time Religion, 66-7).

“In 1850, Southern Baptists understood democracy largely in terms of ecclesiastical authority. In 1950, they understood it largely in terms of individual freedom….The church-oriented evangelicalism of early nineteenth-century American Protestantism continued the Puritan pursuit of the pure, primitive church. Twentieth-century American evangelicalism preferred pietism’s traditional approach: the promotion of an individual spirituality that was loosely connected to the institutional churches….Individual piety required no mediation of the ecclesiastical institutions” (Gregory Wills, Democratic Religion, 139).

The 19th century Baptist leader Edward Hiscox had some insight into the temptations inherent in calling the church a voluntary society. He wrote,

“It is sometimes said that a Church is a voluntary society. This is true in a sense, and only with an explanation. It is true that no external force or authority can compel the relation of membership to be formed or dissolved. The Church can compel no one to unite with it, nor can the individual oblige the body to receive him. But it is not true that it is a matter merely optional and indifferent whether or not a believer identifies himself with the Household of Faith. He is under moral obligation to do that. It is for his own spiritual good to do it; it is one of the appointed means of grace; the Church needs his presence and influence, and the cause of Truth is furthered by a combination of Christian influence and effort. All are under law to Christ, and are bound by sacred obligations to obey and please Him. He has ordained that His followers should associate themselves together in these brotherhoods of faith and affection. A Church, therefore, is more than a voluntary society: it is a society under law to Christ” (The New Directory for Baptist Churches, 61-2).
In my opinion, therefore, it is not wise to call the church a voluntary society in our day, unless this is clearly explained from a biblical perspective.

RECOMMENDED READING


