

THE DIFFERENCE THE PRESENCE OF JESUS MAKES

By Wes Linde, MACS

There is a visible difference for Christians who consider how they are the visible presence of Jesus in their communities. Since the beginning of the Christian church, Christians have wrestled with deciding how a church can be relevant within their current cultural contexts,¹ without compromising and *becoming* the current cultural context.² An example of this difference can be seen in Gal 2:11-21.

However, the tension of how to *be in the world and not of the world* is not a past issue. It is a current issue for the church today.

I am a church planter and lead pastor. As we planted the church, we took the opportunity to create a culture that sits in the tension of being in the world and not of it. The members reach out into the community by sharing the love of Jesus with others. The mission statement of the church is “a visible presence of Jesus” in the valley where we are located. This prayerful vision and dream came from wondering what it would look like if the people of God became convinced that they are the visible representation of Jesus in the community in which they live. This article proposes a response to navigating the tension of being in the world and not of it, and the effect a church should have on its surrounding culture.

Jesus gave his followers the purpose of how to live so that they could carry out his work in his physical absence. In the Bible in Luke 9:1-9, Jesus (as part of his ministry here on earth) sent out his disciples, giving them authority and power as his representatives for driving out demons, curing illnesses and proclaiming the Kingdom of God. Jesus also says in John 20:21, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” Jesus then breathes on the disciples, saying to them in verse 22, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” In these verses, there is a commission and purpose given to those who had been in his presence; the disciples were commissioned to do the very thing that Jesus had done in front of them.

Through these examples and the Great Commission found in Matt 28:19-20, Jesus gave the disciples his authority and commissioned them to be his representatives, to be examples of him, so that they instead could represent his physical presence to others.³ This is also seen in the Apostle Paul’s charge in 2 Cor 5:20, which says, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 22.

² Jeff Vanderstelt, *Saturate: Being Disciples Of Jesus In The Everyday Stuff Of Life* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2015), 123.

³ Rambo, Shelly, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living In The Afterlife Of Trauma* (Waco TXs: Baylor University Press, 2017), 8.

making his appeal through us.” As difficult as it may be to understand that Christians could live out Jesus’ purpose in their own lives, or represent Jesus for someone else, Jesus gave his power and authority to his followers to carry out his mission. This is the intent of Jesus, which has significant ramifications for every devoted follower of Jesus.

In the early days of the New Testament church, Jesus’ disciples knew their mission and purpose from the very beginning. They spoke on behalf of Jesus, producing many new believers, as is seen in the book of Acts. The author of Acts recounts that three thousand people were added to the disciples’ numbers in a single day (Acts 2:41). Jesus was confident that they would carry out his mission until his physical return and this was proven true by this example. His continual work was meant to be accomplished through his disciples as they were to be his ambassadors, representing and resembling him to all people.

There are three questions that remain. What is the visible presence of Jesus? What needs to happen inside for a church to engage the culture outside? Finally, “What does a visible presence of Jesus look like in a community that predominantly does not know Jesus?”

What is the Visible Presence of Jesus?

Humanity was made in the image of God. Gen 1:27 says, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Humanity reflects God in how they were created. They bear his image as a people made to belong to him,⁴ as he has placed them in the world as “a creaturely image of the Creator.”⁵ However, there is an added emphasis for those who call themselves followers of God, beyond their being created as the image of the Creator. Those who claim to follow Jesus have an added responsibility to become more like Jesus, who fulfills his role as both fully human and fully God. To understand this differentiation is the first step in understanding how they are the visible presence of Jesus as believers. R. Robert Mulholland Jr. succinctly clarified the purpose of believers as image bearers in relationship with God and others. He writes,

Everything that God has done, is doing and ever will do in our lives to conform us to the image of Christ (which is the image of our wholeness) is not so that we may someday be set in a display case in heaven as trophies of grace.

⁴ Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God’s Kingdom Through Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2015), 160.

⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*: Image-of-God Christology and the non-linear linearity of theology.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47, no. 4 (2004), 6.

All of God's work to conform us to the image of Christ has as its sole purpose that we might become what God created us to be *in relationship with God and others*.⁶

This dual purpose of becoming more like Jesus in relationship with God and others is the foundation of being his visible presence for others. Conforming to the image of Jesus is important, for he is the first and complete example of God's image.

Stanley Grenz explains God's image this way, "...God has endowed humankind as a whole with a vocation: to live as God's representatives within creation, that is, to be that image through whom God's presence and self-manifestation in creation may be found".⁷ As Grenz states, God's intended plan for humanity was to represent him within creation and to be his presence in the world. Jesus' presence is also articulated through Matt 18:20 when he declares that wherever believers gather and wherever they find themselves, he will be with them. The collective group of people who follow Jesus (the church) become the presence of Jesus when they gather. As a church, they are the body of Christ with Jesus as the head of that body (Col 1:18). Each part needs to work together, exemplifying Jesus to others in the church so that the church may be built up (1 Cor 12:12-31). The church gathering together is an important part of being the presence of Jesus. It requires believers to spend time with each other so that they continue to become more like Christ. Jeff Vanderstelt, in his book *Saturate*, states that believers need to experience a "life that is lived close to one another so that they present visibly and accessibly with one another, and, through their interaction, work toward restoration of each other."⁸ This living close to one another starts the process of image bearing and conforming to the image of Christ.

Focusing on the visible presence of Jesus as a church is not only intended for the church's benefit, it also is a benefit to the surrounding community who do not know Christ.⁹ To start being intentional with the greater community around the church is to practice an outward focus of sharing Jesus with others both in word and deed in our daily living. Ken Shigematsu in his book *God in my everything* says, "One of the most visible ways that we share the gospel with others is through our lives. The example of a life transformed by Christ can serve as compelling proof of the reality of God."¹⁰ To take Shigematsu's thought further, the exponential value of a group of believers all sharing their transformed lives together gives a more potent

⁶ M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation*, Expanded Edition (Lisle IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 48-49. The italics are the author's.

⁷ Grenz, "Jesus as the Imago Dei," 6.

⁸ Vanderstelt, *Saturate*, 95.

⁹ Grenz, "Jesus as the Imago Dei," 6.

¹⁰ Ken Shigematsu, *God in My Everything: How an Ancient Rhythm Helps Busy People Enjoy God* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2013), 205.

and pointed example of Christ's presence for the world around them. Shigematsu continues,

As this happens, consciously or unconsciously, we will be commending Christ to people around us through the way we live. Communicating the gospel in this way is often a necessary prelude to sharing it through our words - particularly with those who may oppose it.¹¹

This is the foundation and preliminary work for making a greater impact on the community outside the church. Once this work is established, conversations can be initiated along with actions and have a better opportunity to gain respect and an opportunity to share Christ with those outside the church.

An analogy to consider from scripture is the analogy of light. If focusing on the presence of Jesus within the church stokes the fire or light, people outside the church will not be able to resist its warmth and influence in a dark world. This analogy is seen in Matt 5:14-16, as people will *see the good works that they do and glorify God*. The opportunity for people outside the church to see the good works of believers and their light is to choose to be seen. This can start with simply being physically near those who do not know Christ so that the believer's presence has a direct effect through the carrying of Christ's presence within them. With the analogy of light as an example, people outside the church will not be influenced by the light if the light is not near them, which would mean that they would be left in the dark.

What Needs to Happen Inside for a Church to Engage the Culture Outside?

It is important to describe the several ways that believers in Jesus view the cultures outside the church. Over sixty years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr published *Christ and Culture*, which has challenged churches on this topic in recent decades. Niebuhr proposes many models in his book, but the significance to this article is a solution Niebuhr calls "Christ Transforming Culture." He refers to people who ascribe to this model as 'conversionists' and describes them as follows:

The men who offer what we are calling the conversionist answer to the problem of Christ and culture evidently belong to the great central tradition of the church. Though they hold fast to the radical distinction between God's work in Christ and man's work in culture, they do not take the road of exclusive Christianity into isolation from civilization, or reject its institutions with Tolstoyan bitterness.¹²

¹¹ Shigematsu, *God in My Everything*, 205.

¹² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York NY: HarperOne, 1951), 190.

Niebuhr argues that instead of the church being separate from the world (*Christ against culture*), or too involved with the world (*Christ in culture*), churches should consider how the work of Jesus transforms its surrounding culture for culture's greater good. The work of Jesus through the church is not just for the good of the church, but also for the good of all in a community. The model of *Christ transforming culture* is not a defensive or aggressive posture per se, but an intentional posture that focuses on opportunities before believers to remember their purpose as a local church as the presence of Jesus.

Niebuhr's model of *Christ transforming culture* proposes that believers should be careful not to separate from culture but engage with people in the culture as God is sovereign over the world. They should act out of obedience¹³ to Jesus to bring his Kingdom to fruition on earth, now and not yet until its full consummation at the return of Christ. Christians should not choose to segregate out of fear that the world will convert them away from Christ but should instead take the confident approach that they influence the culture by being involved in people's lives. There are some Christians who believe that the world is evil and the institutions (government, ministry of education, etc.) instituted by God (Rom 13:1) in the surrounding culture could potentially have a negative effect on themselves, their families and/or the church in general.¹⁴ The influence of worldly values on Christians is not necessarily untrue, but a posture of fear has a repercussive and negative effect on Christians who are commissioned by Jesus to engage with the people within the culture around them, as seen in Niebuhr's proposed view. Many Christians become immobilized, not knowing how to interact with people outside the church, due to an unintentional creating of a world that exists parallel to the real world.

There are many reasons why Christians may decide to segregate from the surrounding culture to create a Christian subculture, which often is designed to minimize distractions from living a life solely for Christ. Choosing to not follow the values of the world outside the church does have merit, however, there is a danger. When believers physically disengage and segregate from cultural connections such as jobs, schools, sports leagues, and coffee shops, they lose potential engagement from people outside the church and therefore do not utilize their opportunities or gain any relevance with people outside the church. For example, people within the church could work in a Christian environment like a church or school, register their children in Christian sports leagues and only have social gatherings with people that are Christians. This is a segregational approach that Niebuhr describes as *Christ against culture*. The unintended outcome is that the time spent on these things does not allow enough time for people to get to know neighbours who are not Christian,

¹³ Ibid., 191.

¹⁴ Ibid., 193.

be a presence of Jesus in a secular workplace, or have their children model Jesus to others in the sports community. If being image bearers and the presence of Jesus to others is important, then it also must be what the world outside the church really needs.

Niebuhr's suggested alternative to being separate or against culture is to focus on how *Christ transforms culture*. This alternative would be a "more positive and hopeful attitude"¹⁵ toward cultures. The opportunity that is missed when a church is not focused on transforming the culture around it is the mandate of furthering Christ's Kingdom here and now on earth prior to heaven. As Christ said in Matt 28:18-20, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Disciples of Jesus need to continue to advance his Kingdom for the glory and praise of God and for the sake of their love for humanity. They were commissioned by Jesus to do his work in his physical absence. Therefore, his disciples, which bring his presence with them when they gather, are to carry on his work until he returns.

Many years ago, I listened to a lecture or sermon that impacted me with a rhetorical question. The question was, "If our role as Christians is simply to bring heaven to earth for ourselves, what is the point of us remaining in the world at all? Why would God not just take us to heaven now, if we have already achieved this goal for ourselves of being good Christians?" This question shaped my understanding of the church's purpose in the world - and of the urgent need for new churches to be started today. Believing that there is no relevant purpose to the church is short-sighted and does not have others in mind. People outside the church increasingly believe that there is no relevance to church in their society. Christ's commission to his disciples, seen in Matthew 28 and John 20, teaches believers that until the second coming of Christ, they have work to do, both for the unity of the church in loving one another, and also as examples and representatives to those who are outside the church. If there is no further purpose for Christians this side of eternity, why did Jesus keep his disciples in the world rather than enjoying his presence in the next world? There is more that needs to be accomplished as the visible presence of Jesus in the communities where believers live, work, and worship.

What Does a Visible Presence of Jesus Look Like in a Community that Predominantly Does Not Know Jesus?

¹⁵ Ibid., 191.

How do believers ensure the impact they desire to have in churches and communities? What does it practically look like to be the visible presence of Jesus in a community that predominantly does not know Jesus?

The presence is not found in a program and it is not a matter of thinking *what Jesus would do* in a particular event or situation. The community impact is not solely found in a training module, and the solution is simpler and more empowering than all these things. The impact flows from the believers' identity as obedient and committed followers of Jesus as they aim to be intentional about not segregating in fear. It comes as they aim to be good citizens in their local communities, living their lives daily as functioning members of a church and in community.

The most instinctive move might be for a church to focus inward on itself, looking after only themselves and how they might be good followers of Jesus. There is much value to this perspective as the first step. However, good followers of Jesus that are image-bearers cannot stay on that first step and must take another step. The next step is to feel a conviction to make themselves available to those who do not yet know Christ. Jesus often was found in places of personal prayer and spending time with his disciples, but he was also found in places where he interacted with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners (Matt 21:31b), usually over a meal (Luke 19:1-10), circumstances that may not have been perceived as not proper for the people of God. Jesus did not tell people how to live from the sidelines; he placed himself in situations to show his disciples physically what it looks like to be his presence to others. Therefore, followers of Jesus should consider his example.

When believers realize the significance of their influence as Christ's ambassadors, it is easy to be reminded that they are clothed with Christ (Gal 3:27), they have the fragrance of Christ (2 Cor 2:15), and their conversations are to be "seasoned with salt" (Col 4:6). Thinking through these things should build their confidence to focus on obedience to Christ, to be aware of the difference they make when they walk into a room or a city event. This influence *will be* the visible presence of Jesus. Believers have an automatic effect on the community around them because they are the church. Shigematsu observes that as they live out their transformed lives - as they make Christ's presence visible in the cultures around them - people will notice and be curious about what makes them different.¹⁶ This curiosity can be present in all churches that are unified in Christ.

Christians would all agree that they want those who enter their doors on a Sunday or who commune with Christian people in a small group in a home to say, "This feels different than the world I know." People who do not know Jesus should be attracted to the goodness, kindness, and loveliness of Christians, as Christians practice the presence of Jesus in their lives. This is what Scot McKnight hopes for in

¹⁶ Shigematsu, *God in My Everything*, 205.

the future of churches: a goodness culture that has always been seen from the heart of God. McKnight uses the Hebrew word for “good,” which is *tov*, to remind God’s people of the importance of how a good God wants good for his people. He writes,

In the circle of *tov*, when we practice the habits of empathy and compassion, extending grace, putting people first, telling the truth, promoting justice, and serving others, *tov* emerges in the culture and we all become more like Christ. Goodness (*tov*) becomes an agent that influences every aspect of our lives. And the more we practice *tov*, the more the culture becomes *tov*... and round and round the circle of goodness we go!¹⁷

People outside the church should be curious about the life Christians live in front of them physically, while also feeling convicted as they observe the fruits of the Spirit - kindness, gentleness, patience, self-control - in operation (Gal 5:25).

To have a church culture that focusses on *the visible presence of Jesus*, churches need to help their people be more like Christ - to know what it is like to be in his presence for themselves. Once a congregation has spent time in the presence of Jesus themselves, they will know how to be the visible presence of Jesus in their greater community. They can start immediately with the kindness of loving one another. In 1 John 4:12, the Apostle John points out that there is a stark result that comes from the heart of loving other believers which cannot be missed and is completely relevant to reaching those outside the church. John writes, “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.” In sum, the way for people to see God, both in the church or outside it, starts with people loving each other. Once they accomplish this visibly, God is seen living in them, and his love is made complete in them *visibly*. They can love God, love others and be the visible presence of God in their local community.

To conclude, the posture of Moses in Exod 33:12-15 could be considered in the understanding of God’s presence and the difference he makes as Christians go and make disciples. Moses said to the Lord, “You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people,’ but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. You have said, ‘I know you by name and you have found favour with me.’ If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you. Remember that this nation is your people.” The Lord replied, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” Then Moses said to him, “If your presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.”

Going forward as a church without the knowledge of who believers are in Christ hurts and stifles the influence of the church in its community. The knowledge

¹⁷ McKnight, Scot, *A Church Called Tov: Forming A Goodness Culture*, (Illinois: Tyndale, 2020), 201.

of who believers have in Christ, who they are in Christ, and who they are in reference to the local community will strengthen their purpose. What is needed are many lives to teach and show by example how to be the visible presence of Jesus to others, so that many who do not know Christ will be convicted, convinced, and choose to follow him for themselves. Modelling the presence of Jesus opens up conversations of sharing through words the good news of Jesus for those who do not yet believe. Once the many are convicted, convinced and the choice is made one by one, these new followers will exemplify the presence of Jesus for themselves, and they will make Jesus known to others in their daily lives.

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