

Church on the Fringe

Many of us are old enough to remember the glory days of the church: those days following World War II, when men returned from the war and young families began to build homes in the suburbs. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the church was already becoming more diverse, and it thrived in that atmosphere. You could open the door of a new building and people just showed up.

The church was part of the dominant culture, but as we entered into the 60's, the church began to lose influence and prestige, and, began a decline that continues today.

I'm not going to evaluate or discuss the decline. We've been-there-done-that *ad nauseum*. And, now we find ourselves no longer part of the dominant culture. We are a minority; in fact, we find ourselves on the fringe of a culture that no longer understands us—a culture that no longer speaks or understands our language. And, while, when we move outside the four walls of the church, we easily recognize a serious disconnect between the church and that culture; and, while we generally are comfortable in both realities, we flounder when we try to relate one to the other.

And that's not all bad. In a sense, the church has returned to its natural roots. The church was born on the fringe of society, and virtually always has floundered whenever it found itself in a position of dominance. Historically, when the church has thrived, it has been from the fringe.

That's the way it was with Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell as Disciple folk stepped outside the dominant church and shared their faith on the fringe called the American frontier. That's the way it was with Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Knox and others challenged the church at the time of its greatest power and domination, and ventured out to share the grace of Christ on that fringe called the Reformation.

And that's how it was in the beginning. The church emerged out of a fringe movement, with twelve men who followed a renegade rabbi named Jesus, and then lead the way into a culture that was hostile to their very existence. Here's how it all began, on the fringe.

MATTHEW 10:5-15 (NRSV) *These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, ⁶but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ⁷As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' ⁸Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. ⁹Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, ¹⁰no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food. ¹¹Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. ¹²As you enter the house, greet it. ¹³If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. ¹⁴If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. ¹⁵Truly I tell*

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you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town.

When the church is in a position of **dominance**, it expects people to come to it. "Come home; Come Ho - o - ome. Ye who are weary, **come** ho - o - ome." Come to church. Come to Jesus. Always, "come". And the direction always is toward us. And that may be the greatest difference between the church of 1949 and the church of today. Today, the church ministers in a culture that will not respond when we say, "Come." Never mind why. There are dozens of valid explanations. Today, as in every era in which the church has thrived, the operative verb **is not** "come"; it's "go." The church **is sent**.

The instructions are specific: (1) to whom are they sent? "Don't go to Gentiles or Samaritans; go to "the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel." Twice in Matthew, Jesus uses that phrase. Here, he sends the disciples to them, and in Matthew 15, when he meets a Canaanite woman who begs him to cast a demon from her daughter, he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

These "lost sheep" may have been the Amhaarez, "people of the land"—country people—people with no awareness of the law. And for that reason, they were held in contempt by the Pharisees. In John 7:49, the Pharisees say, "This crowd, (the Amhaarez) who do not know the law, are accursed."

But, Jesus' attitude is different. In the parable of the wedding feast, when the invited guests don't respond, the host sends his servants out into the streets to round up everyone they can find—street people: the Amhaarez.

The second part of the instructions is rooted directly in the activity of Jesus. The commissioning of the twelve is not set in isolation. Look at the context: prior to this text is a summary of what Jesus has been doing in and around Galilee—teaching in the synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and infirmity.

It is out of his mission that the mandate for his disciples develops. This is no lonely task of blazing a trail. They are invited to join a mission already established and undergirded by Jesus himself: "proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons."

No rules or requirements for getting into heaven; no condemnation of specific immorality; in fact, Jesus' greatest criticism was aimed, not at sinners, but at religious hypocrites. When I was growing up, hypocrisy was going out drinking and dancing on Saturday night at showing up at church on Sunday morning. For Jesus, hypocrisy was using one's religious doctrines to avoid serving the poor.

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Finally, the disciples are to go without the kind of preparation we might expect. No food, luggage, money; not even a change of clothes or a staff. And they are to go barefoot. All three Synoptic Gospels report this event, and the list is consistent in all three. The disciples are sent with only the clothes on their back—nothing that possibly could be related to wealth, status, or power. The kingdom is not to be associated with those things. Mark says Jesus gave them authority over the unclean spirits; they are sent with that authority, and nothing else.

I wonder if the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel would equate today with those who call themselves “spiritual but not religious”—spiritual refugees on the fringe of society—spiritually homeless, wandering aimlessly, scrounging for spiritual food wherever they can find it—whatever they can find to fill their spiritual craving. I wonder if their scrounging satisfies the emptiness of their souls.

Some “Church people” may look with contempt at them, as the Pharisees looked upon their first century counterparts—like some in political leadership today look with contempt upon the poor and the physically homeless—blaming the victim. I wonder if there’s really that much difference between spiritual and physical homelessness.

But I don’t wonder in the least whether Jesus would send us among them, wherever we find them.

We’re “church people.” We know how to “do church”. How do we minister to people who don’t know how to “do church”—who, in fact, see us in the role of the Pharisees of Jesus’ time?

Now, I’d like to think that when they point to us and say we’re the reason they’re not in church—I’d like to think they’re mistaking us for those rigid fundamentalists who pile rule upon rule, and condemn every behavior that doesn’t conform to their rigid, Puritanical morality.

I’d like to think that.

But, more importantly, I’d like to know that I’m living my life so that when I go to them, and they look at me, they see—the one who sent me—the one they’re scrounging in every theological trash can to find.