

Rebuild



Then they will rebuild the ancient ruins, They will raise up the former devastations, And they will repair the ruined cities, The desolations of many generations. (Isaiah 61:4)

Is There *Really* a Difference?

Paradigm Makes a Difference [The Conclusion of a Five Part Series]

"Church as believers attending services vs. Church as Community," which of the two should we choose? Sure, one may reflect the Bible's cultural setting better than the other, but, really, do the differences between the two models really make that much of a difference as to how we live our Christian life? Does it *really* matter which we choose?

First, we must see that the Church of the Bible is very different from the American Church, as different as a lily from a lily-pad. The Church of the first centuries was unambiguously communal. The popular American Church is individualistic. Yes, there is a difference.

What difference does this make? The New Testament model promotes a way of life that calls God's People to live in committed love; the other accommodates a self-absorbed individualism that tries to not interfere with our desire to live this way. Yes, it matters.

Now, let's look more closely at how these distinctions contrast with one another:

Church As "Attending Services" vs. Church As Relationships

- *Distinction:* In one setting, people sit next to one another to watch, sing, and worship and then get in their cars and leave in their cars the way movie goers leave after the movie; in the other, people are encouraged to see one another as members of their [God's] family-

before, during, and after services.

- *Practical Significance:* In the first model, gossip, slander, unforgiveness, and other unloving acts are passed over without much notice (each minding his/her own business). Each is "polite and anonymous." In a Christian Community, all such unloving behavior sticks out like pregnant ballerinas dancing in construction boots. Because people see they are called to love like the Lord Who loved them (John 13:33,34), such un-Christian behavior is addressed and conflict is resolved.

Church as "Presenters of Gospel Words" vs. Church as the Gospel

- *Distinction:* In today's Church, the Gospel is primarily "a presentation" aimed at getting people to assent to a message. In the Early Church, the Christian People saw their Covenant Community as the embodiment of Christ's Message and attested to Christ by how they lived their lives. To accept this incarnational presentation of the Gospel demanded more than a raised hand, or a walk down an aisle; it required the sincere seeker to join him/herself to the Community and learn how to live for God.

- *Practical Significance:* Many today wrongly think that they can accept Christ without having to make major adjustments in thought, values or lifestyle. This certainly is not the example Christ left His disciples.

Rebuild is published bi-monthly by Holy Trinity Orthodox Church for the benefit of the greater Church. If you know others who would enjoy *Rebuild*, let us know and we would be happy to add them as subscribers (subscription is free). It is assumed that all who receive *Rebuild* appreciate receiving it. For either subscription requests, or terminations you may contact us by letter or phone (970) 221-4847. If you wish, tax deductible donations may be made out to "H.T.O.C." (August/September 97)

Church As An *Influence* On Society vs. Church as *Being* a Reflection of God's [Alternate] Society

- *Distinction:* The American Church is often caught up in the political process, trying to "get out the vote" to support legislation sympathetic to Christian values. The Early Church, in contrast, did not give her efforts to Christianize the world, but rather sought to be a light to the world as a reflection of a People who lived in love under God's Government.

- *Practical Significance:* The modern Church is often seen by the unbelieving world to be little different than any other "political interest group" bent on using its power to influence others to agree to her agenda. The Church of earlier centuries did not rely on the political process to make her point, but relied upon the loving, dedicated witness of her people. Today's Church says, "Don't *look* at us, *listen* to us," whereas the Early Church boldly challenged her hearers, "If you want to know the ways of God, 'come and see'" (John 1:26).

Church/Denomination Dictated by Individual Style vs. Church as a Reflection of God's Love

• *Distinction:* The Church of today often justifies her divisions by stating that the market demands variety; i.e., the greater number of options that each church can provide, the greater number and variety of people who will be touched. Although this approach makes business sense, it is not the way of the Gospel. The Early Church saw the essence of Christ's preaching to be about God's love. From her inception, the Church of the first centuries believed that Christ's message could only be preached in Holy Spirit power to the degree her members lived in love. Unfortunately, it seems today's church has displaced New Testament love with marketing strategies, and believes she can effectively preach the Gospel with or without a loving context.

- *Practical Significance:* The Gospel we preach fails not because we do not offer enough options, but because we do not love enough. When the world saw Jew and Greek embrace one another, the world was forced to accept an other-worldly explanation: God's love is greater than any human barrier. This is the same conclusion that the world is supposed to draw when they hear and see the Gospel today (John 17:20-24).

What to Look For

How can you tell the difference between a Community and a Church made up of people who are merely living as individuals? Here are a few things to look for:

• In a congregation of individuals, people *receive* sacraments, but in the Church seeking to be community, the people are committed to *reflect* the sacraments they receive. (I.e., in one instance, people "take" Communion, in the other, people seek to *live in* Communion; in one, people "get" baptized, in the other, people seek to honor the Covenant meaning of baptism by committing their lives to Christ, *and* His brethren.) 1 Corinthians 10:16,17; 12:12-14.

• In a non-community church there may be much teaching (e.g., family life, Biblical analysis, world trends, self-esteem, etc.), but in a Church which honestly seeks to be a community the teaching emphasis falls on learning how to love God and one another (i.e., the same emphasis of the New Testament Epistles.)

• In the church of "private" believers, people primarily get together because of an activity (Bible Study, evangelism, worship, small group). In a Community, people get together because their commitment to Christ mandates that they share their lives with one another.

• In a non-relationship based church, people are basically strangers to one another, and there is little exhortation for the people to know or trust one another. In the Christian Community, people are continually exhorted to know and be known, to trust, and be faithful to honor the trusts given into their care.

• In the "Church of the Individual," the focus of the person's life has little or nothing to do with his/her relationships with other church members; i.e., how one lives his/her life, what the person is living for, and how one makes important life decisions show that their "church life" has no connection with their "real life." In contrast, those seeking to live in Community have given themselves to love God and one another in such a significant way that these Christians want the input of their brethren.

• The church of the independent Christian encourages people to look to her as an agency where one can attend to their needs, whereas the Church that is Christian Community equips people to love so they can meet the needs of others.

Yes. There really is a difference.

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