

ATTRACTIONAL OR INCARNATIONAL?

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Attractional Model of the Church

Concept: “Come and see!” This model assumes that we must bring people to church in order to encounter Jesus. It stresses the need for creative and dynamic church services, as well as powerful speakers and practical ministry programs. The attractional model assumes a common language and moral discourse between society and church. The church exhorts people already civilized by Christianity to “come and hear.”

Mission: Missions is one of many tasks the church *does*. Missions is usually performed by specially trained persons sent to foreign lands to evangelize pagans. One author wrote: “Evangelism, when present, is usually defined as member recruitment at the local level and as church planting at the regional level.”

Criticisms: When Christianity dominated culture, there was little desire to understand world religions, worldview, popular culture, or alternative spiritualities. There was little engagement with people who had radically different priorities and practices. Over time, the church hid in its “ghetto,” remaining aloof and unaware of the antithetical culture around it. We now live in post-Christian, post-modern society dominated by worldviews and structures contrary to the Christian faith. Many people are not enculturated by Christianity and are not inclined to “come and see.”

Further, within our consumer culture today the church is marketed as just one of many vendors of religious goods and services. Only the best programs and services survive. Congregants are passive and consumptive. Church becomes a venue for “one-stop shopping”: personal and family services, growth in self-esteem, and a place to network and socialize.

Potential: Imagine a church that is not dominated by consumerism or Christendom. Rather, the attractional church sees itself as an outpost of heaven and embraces Jeremiah’s advice to the exiles to “seek the welfare of the city” -- our post-modern city -- but not at the cost of assimilation to relativism, individualism or consumerism. This church listens to culture and seeks creative and loving ways of *critical* engagement.

This church avoids any identification of theology or practice with any particular ideology, race, or economic class. It models different values regarding money, sex, race, and power. It is committed to social justice and compassion. This church is attractional as an *alternative city*, seeking to live in love and truth as disciples of Jesus Christ in the “present evil world” (Gal 1:4).

Incarnational Model of the Church

Concept: “Go and serve!” This model assumes that Christians must go out and engage non-believers within their post-Christian, post-modern culture. It stresses the need to take the church to the people, rather than bringing the people to church.

Missional: Missions is not merely what the church does, but what the church *is*. Jesus told His disciples: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21). God has a mission and His people are “sent” into the world to incarnate (demonstrate) the Gospel in the midst of an alien cultural environment. Christians should become part of their communities, serving the common good, and building relationships with non-believers so that their lives become the message.

Criticisms: Within our relativistic, post-modern culture this can mean compromise and assimilation. At a workshop on incarnational ministry a Christian leader was told: “‘The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood’... Throughout the workshop, I heard many techniques for adopting a second culture, listening to others, and immersing myself in an urban neighborhood...Jesus provided the model for how to immerse oneself in another culture, but the specific content of his life and teaching, and his death and resurrection, were beside the point.” Our post-Christian, post-modern culture fosters the minimizing of church and doctrine, stresses God’s love rather than wrath, and validates other religions and spiritualities.

Potential: Imagine a church that understands itself as the “sent people of God.” This church goes to and serves groups marginalized by the dominant culture. It views with discernment worldview and spirituality in order to demonstrate *and* communicate the Gospel. This church adapts worship and ministry to engage the non-Christian community. It avoids religious speech and practice when dealing with unbelievers. It thinks theologically and apologetically about its cultural-religious context.

This church avoids any identification of theology or practice with any particular ideology, race, or economic class. It models different values regarding money, sex, race, and power. It is committed to social justice and compassion. This church incarnates (demonstrates) the Gospel through community service and true Christian fellowship.