[HOW CHRISTIANS OUTSOURCED THE GREAT COMMISSION](http://meettheneed.org/blog/2022/04/how-christians-outsourced-the-great-commission/?fbclid=IwAR0tLA1WuuxPIzQup69-rKzVQZEbmKViI0JWeRRnPwfyWC0M4qk3z0MdblE)

[Apr 07, 22](http://meettheneed.org/blog/2022/04/how-christians-outsourced-the-great-commission/)

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Outsourcing is a term not typically associated with churches.  Businesses outsource functions deemed non-essential or that can be performed at a lower cost by other companies.  Back-office services like accounting and IT are often contracted out, whereas most corporations hesitate to outsource customer-facing activities like sales and marketing.  Scripture lists several core functions every church should carry out, including preaching, teaching, prayer, discipleship, missions, and compassion.  However, American church growth models have rationalized and justified outsourcing certain “customer-facing” activities by changing the definition of “church” and its intended “customer”.

Increasingly “church” is viewed as a place and pastors, not people in the pews.  Churchgoers expect excellent sermons and service, including programs that meet the spiritual and social needs of their families.  Pastors feel pressure to live up to those expectations, and not to ask too much of members when other churches just down the road provide so much and demand so little.  Those dynamics position Christ-followers as “customers”, not their rightful role as the [embodiment of church](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+peter+2%3A9&version=NIV).  The ekklesia (“assembly of called out ones”) are actually Kingdom employees, charged with pursuing the real “customer” – those in each member’s circle of influence who don’t know Jesus.  Since “insiders” have replaced “outsiders” as “customers”, church leaders feel more at liberty to outsource externally-focused functions (like disciple-making and compassion) that the Bible considers “customer-facing”.

**The Danger of Outsourcing**

As retail consumers, we can tell when companies we do business with have outsourced customer service.  It’s more difficult to communicate and get the answers we need from less informed and lower paid representatives who don’t work for the company.  Likewise, the unchurched across America have noticed that most churches have largely outsourced “customer-facing” activities like discipleship and local missions over the past few decades.  Non-believers also realize that churchgoers, who replaced them as the Church’s target “customer”, have essentially outsourced their responsibilities (to be the hands and feet of Jesus all week long) to pastors (on the weekends).  Even non-Christians appreciate what Jesus taught and did, but most don’t think Christians sound or act much like Him.  Jesus promised that His [authentic followers will have enemies](http://meettheneed.org/blog/2022/03/if-everyone-likes-you-theres-a-problem/), but believers and churches are [making far more enemies](http://meettheneed.org/blog/2022/03/if-everyone-likes-your-church-theres-a-problem/) today than they should have because society is receiving such poor “customer service” now that discipleship and compassion have been outsourced.

If the “[lost](http://meettheneed.org/blog/2021/10/giving-wrong-directions-to-lost-people/)” in the community were still seen as the church’s primary “customer”, church leaders would not have cut back on those critical functions.  However, when contemporary church growth frameworks positioned members as “customers” and not “workers”, tithes became compensation to pastors for assuming ownership of the Great Commission.  Churchgoers’ roles were reduced to inviting those who don’t worship Jesus to a worship service, an oxymoron.  No longer would congregants have to endure the discomfort and awkwardness of sharing the Gospel, responding to tough questions, and making disciples.

Centralizing those functions placed an overwhelming burden on a few paid “professionals” to pull off spectacular weekend events.  Pastors continue to burn out today, some even leaving the ministry, from taking over members’ jobs while tending to their normal duties.  As a result, many succumbed to the temptation to outsource other biblical functions like poverty alleviation that they no longer saw as “customer-facing” (given the transition from an externally focused definition of the “customer”).  In other words, churches offloaded work they should be doing to cater to the demands of church consumers, which they shouldn’t be doing.

Biblical discipleship was outsourced to ministries who specialize in developing discipleship curriculum that they, ironically, then try to convince churches to adopt.  Front-line, perpetual engagement in compassion and causes, a central function of churches for roughly 1900 years, was outsourced to government, charities, and parachurch ministries.  However, none of those can offer what people need most – the teaching, worship and fellowship provided by churches.

**The Delusion of Outsourcing**

Besides lightening the workloads of church leaders, outsourcing compassion and discipleship to non-church entities ensured congregants didn’t have to bear that burden either.  Asking “customers” to perform the time-consuming, messy task of getting deeply involved in the lives of the (materially) poor and new believers would send many running to the exits.  Yet replacing discipleship and compassion with retention strategies like enhancing facilities and planning the perfect Sunday service (for those who shouldn’t be considered “customers”) didn’t stem the decline of churches in America in growth, impact, influence, and perception (by those who should have been considered “customers”).

Discipleship within most churches is now relegated to [small group meetings](http://blog.meettheneed.org/2015/10/why-small-groups-arent-making-disciples) rather than intensive and personalized formats that promote life change and accountability.  Outreach is generally transactional and self-serving, not alleviating poverty but perpetuating it through occasional events that “market” the church but produce dependence and shame, not ongoing solutions to real-world problems.

An interesting finding from our work with thousands of churches is that those who cut back on compassion activities (to reduce staff and member workload) also tend to ratchet back discipleship efforts (to reduce staff and member workload).  The two go hand-in-hand since fewer local missions activities means fewer opportunities for evangelism and discipleship – and consequently less need for training on how to share our faith and lead people closer to Jesus.

However, Jesus said [serving the poor](http://meettheneed.org/blog/2020/09/is-church-or-state-more-responsible-for-helping-the-poor/) and the [Great Commission](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew+28%3A18-20&version=NIV) are not expendable.  He repeatedly insinuated the irreconcilability of being His follower and ignoring poverty.  And Jesus’ parting words before His ascension was a call to discipleship.  No church’s assessment that (year-round) local missions and (intensive) disciple-making don’t align with its growth goals or customer definitions can diminish their importance to God.  No church should fail to perform or outsource the Lord’s non-negotiable mandates under any circumstances.  Not coincidentally, it’s the dearth of discipleship in America’s churches that led to the outsourcing of discipleship and poverty alleviation – because few believers understand how emphatically Jesus stressed every Christian’s obligation to participate in both.

**The Disintegration of Outsourcing**

Jesus modeled prayer, care and share – an integrated approach to seeking the Father’s will and demonstrating His love to open ears to hear the good news.  Outsourcing evangelism to pastors (and missionaries), discipleship to ministries, and compassion to non-church organizations creates a detrimental dichotomy between care and share.  The body of Christ was designed for [seamless integration](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1+Corinthians+12%3A12-31&version=NIV).  Scripture lays out [a number of key roles](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+4%3A11-13&version=NIV) that should be [distributed among pastors and members](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts+6%3A1-7&version=NIV) based on skills and [giftings](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Romans+12%3A6-8&version=NIV), but those instructions do not advise or condone divesting entire areas of responsibility, entrusting them to those outside the Church.

Further, there are certain customer-facing activities like prayer, evangelism, discipleship, and serving the poor that all members are called to perform.  Unlike corporations where sales, marketing and customer service are conducted by different employees and departments, no Kingdom employee (i.e. Christian) is exempt from engagement in reaching out to the Church’s true “customer” – those desperately in need of help and the hope found only in Christ.

Within the local church, all hands should be on deck to perform those functions, yet we divide up the Great Commission, abdicating discipleship to “professionals” and leaving poverty alleviation to charitably-inclined Christians.  Christian business people (“kings”) departmentalize the sacred and secular, working all week in commerce to fund church operations (“priests”).  Churches plan weekend service projects (which often do [more harm than good](http://blog.meettheneed.org/2016/02/why-church-events-often-do-more-harm-than-good/)), recruiting retirees who have time to volunteer while not expecting young families to do much more than bring a shoebox to church for Operation Christmas Child.  If pastors championed discipleship, all members would understand that workplaces are mission fields and that families must do more than just take care of their own.  We should all be surrogate chaplains wherever we work and pastors of our neighborhoods.  No one has an inside track to the Father – we’re all children of God.  Even forming church committees or appointing groups is another form of outsourcing when the function being partitioned should be required of all church members.  Instead, church leaders should seek to instill a pervasive culture of evangelism, discipleship, and compassion.

Similarly, we fragment the body of Christ across those functions, bifurcating Church into local churches and parachurch ministries.  Segmenting care and share is a relatively new and ill-advised phenomenon, failing to convey the deep concern churches should have for the materially poor based on Jesus’ clear commands to care for them.  Society senses the detachment that fuels transactional, convenient compassion at most churches.  It costs so much to keep the machine running, investing in the amenities and programs demanded by consumers, that churches have no choice but to leave relational, needle-moving social work to others.  Some denominations even operate centralized, shared-services organizations that churches pay to perform “customer-facing” functions that each local church should own as part of its normal operations.

**Recapping the Logic…**

The outsourcing decisions of churchgoers and church leaders are closely related…

* Members ARE the Church – Kingdom workers, not “customers”
* All Christians are commanded to reach the Church’s biblical “customer”, those who don’t know Jesus
* Churches unwittingly treat churchgoers like “customers” when expectations of members are lowered and expectations of staff are raised in hopes everyone will come back next Sunday
* That power shift encourages and enables church shoppers (consumers) to outsource their “customer-facing” functions (like personal evangelism and discipleship) to church leaders
* Pastors became extremely busy doing members’ jobs for them and trying to placate the wrong “customer” (through performance, program, and event-driven expressions of church)
* Churches have little time left over for (and less interest in) “customer-facing” functions like discipleship and compassion that would have engaged the right “customers” in the right ways
* Therefore, most churches have essentially outsourced those activities to other organizations

As a result, the intended “customers” feel ignored, fueling widespread cynicism about churches.

**It’s Your Turn…**

How can churchgoers reclaim their position as the personification of “church”, providing pastors with the bandwidth to reclaim the Church’s responsibility to lead the way in discipleship and compassion?