

Outer Circle Churches

The Church is at her best when she specializes in outcasts – the more outrageous brand of outcasts the better. This is the kind of church I call an “Outer Circle Churches,” which are made up of “[Outer Circle Christians](#),” the title of a recent essay I posted on Luke 15. Here’s a Readers Digest version of that writing:

Jesus is not so much looking for *Inner Circle favorites* but *Outer Circle followers* who are willing to collaborate with him in loving and serving the least and the left out. His not-very-messiah-like-looking mission disgusted the favorite spiritual sons of the day prompting him to challenge them to rethink their sequestration away from undesirables and follow his example to engage with the cast offs of their society.

I think Jesus wants us to avoid all forms of entitled elitist Inner Circle attitudes and accompany him at the table with “with tax collectors and sinners.” These so-called “Outer Circle Christians” tend to gather with others of similar stripe in what I’d like to call “*Outer Circle Churches*.”

As a former church planter myself I’m always on the lookout for young church planters in my city. I’ve found that it’s a rare individual who aspires to begin where Jesus began – at the *bottom* of the societal barrel. (See the [Jesus – The Middle-Class Messiah?](#)) Most church planters are trained to begin with the well heeled and then, if they receive a distinct call from the Spirit at some distant point in the future, they might create a program to reach out to the poor. The logic is that you have to start with the rich because they’ll pay the bills. Then you can move on to do some community serving and give a slice to the needy so you can feel good about yourself when you’re spending most of the budget on lighting and state of the art sound equipment. But Jesus didn’t seem to care much about paying the bills or acquiring the best apparatus for his mission.

I’ve lived in a middle-class home all my life and have pastored churches of similar socio-economics. I like comfortable church chairs, adequate heating and air-conditioning as needed; and I prefer well-performed and sound engineered worship music as much as anyone. It’s not my first choice to sit next to someone – in church or anywhere else – who smells like they haven’t showered since the Bush administration. They don’t have to smell good, just not bad. But when I think about the Jesus story I have a hard time trying to fit his way of life into my middle-class preferences.

Besides its stunning skyline, cultural and ethnic diversity, and free outdoor concerts, one of San Francisco’s features I love most is that there are a lot of poor people here. I’m not glad about their poverty but where people are hurting and hungry, God is somewhere close by – and I like being around people he’s close to.

God spends a lot of time thinking about the destitute. A decade ago when I first started to notice this ubiquitous theme in the Bible and began to challenge our middle class suburban church to think about it too, their response was less than abandoned enthusiasm. But could I blame them when their supposed Bible expert pastor had been so glacially slow to get on board with God’s passion for the poor himself?

When I first moved to the City I had an experience that reconfigured my paradigm about Outer Circle people. I was speaking at a faith-based drug rehab facility for men in the Mission District. We were crammed into a small room, not well ventilated (not “well” anything), with two-dozen careworn men, each battling their drug demons. This place houses, treats, and trains recovering addicts to live clean and sober lives in the way of Jesus. This is no lavish rehab center for the rich and famous, complete with swimming pools, five star cuisine, and putting greens. The men here, whose addiction kicked

them to the curb, sleep in a bunk bed dorm (in dire need of paint, ceiling to floor), shower in a decrepit shared stall, and eat whatever the center can afford that month.

I walked in to the stifling air of poorly bathed bodies and stale cigarettes and introduced myself to a few of the men gathering for the meeting. As the service began I sat down on a bent metal folding chair and had the sense that I was there for more than to tell them what I know. They belted out worship songs to YouTube videos projected on a large screen TV. Most sang and shouted and gave testimonies of how twisted up their lives had been and how God was untangling them.

At the end of my talk they played another YouTube song and gave an altar call for those who wanted to dedicate or rededicate themselves to Jesus and/or to sobriety. It was during that concluding song that I heard the voice of God as clearly as any former time in my life. It wasn't audible, but there were words like the song lyrics projected on the TV screen. The words I "heard" or "saw" or "felt" were: *"These are your people."*

"What exactly does that mean? 'My people?' Are you saying I should join this organization? Are you sending me to the City to do a drug and alcohol rehab ministry?" On and on went my overactive mind when the Spirit gently placed his parental hand on this child's mouth and whispered, *"Hush."*

I came away with a conviction that *"these people"* didn't necessarily mean that particular roomful of desperate men per se. "My people," my new circle of friends, were the desperate and indigent, the defeated and diseased, the pitiful and the poor. I can't say that everyone is supposed to adopt "these people" as their people per se, but I know I'm becoming an Outer Circle Christian and an advocate for Outer Circle Churches.

I have no doubt that Jesus wants to say to all disciples at their end of life performance review: *"I was hungry, and instead of stuffing yourself to obesity you bought me lunch. I was thirsty, and you quit buying sparkling mineral water and dug clean water wells in my community. I was a stranger, and instead of having me deported, you got to know me and realized that I left my country to make enough money to send some home to my starving family. I needed clothes, and instead of buying more shoes to add to your grand collection, you took me shopping for my first pair of new jeans. I was sick, and instead of pointing out the behaviors that led to my sickness, you took me to the doctor and paid my bill. I was in prison and you didn't say I was getting what I deserved, but you befriended me on visiting days and helped me find a job when I got out."*

I'll concede that each of us has a unique call and not everyone is supposed to spend all his/her free time with the most socio-economically destitute and spiritually twisted. On the other hand, I feel pretty strongly that our cradled Christian community needs a kick in the #%*# to become more sensitized to the least and last among our neighbors worldwide. After all how is it that it's not news when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but when the stock market loses two points, it's on every church's prayer list?

"They (Peter, James, and John) asked me to continue to remember the poor... which I was inclined to do..." Galatians 2:10

We Baby Boomers saved in or as a result of the Jesus Movement had to fight our way into a Church that didn't like our lifestyles, our hair, our music, or our hippie ideas. Now we're all "grown up" and have gotten the Church just like we like it – interestingly enough, it's about as conservative as our predecessors'. And there are outrageous outcasts, including gays and liberals and homeless people who want in, even worse, claim to *be in*, and wonder why we don't talk to them at the dinner table. You see the irony in this, right?

When someone is church shopping these days, their short list of criteria usually include such qualities as “[good worship](#)” (my least favorite of all Christianese phrases!), good preaching, good facilities, and good programs. I propose that compassion for the outcast belongs on that list, if not at the top of it! When, as a pastor, I was “interviewed” by a potential member, in thirty years no one ever asked me, “What does this church do for the poor and marginalized?” I fielded all kinds of other inquiries: “*What do you believe about tithing? Is your worship contemporary or traditional? Do you have a Women’s Ministry?*” But no one ever inquired about how we served the Outer Circle in our community and beyond. Hmmm.

Recently I attended a church wherein the pastor directed us to get in small groups to pray for each other. In the group that I joined was a guy who was half hammered (maybe three-quarters)! He explained that he’d just lost his wife to cancer and admitted that he’d been self-medicating with *Johnny Walker* ever since. He asked us to pray for him to regain his sobriety and to move on with his life. During his prayer request he used the “F-word” several times and a few other choice terms from his decidedly un-churched vocabulary. A woman in the group chimed in, “My daughter committed suicide this week. I know what you’re going through.” Upon which she put her hand on Drunk Guy’s shoulder and prayed an amazing prayer for comfort and sobriety. That’s an Outer Circle Church at work.

It’s been said that 11:00 Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. As true as that is, I propose that churches are not only segregated by ethnicity, but also by socio-economics and social class. Whatever form of caste system we tolerate in America it’s most apparent in our churches. As it is in society as a whole, our families of worship are divided among have’s and have-not’s – Inner and Outer Circle Churches.

Some churches are so wrapped up in being the most spiritually advanced church in town that cast offs don’t even appear on their radar. They probably don’t actually think they are, but act like they believe they’re closer to Jesus and nearer his ideal model of church. *“If anyone does it right, we do. We’re in the center of God’s purposes. We’re like the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples – Peter, James, and John. He shows us stuff that he doesn’t show others and commissions us to do things that others can’t do because they don’t know what we know. And by token of our impressive numerical growth we have an assignment to show them how to do it better and to create a movement of other Inner Circle Churches like us.”*

I want to challenge us to think about is another kind of church community – an “Outer Circle Church,” and here are some of my opinions about some characteristics of an “Outer Circle Church.”

An Outer Circle Church views the poor as people and don’t care that much about how they got that way.

“Of all the preposterous things nothing exceeds the criticisms of the habits of the poor by the well warmed, well housed, and well fed.” Herman Melville

The most spiritual Jews of Jesus’ day had an unspoken caste system of sorts that was partially based on geography. It mattered to them where you lived. Of course, they objected most to anyone who lived outside of the Holy Land – all Gentile dogs. A close second on the hated list were the cultist Samaritans who lived in what we call the West Bank today. What they believed was all wrong and one was better off keeping a healthy distance from them. Next, if you lived in Galilee you lived too far from Jerusalem and too close to the Gentile world for their taste and were therefore viewed with contempt. (That’s why they called it “Galilee of the Gentiles”).

There was one more region and people group, not so prominent in the New Testament, that in spite of the opinions of his fellow Jews, Jesus loved and reached out to – Perea on the other side of the Jordan. The spiritual elite viewed the Pereans, not so much with *disdain*, but with *indifference*. No one ever went to the other side of Jordan unless passing through to avoid Samaria. It was just a place to *pass through* and a people to *pass by* on your way to another place, a better place. The Pereans were their pariahs, *persona non grata*. They were an overlooked population in the days of Jesus. But Jesus spent a considerable amount of time, not just passing through, but pursuing those he loved there. Not surprisingly, Luke, the only Gentile who wrote books in the Bible, recorded more of Jesus' teachings in Perea.

I make this point in order to ask us the question: Who do we overlook or blithely pass by on the way to someplace better where there are more important people than these Perea-types? Who are our "Pereans" – the unpersons that we simply don't notice? I suggest that in the American Dream Churches the poor are often our Pereans, the ones who we unintentionally overlook if not actively avoid.

Maybe it's because we overthink the reasons for someone's destitution. *After all, they may be addicts or thieves or sick with AIDS or Cirrhosis or lice! And why are they poor anyway? Why can't they just get a job?* Someone told me recently, "I struggle with the reasons why some people in this country are in such a destitute state and are out on the street begging." He confessed that he was less sympathetic because he wondered whose fault it was that they were in their position. When he asked me how I dealt with that, I responded that if one is going to do community development among the urban poor, that's a relevant issue. I said that since my assignment is more spiritual transformation than social renovation (which is a profoundly needed ministry in the city), in order to do my part I sort of have to put the causes of their destitution out of my mind. If I get hung up on why they're poor I might forget to do what Jesus taught us to do – to serve and preach the good news to the poor. I don't mean that I don't care enough to listen carefully to their stories, most of them horrific and heart wrenching. I most certainly do. But in order to befriend them as fellow travellers, the reason for their poverty is not my main concern.

When I was in elementary school we did "show and tell" where we brought something from home to *show* to the class and *tell* about it. That's our mission among the poor and the rich, to show his love in tangible ways and tell about him.

I think Outer Circle Churches just love their neighbors, especially the most disadvantaged ones, and let agape take them where it takes them.

An Outer Circle Church doesn't so sanitize their church that the unsanitary feel unwanted and unwelcome.

"People are dying in Africa because they don't have the \$3 mosquito nets that would prevent malaria, while churches argue about whether or not they need a water heater for the baptismal." **Shane Claiborne**

I'm involved in several ministries that could very well be thought of as Outer Circle Churches. We worship God and preach the Bible on grossly unsanitary sidewalks among the "great unwashed." A number of our friends consider our gatherings on the street their church. Whether or not we call it "church" that's how they see it. I know because when I ask them if they go to a church, they often say matter-of-factly, "This *is* my church!"

If I press the issue, “I mean, do you ever go to a gathering on Sundays with other believers?” Invariably they say something like, “I don’t fit in regular church.” They use phrases like, “It’s too clean... too clinical... too vanilla for me.” And then they add something along the lines of, “I don’t feel comfortable around those people. They stare at me when I’m there. It’s like I’m not part of their club.”

Rather than making the rich comfortable and alienating the poor, an Outer Circle Church practices a sort of reverse order in which they create an environment in which the poor can be at home, and when the un-poor arrive they build a collaborative community among them all. Instead, in most of our churches we excuse our outrageous expenditures on impressive mansions for God by saying, “This is how people live in their homes, shop in their malls, and dance in their clubs. We have to give them something they can relate to or they won’t come in the first place and hear the gospel.”

First of all, some people have no homes, never shop in malls, or dance in clubs. What are we doing to reach those people? Furthermore, once we attract the nice clean people to our state of the art facilities and they hear our rock star worship teams and they listen to our impressive orations they are well on their way to assuming that our religion is all about *them* and their class of people. Besides our drive-by ministry foray into the slums during the holidays, we have very little interaction with people on the outer circle of our society. They’re not part of our club. Our Madison Avenue Church model can inadvertently instill an entitled mentality and reinforce the American generated prosperity message, which, in my opinion, is about as distant from the “narrow path” that Jesus walked and talked than any other 21st century aberration!

The church isn’t supposed to be a place where the poor come to get stuff and the rich come to dump stuff off. The poor might get fed and the rich feel good about themselves, but where is the “community” in that and where is the transformation we preach?

My friends who serve the homeless travellers in Golden Gate Park and actually call themselves [“The Outer Circle”](#) have begun to slowly coax some of their friends into their Sunday brick and mortar churches. One of those churches is comprised primarily of young educated white or Asian techies and hipsters. The un-sanitized homeless hippie travellers that are starting to come are quite different from everyone else there, yet they’ve begun to lovingly include their brothers and sisters from the street into their family and are enriched with the inclusion. Everybody wins!

I know of a church in Denver that, based on Paul’s words, “we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world,” goes by the name: *“The Scum of the Earth.”* They explain that they’ve chosen this obviously anti-marketing name in order to unashamedly advertise that they are a church for the outcast and the disenfranchised. They say: “Whether outcast by society (e.g., punks, skaters, ravers, homeless people...) or by the church itself, many who come can identify with the name “Scum of the Earth” since they have been previously treated as such.” You might think that they go too far to brand themselves this way and I assume that you probably won’t be taking this to your church’s board meeting this month as a proposal for a church name change, but you have to admire their Outer Circle audacity.

An Outer Circle Church runs after the poor, not away from them.

I have some urban missionary friends who recently moved their house ministry from San Francisco across the bay to [Oakland](#), California. These amazing people have an incarnational approach to community transformation, which means they’re committed to submerging themselves in and among the marginalized. And since their neighborhood has all but gentrified (gotten whiter and richer), they’re relocating to Oakland with the poor and the gang bangers that they’ve fallen in love with. What they’re doing is the antithesis of what many churches have done for decades in America. When the neighborhoods around their church facilities become poorer and more ethnically diverse they flee

further into safer, more sanitized suburbs. But these guys, instead of running away from social outcasts, they're chasing them! "Wait, we'll go with you!" I love it!

Gentrification, where the rich gradually take over a poor neighborhood because the property is cheap and they can garner support from the local government as they clean up the urban blight. The underclass that they displace don't cease to exist, they move somewhere they can almost afford, leaving their jobs and family support systems behind. In order for new people to move in, the old ones have to move over or move out, preferably way. Someone found a new place and some got displaced!

What this missionary team is doing is sort of the opposite of gentrification. They could have stayed and fit quite nicely into an increasingly upscale and lily-white neighborhood. Instead, they chose to leave the gentrifiers behind and go with their outer circle friends.

While gentrification is an inevitable reality, there are ways for the planners and engineers of it and participants in it to redevelop a neighborhood with compassion. I'm not smart enough or called to do urban development per se, but I call on you who are (i.e. smart and called) to use your informed heads and full hearts to go to an urban area, nearly any American city will do, and contribute to a love-driven and [Christ-like gentrification](#).

In the meantime, don't run away from, but run after the poor!

An Outer Circle Church doesn't target or showcase the brightest and most beautiful.

I heard about a church that in order to keep up appearances and impress their typically moneyed television audiences, they literally shuffled the live audience around in order to put the best dressed and better looking people in the front where the cameras would pick them up when panning the audience! That makes me crazy! Maybe at the Academy Awards, but never in the Church!

Outer Circle Churches are equal opportunity families. You don't have to be a fashion model or be dressed GQ to be on the worship team or make the announcements. This isn't an American Idol competition. We exist for another purpose.

You probably agree with me on this already, but let me ask you, would you be embarrassed if, on the same day you finally got your neighbor to church, a dozen or so odorous homeless people also came for the first time and sat next to and in front of your guest? Would you give them an after-service disclaimer about it being an unusual occurrence, and that they should come back next week when "those people" won't be there?

An Outer Circle Church isn't trying to be the best church in town, but the best church they can be for their town.

Ash Barker, a missionary in one of Bangkok's poorest neighborhoods, wrote: "In my experience, if there is a church based in a slum, it will nearly always be Pentecostal or charismatic." He went on to cite some reasons for this, including how these churches tend to teach the priesthood of all believers and encourage all their members to do the work of Jesus. He also says that those churches practice an openness to the Spirit's work of healing and miracles that the disadvantaged tend to need more than those with access to adequate health care. Being a charismatic myself, I like the sound of this so far. But then Barker went on to make some disturbing observations:

“As the charismatic and Pentecostal wing of the church grows, though, it seems to be seeking more respectability. Their recent move into right-wing politics, grand auditoriums, and celebrity leadership betrays its roots as a movement among the poor. Perhaps this is the inevitable life cycle from a movement to a monument that it once stood for. Many of the evangelical movements that began in the 19th century experienced this institutionalization and are now in steep decline. Yet, this gaining respectability and power by the charismatic church could be a huge loss to the poor. Indeed, it could be the beginning of the end, and the Spirit could move to more open groups, doing something new... again.”

Ouch!

I love what Pope Francis wrote recently, “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”

Outer Circle Churches begin where Jesus began – at the bottom. He’s not the [Messiah exclusive to the Middle Class](#). His is not a top-down kingdom, but bottom-up.

As much as I like it when a celebrity gives credit to God on national TV for their opportunities and abilities, I’m pretty sure that the testimony of how God has sustained the suffering persona non grata in their darkest hours has an even greater impact. The common person can relate to *the sufferer* more than *the superstar* any day.

We don’t need to be the best church in town, but the best church we can be for our town – a church in the heart of the community with the community at heart.

Outer Circle Churches don’t serve the poor so much as feast with them.

I was minding my own business, making every effort to bring this essay to a conclusion, when I had the misfortune of attending a church last Sunday wherein a guest speaker gave a message called [“Feasting with the Poor.”](#) He’s a young guy who almost unintentionally planted a church in San Diego by inviting the poor into their home – first for just one dinner, then another, and which eventually turned into a weekly feast among friends. His message from Luke 14 was remarkable, and since I can’t improve on it, I offer the audio to you. I hope you’ll give it a listen and see if the Spirit doesn’t speak as powerfully to you as he did (and continues to speak) to me. I warn you that it might well ruin you for either neglecting the poor altogether and/or relegating them to your favorite soup kitchen once a month.

Outer Circle Churches listen as much or more than they talk.

The neighborhoods I frequent in order to “make friends with God” host hundreds of men and women who talk to themselves and yell at invisible antagonists. Their minds have been mush from birth or from abuse or from profuse amounts of whiskey, crack, heroin, or meth – or all of the above. The people there are shipwrecks, and after years of being battered by relentless waves there’s not much left of the vessel. Demons have found safe houses in many of these precious souls.

Though obscured by their psychoses, they still bear the mark of the Creator’s image, and are loved in heaven, where – if they go there someday – their minds and social capabilities will be reassembled. In the meantime, they need to be told that they’re loved by the Reassembler. But maybe more than that, they’re dying (literally) to be heard – to be shown affectionate attention.

Sometimes instead of our mouths, God uses our ears, and through us makes an invisible, inaudible connection between his heart and theirs. We usually don't fix anything or detectably reduce any of their mania. Our directive in those times is to simply receive the Father's peaceful compassion to stand still and listen to the person beneath. And while we'd like to do more, we might recall the times when Jesus patiently listened to our panic and paranoia. Outer Circle Churches are grateful, not only to be God's mouth, but also his ear. Because they know you can't make a friend when you do all the talking they're happy to be *"quick to listen and slow to speak"* (James 1:19).

We might think we're smarter because we have stuff stuffed in our overstuffed closets and garages. We took a sociology class and think we understand all the sordid causes for destitution. What we think we know often barricades us from relationships with actual destitute people. Hanging out with people on the edges teaches us to listen. Sometimes that's what people need most and what God requires of us. Outer Circle Churches listen at least as much as they talk, if not more.

I know when I was down and out, the friends I valued most were the ones who just let me vent without offering me premature sophomoric solutions. For the first time in my life I was on the outer circle myself, and authentic friends, rather than troubleshoot or judge, they just sat with me in my pain. That's what the outer circle sufferer needs from the Church, attentive hearers.

An Outer Circle Church tries to impact people with their lives of service, not impress people with their Sunday services.

I celebrate how many churches today are beginning to "despectacularize." They're shifting toward simplicity and toward a more direct route of showing people what God is like and advancing his kingdom. They don't depend on all the bells and whistles that are in vogue today in the Church world – or for that matter, the rest of the world. They're beginning to realize that the greatest impact they can make in their communities is how *they serve* and not *how they do their services*. It's not their spectacular programs but their simple and authentic love for the left out that make them an effective witness in their community. Jesus taught and modeled a compassionate lifestyle for those who choose to be like him. The Outer Circle Church doesn't target the rich and toss crumbs to the poor. It begins by finding the feet most in need of washing.

"They will see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." **Matthew 5**

An Outer Circle Church targets the poor, and if the rich come, they teach them to serve the poor.

Someone said, *"There is hope for the rich if they are willing to repent and live in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, to be converted to God and to each other... Jesus didn't neglect the rich, he evangelized them to love and give to the poor."*

New churches often target wealthier communities thinking that when they have a critical mass of bodies and bucks they'll form a committee or a program to reach out to the poor. But it's a curious reality that wealthy people and large congregations give proportionately less to the poor than the churches more meager in numbers and income. Wealthy churches tend to spend a higher percentage of their income internally – on staff, buildings, advertising, programs and events. They're busy maintaining the machine that covertly hijacked them like Hal in the movie, *2001*. They have no time, money, or heart left for those with the greatest needs.

For years I've been haunted by something a brother said to me when one of the churches I planted bought its first facility – an old theater building. Trust me when I say that this building left much to be

desired. It was no a steal at any price, but was a substantial upgrade from the previous rented facility in which we worshipped. “Don’t let this building change you,” he said sternly. “I’m concerned that you guys will get off the track you’re on as you put time, energy, and money into this place.” As I recall, I thanked him for the warning, but in my mind there was no way we were going to let a building – an unimpressive one at that – change our trajectory. But if I’m being honest, our execution wasn’t as good as our intentions. I’m not saying churches shouldn’t own property or build buildings, but I know from experience how easy it is to fall into the snare of keeping up with the rest of the church world where we make it all about how big we are, how impressive we can be, and what we can do better than the church down the street.

Subtly a greater portion of the church’s income that used to go to African orphans begins to be spent on a new projector, sound system, and carpet. The resources we once invested in the poorest neighborhood in town is now spent on advertising geared to the wealthiest residents. When in the old days we would welcome and love on an indigent visitor, now in the interest of providing a comfortable atmosphere for our prissier members we might make it clear that their presence is less than appreciated. After all, people work hard all week long to pay the mortgage on their nice suburban neighborhood houses located as far as possible from the bad side of town. We don’t want them to have to come to church and have to deal with people they’ve pay a high price to avoid. It might dissuade them from coming back or, worse yet, go to another church where they will be better insulated from such people.

Thoughts as vile as these may never be stated in actual conversation among church members but sadly I guarantee that these are things that many church leaders think about and which subtly influence their policy-making process and facilities management.

Isaiah was an adamant proponent of fasting self-indulgence and making the society’s poorest a national priority for Israel. Please note the promise that follows his prescription of prioritizing the poor.

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

Isaiah 58

An Outer Circle Church acts justly, loves mercy, and walks humbly; and they don’t care who knows it.

These churches and their members are not trying to impress anyone with their compassion for the unpersons in their communities. When they reach out to the underclass it’s not a politically correct ploy to win the respect of middle-class people and entice them into their church. They’re not *showing off*, they’re just *showing up* and doing what Jesus would do if he were here.

Plus, they’re not performing for their peers or denominational heads. When the leaders of an Outer Circle Church attend leadership conferences with colleagues who lead churches that meet in spacious buildings, with impressive programs, and large crowds of middle-to-upper class people, they’re not intimidated or envious. They’re secure in what the Spirit has told them to do. [Neither are they judgmental of those leaders who either haven’t heard the call of the Spirit to reach out to the outcasts or he hasn’t called them there — yet!]

An Outer Circle Church has at least a critical mass of Outer Circle Christians who refuse to be a mass of critical people.

These Outer Circlers model a compassion for the poor to the rest of their church. They're not *arrogant* about it, but *ardent* in such a way that others are drawn in. Not everyone will get on board and some might even flee to another church where they can be cozy and surrounded by people of their own socioeconomic class. Be that as it may, the mature Outer Circler will do what the Lord of the Church leads them to do and will graciously and patiently lead his/her friends by example.

In conclusion

I admit that what I've said here could be thought of as radical. But what is "radical" if not the way things ought to have been all along, but because we've drifted so far away from the way things ought to have been, what should be *normal* is now thought to be *radical*.

In order to keep this essay achievably simple and brief I've given precious little theological or biblical basis for my opinions about the way the Church ought to act. For more Scriptural foundation I recommend these few resources:

- My own essay on "[Outer Circle Christians](#)"
- *Making Poverty Personal*, by Ash Barker
- *Red Letter Revolution*, by Shane Claiborne and Tony Campolo
- *Sub-merge*, by John Hayes