The Metaphor That Broke American Churches

Scott Ritterbush
May 21, 2026

The Predictable Sins of the American Church

Evangelical churches in the US are strange paradoxes. American congregations are simultaneously places of tremendous vitality, where everyday men and women sacrificially invest their time, energy, resources, and hearts in God's Kingdom, and also where so much dysfunction exists that "church hurt" has become part of modern vocabulary. Churches have always had problems – Jesus Himself taught that they would also be a mix of the "wheat" of true believers and the "tares" of those who are not (Matthew 13:24-30). Yet issues in American congregations tend to fall along predictable lines. You have power-hungry pastors who abuse authority, and you have prideful congregants who split churches by refusing to respect rightful authority. You have furious activity that attracts crowds and provides all manner of programming, but a sore lack of theological and practical depth. There is an abundance of hype, excitement, and slick marketing, but a drought of true holiness. On the other hand, you have churches charged with stewarding the priceless gospel of Jesus Christ that settle for lazy ministry and lazy worship.

What accounts for these sadly consistent issues in churches in the US? Perhaps the issue lies at the root of how we think about the Church and local churches.

Metaphors We Live By

Human beings are concrete thinkers. We interact with incredibly abstract and complex thoughts, but we do it through concrete realities.

In 1980, scholars George Lakoff and Mark Johnson published a fascinating book titled *Metaphors We Live By*. Humans, they say, are concrete beings, and we understand abstract concepts through metaphors.

For instance, people once spoke of the mind as if it were a machine. To focus was to “tune out the static,” to think similarly to someone else was to be “on the same wavelength,” and a person’s temperament is how they were “wired.” In our computer age, now someone’s personality is how they are “coded.” When we want to tell someone we’re thinking through something, we say we’re “processing” it, and when we are overloaded, we say we’re running out of “bandwidth.”

We understand abstract concepts through metaphors. We do not stop there, however. Lakoff and Johnson show that the metaphors we use to understand something abstract also shape how we interact with the abstract idea.

As an example, think about a negotiation. It is an abstract concept we often speak about with the language of war. In a negotiation, you have to “defend your position” and “hold your ground” while using a good “strategy” in order to “win.” Thinking about negotiation through the metaphor of war shapes how we approach negotiations, Lakoff and Johnson write. Because we view them as struggles between opposing sides, we negotiate like it’s a struggle between two sides, each trying to win at the other’s expense.

What if, they continue, we understood negotiations as a dance? If we spoke of needing to be in sync with those we were negotiating with, to keep the right pace, and to land a flawless routine, how might that change the way we negotiate? Metaphors are deceptively powerful, they write, because metaphors shape both our understandings and our actions.

That brings us back to the evangelical church in America.

The Metaphor That Broke American Churches

When I was in seminary, one of our school administrators had previously served on the staff of a church of thousands in Texas. He joked that some of the staff referred to the church as “The

Gospel Supercenter" – a one-stop shop where a family could meet all of their spiritual needs in one convenient place!

Did the family need a great children's ministry and maybe some good marriage counseling as well? They had it. Perhaps a singles group and opportunities for global mission trips were what someone else needed. Well, the church had that too. From Bible studies to affinity groups to youth ministry, the church was designed to appeal to the needs of the congregation. Whatever those needs were, you could come and find the programs that were right for you.

Speaking tongue-in-cheek, these former pastors had recognized that the church had adopted the form and feel of a big-box store. That was no accident. Permit the former history teacher in me a brief (well, brief'ish!) and over-simplified history lesson.

In the second half of the 1800s, America experienced its second industrial revolution. Production of goods increasingly shifted away from artisan producers and into factories, and new technologies, plus favorable Supreme Court rulings, fostered corporations reaching gigantic proportions. At the same time, theological liberalism, a philosophy that denied biblical teaching and historic Christian doctrine while prioritizing a "social gospel" of improving this world, was making its way from Europe into American churches through pastors educated in its tenets.

These shifts combined to shift how churches operated and were understood. In 1912, the theologian Shailer Mathews published a work titled *Scientific Management in Churches* that sought to integrate new business practices into Christian ministry. The 1920s saw the publication of a bestselling book titled *The Man Nobody Knows*. You can still find it on Amazon today, complete with this description:

> Bruce Barton's 1925 effort to reconfigure Jesus for the Roaring Twenties turned into one of the great bestsellers of the century. No Puritan or Prohibitionist, here was Christ as the world's first advertising man, a great business executive who picked up twelve men from the bottom ranks of business and forged them into an organization that conquered the world.

There is nothing wrong with incorporating good leadership and organizational principles from the business world, but there is a danger if done without discernment, then churches can understand themselves as spiritual businesses, providing spiritual goods and services, catering to spiritual customers, and competing in a spiritual marketplace.

That view of the church was seeded in the early 1900s, but it grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. A third-generation missionary named Donald McGavarn had watched missionaries invest tremendous effort in foreign fields with seemingly little results. He began conducting research across India, and from that research crafted an approach to mission work designed to optimize the effectiveness of missionaries.

That philosophy eventually found its way to Fuller Seminary in California, where it would solidify into what became known as The Church Growth Movement. It began as an effort to equip churches to thoughtfully and intentionally share the gospel in their communities. Put into practice by skilled leaders in the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, it gave rise to massive megachurches like Willow Creek in Chicago, Saddleback in California, and Northpoint in Atlanta. As these churches grew in size and complexity, American business practices and principles were increasingly imported to manage these churches and then spread to other churches through conferences, books, and other publications.

Again, there is nothing wrong with incorporating leadership ideas from the business world in order to shepherd a church faithfully. In fact, that's putting it too mildly. It is good and worthwhile for church leaders to learn from the business world in order to shepherd a congregation as skilfully as they can.

But as church growth principles were being put into place, a subtle shift was happening. Local churches, designed by God to be communities where people knew, enjoyed, loved, and lived for Him, were coming to be viewed, first and foremost, as organizations that existed to evangelize people and bring them into a church. Evangelizing people is, of course, a crucial part of living for God, but Scripture never presents it as the main component of this work. Yet church growth was no longer seen as a byproduct of a healthy church living out its purpose. It was becoming the dominant measure of church health and success, and facilitating this growth was becoming the primary purpose of pastor-elders and church staff. Churches that failed to embrace this model risked a slow death as congregants drifted to other churches with programs well tailored to their felt needs, like small-town mom-and-pop shops competing with a new big-box retailer.

Thus slowly and subtly did local churches come to be places that functioned first and foremost like spiritual businesses. The church-as-business metaphor had wormed its way into the practical ecclesiology, or theology of the church, of American Christians and congregations.

It's this metaphor that "broke" the church in America.

How This Metaphor Breaks the Church

Consider how understanding the church through the metaphor of a shopping center would shape our engagement with local congregations.

Hebrews 10:24-25 instructs, "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." But we go to shopping centers when there is something we want or need, and when it is convenient. I might not visit a store for months, or I might blow off their big sales, but I wouldn't be neglecting the store in any way.

Hebrews 13:17 tells us, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." Staff at shopping centers, meanwhile, aren't there to keep watch over us. They are there to provide good customer service and make sure we're happy with our shopping experience.

In Galatians 6:1, the Holy Spirit commands Christians, Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won't be tempted." When you attend a store, though, there is no bond between you and the other potential customers in the building. You are there to get what you need, and not only do you not have any obligation or responsibility to the other shoppers, but it would be weird if you acted as you did.

Understanding the church through the business metaphor consistently turns people away from living in community in God's way. If this metaphor were widespread, we would expect to see churches where sin was rarely confronted, where the practice of church discipline was labeled unloving, and where corporate worship attendance was spotty. Pastors would be more

concerned with keeping people happy than with shepherding them towards holiness; people would put their own preferences and convictions ahead of the good and unity of the community, and there would be a distinct lack of the power of the Spirit.

Does this sound familiar? The metaphor of the Church-as-Supercenter has broken American churches, leading to all kinds of un-Christian-like dysfunction and sapping the health of churches.

We need a new metaphor.

Biblical Metaphors That Heal Churches

The Holy Spirit doesn't give us a single metaphor for the Church. In the New Testament, there are *96 distinct images* used to describe the church.[1] Some of the most prominent are the Church as Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12:27), as Jesus' bride (2 Corinthians 11:20), as God's family (1 Timothy 3:15), as the temple of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22), and as the Lord's flock (1 Peter 5:1-2). Understanding the Church through these metaphors, instead of through the lens of business, leads to a completely different set of expectations and actions.

What is the purpose of a bride? When a woman stands with a man and makes marriage vows, she commits to know and love her groom, and receives his commitment to know and love her. If we see the Church as the body of Christ, we'll see that her purpose is to be known and loved by God and to know and love God. That's precisely what Jesus said is the purpose of God's people. Matthew 22:35-40 records:

> And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him: "Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?"
>
> He said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."

[1] Paul S. Minear, Images of the Church in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 28.

The Church exists to love God, and that love is shown through love of neighbor. Local churches exist to do the same. Churches might transform the world or spread the gospel here, near, and far, but they don't exist for transformation or for mission. They exist to know and love God, and that love flows from first receiving God's love (1 John 4:19). If we understand the Church through the metaphor of the bride, the idea that the Church is a shopping center to meet our needs will wither.

The metaphor of the Church as the Lord's flock, meanwhile, confronts our toleration of sin. A shepherd appointed undershepherds to care for the flock. They were charged with driving off predators, protecting against deadly biting insects, tending to sick sheep, and protecting the flock's health. Seeing the Church as a flock means seeing local churches as places where sin is gently and lovingly addressed and expecting exactly that to happen.

Embracing God's metaphors for His Church means embracing local churches as places where consistent attendance in corporate worship is the norm, where pastor-elders lovingly confront sin from the pulpit and in private, and where leaders humbly lead as those who will give an account to God, and the congregation humbly submits to godly leadership out of love for the Lord. In other words, embracing God's metaphors for His Church is a step towards a healthy church. God's metaphors are the better metaphors we need.

Staying Faithful Where the Chief Business Is Business

In 1925, the US President, Calvin Coolidge, delivered to a collection of newspaper editors a now-famous, or infamous, line: "After all, the chief business of the American people is business." In a land whose chief business is business, there will always be a temptation to understand the Church through the lens of a business. But God, who established the Church and rejoices in healthy, local congregations, has called followers of Jesus to look at His Church through a different lens.

We embrace God's metaphors first by repenting. Specifically, let us consider our individual histories with local churches, and where we have treated them like spiritual supercenters.

Where we have, let us repent. Like breaking a dam unleashes a powerful rush of water, repentance unleashes the power of the Spirit to move in our lives.

Second, insist on understanding the Church through God's metaphors. Let us treat the church not like a business, but like a family, like God's temple, and like Jesus' very body. May the Lord Jesus Christ, in His grace, help us to embrace this metaphor. Where we do not, may He help us to recognize that we have turned astray, repent, and return to His way. Let us be a people who, by the grace of God, are not conformed to the world, but are transformed by the renewing of our minds, who doggedly refuse to understand our local churches through the metaphor of a supercenter story, and hold fast to the Word of God.