

IF YOU DON'T LIKE WHAT CHURCH HAS BECOME...
THERE IS A BETTER WAY

OUT OF THE 4TH PLACE

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Printed in the United States of America

Published by Back Deck Books

ISBN: 978-0-692-12304-1

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Cover design and cover and interior illustrations by Robin Renard

First Printing, 2018

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Back Deck Books
Seattle, WA 98155
www.outofthe4thplace.com

Fourth Place Technology

There was a day when the desktop PC lived at the center of the computing universe. Bill Gates sat on the throne. Steve Jobs was a has-been. Network administrators had job security. Car phones were only for society's elite. The cloud was just a white puffy thing in the sky.

Then along came the mobile device. The iPod and iPhone put Apple back on the map. A couple of college kids started a little company called Google. Jeff Bezos began selling some books online at a website named after a South American river. The paradigm began to shift—the world was going mobile.

Work used to take place at a desk. Not *any* desk. No, a *particular* desk. The one with your computer at it with your information saved on it. If you wanted to get something done, you needed to go to that *particular* desk. No working from home. No sitting in a coffee shop to work remotely.

When the PC reigned, work was tethered, centered. When we went mobile, work went everywhere. At home. In the car. At *any* desk. And what happened to work happened in every sphere of society.

Communication used to be centered. Voices used to travel over wires into homes. If you wanted to talk you needed to be within ten feet of the phone. Why? Communication only went as far as the length of the cord. Commerce used to be centered. Consumers had to physically drive to a store and pick out their purchases. No one-step clicking, or swiping, or Prime, or having a package magically show up on your doorstep.

When we went mobile, the center was gone. What does this have to do with church? Everything.

Everywhere Worship

In the Garden of Eden there was no center to worship. Worship was mobile. There were no physical temples in Eden. Worship didn't have a *particular* place. Worship had *every* place. Worship was integrated into all of life. God is omnipresent—everywhere at all times. Wherever Adam and Eve walked in the garden, there was worship. Wherever Adam and Eve worked, there was worship. Wherever Adam and Eve played, ate, sang, loved and laughed, there was worship.

Worship needed no physical temple. No *fourth place*. No center. Adam and Eve were continually connected.

With God.

With each other.

With the creation itself.

In the beginning there was no division between sacred and secular. No Christian music versus non-Christian music. There was just music. Non-qualified music. There were no holy buildings. Garden, mountain

and river were all holy. There were no priests; no one was closer to God than anyone else.

In Eden, we didn't need religious activities to please God. Work pleased God. Sex pleased God. Taking care of the natural environment pleased God. And he called it all *good*. All of life was **integrated**. All of life was worship because every sphere of life was connected to God and aligned with him, the source of life.

But then we lost our connection.

Connection Dropped

Mobile phones rely on radio waves and a very small antenna. Your phone takes all of that digital data you send out—emails, texts, tweets, your mom's cat videos—and converts it to an electrical signal that can be transmitted over radio waves. Everything comes and goes via your antenna. You can't see it on most modern phones, but it's there—a small antenna picking up the signal, sending and receiving data at the speed of light.

Adam and Eve were connected to God. Deeply connected. Intimately connected. When they sinned, the connection was lost.

The antenna, broken.

As C.S. Lewis would remind us, metaphors always break down at some point. To compare the connection to God in Eden with our connection via technology is a helpful image, but grossly inadequate. We may feel connected to the world through our devices but it is nothing compared to the deep and intimate connection of Adam and Eve to their creator. We may feel "naked" without a phone, but it is nothing compared to the nakedness Adam and Eve felt that moment the connection was lost.

Can you imagine a pure connection to the God of the universe? Can you imagine the safety and love of human relationships with absolutely pure motives? Can you imagine meaningful work without the thorns?

That is what we had. All of it. But as soon as we had it, we lost it. When we lost our connection through sin, we lost the signal. We were separated—holy from unholy, sacred from secular.

The connection to God—turned to shame.

The connection to each other—replaced with competition.

The connection to creation—ruined by thorn and injustice.

Genesis 3:24 states, “After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.”

God placed cherubim to guard the way back to life.

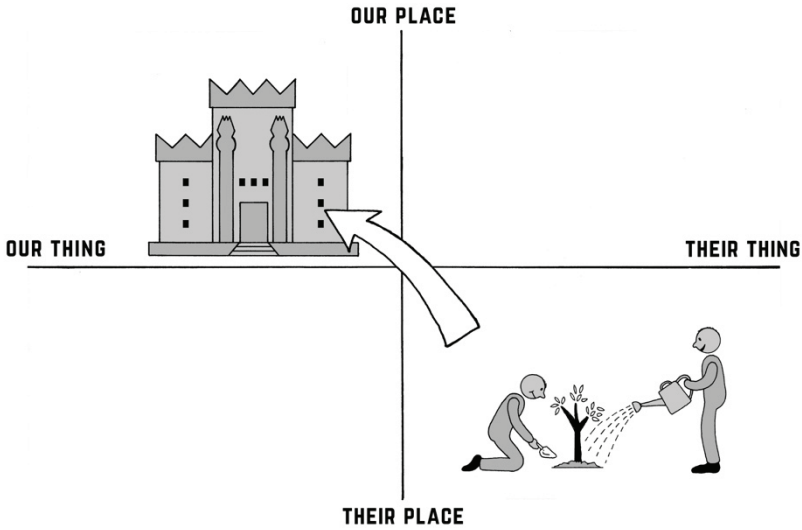
God’s Pursuit of Relationship

God never changes. His desire for us never decreases. His love is unending, immeasurable, incalculable. It wasn’t that God stopped transmitting the signal; it’s that our antennas were damaged beyond repair. The radio waves of his presence were still everywhere, but nobody could tune in.

So what did God do?

Did he give up on humanity? Did he leave us alone in our isolation? No, he pursued us. He appeared to Abraham and spoke. He called one nation out of all of the nations of the earth. He chose them and delivered them from Egypt. He chose a place for his dwelling—fire, a cloud, a tabernacle, finally the temple in Jerusalem. An ark. A room with a curtain.

He gave people with broken antennas ways to tune in. Since they couldn't be with him in the garden he made himself available here: the *fourth place*.



After all, how do you communicate with people when the mobile connection goes down? You choose a *particular* place. If the cell towers fell and we became disconnected, we would be forced to revert to life before the cloud. If you are having visions of the 1980s, big hair and fantastic music, you are not far off. We would have to return to the era of the desktop PC. Software. Discs. Networking people plugging ethernet cables into wall ports.

Our information would be limited to a particular place. In order to compute things, we would have to go to the desk again. Not just any desk. No, the *particular* desk—the one that has the computer tower with our files saved on it. Why? Because loss of a mobile connection necessitates particular places.

In Eden there were no temples, no religious *fourth places*. And when we turn to the back of the book and catch a glimpse of the new heavens and the new earth in Revelation there are still no temples. John writes

in his Revelation that in the eternal city he saw no temple (Rev. 21:22). The glory of God will be everywhere. It will be a new and fully integrated creation.

So then, if the temple is missing from the bookends of the creation and the Revelation, then we need to ask the question, *why do temples appear in the middle of the story?*⁴

The Need for the Fourth Place

Only God in his wisdom knows all of his reasons, but at one level the temple existed because the antenna was broken and God chose a way to temporarily restore our lost connection.

The everywhere worship of Eden was lost, so God chose a *particular* place: Jerusalem, the Temple Mount.

The temple was an act of love. Throughout scripture we hear the refrain, “I will be their God and they will be my people.”⁵ The temple represents God’s relentless pursuit of his creation. However, in the midst of this pursuit we also feel a tension. While the medium of the temple represented God’s loving desire to be with his creation, it also represented the reality of the broken relationship. Embedded into the forms of the temple were reminders of the integrated life of worship in Eden that was lost.

⁴ It is important to realize that Jesus is, was, and will always be the temple. Jesus never changes. At the end of the story, John says in Revelation 21:22, “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.” God himself is the temple. In Eden, the temple existed. At the end of the story, the temple will still exist. The difference is the manifestation of the temple. When I say, there was no temple in Eden nor in the new heavens and the new earth, I am referring to no *physical* temple of stone or bricks or wood—no building set apart as the place to encounter God.

⁵ Jer. 31:31, Ezek. 11:20, 2 Cor. 6:16, Heb. 8:10

In Eden humanity walked with God in the garden, enjoying his presence wherever they went. In the temple, however, God limited his presence to one room, the Holy of Holies. In Eden God was accessible to everyone, but in the temple only one tribe could access the holiest places—the Levites. Only one man could enter the Holy of Holies—the High Priest. One man. No women. We even see the same cherubim that guarded the entrance to Eden stitched into the very fabric of the curtain guarding the entrance to the Holy of Holies. Exodus 21:36 states, “Make a curtain of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubim woven into it by a skilled worker.”

Cherubim guarded the way back to life.

The medium of the temple told a story filled with longing. The palm trees carved into the walls pointed backward in time to Eden—to the tree of life now cut off. Not only did the temple forms speak a message of longing for things past, they also whispered of things still to come. The bread, the sacrifice, the curtain itself all looked forward to the one who would finally lay down his life as a final sacrifice, an act which would someday tear the curtain and restore the lost connection.

If the *medium is the message*, then the temple forms made perfect sense. The structures accurately reflected Israel’s place in the story of God. Temple, priest, law and sacrifice all worked together to communicate God’s faithfulness—past, present and future.

Imagine being a part of the festival procession to the temple, singing the Psalms of Ascent on the way up the mountain to Jerusalem! How glorious! If the temple is where God chooses to make his presence known, then it makes perfect sense for worship to rise on the way up to the temple. If the temple is the center of God’s holiness, then religious life *should* be centered around the temple. That is where the sacrifice *should* take place. That is where the holy people *should* work.

But what about us? Should our religion be centered in a *fourth place*? Do our media accurately reflect *our* relationship to God? Hold onto those questions for just a moment.

Temple Media

As we progress through this book, we are going on a journey of church media. As we do, we will pay special attention to three categories: **place**, **people** and **practices**. These three categories will help us to analyze and evaluate changes in forms over time.

Place refers to geography and architecture. Within this category we will ask questions about land, location, buildings, materials and design.

People refers to who does what. How are humans treated in terms of hierarchy? We will ask questions about leadership. How are leaders differentiated from everyone else? What roles do they have? How are “insiders” and “outsiders” treated?

Practices refers to what we do. We will ask questions about life in community. How do people grow? What constitutes worship? What do people do when they gather? What do they do when they are apart? What are their priorities?

As we evaluate our media, we will speak of a continuum between the two extremes of **separation** and **integration**. Life rarely contains blacks and whites, so we will look for themes and patterns that give us clues as to the leanings of a particular form.

What do we observe when we look at the forms of the Jerusalem temple?

When we look at the temple system, we see a leaning toward a message of **separation**. The medium matches the message. We were separated from God, so the medium reflected this reality.

Here is what we see when we apply our three categories:

Place: The land the temple was built on was separated from the rest of Israel. Even the various courts of the temple were built out in concentric circles so as to convey the ever-increasing levels of separation. The more holy things went toward the center. On the outskirts were the less holy things. At the center stood the Holy of Holies, a place so set apart that only one priest could enter and only once a year.

People: People were separated based on family line, rank and gender. A select family line, the Levites, ran the temple. Select people from within that family line were permitted in the holiest places. The other tribes came to the temple for worship and festivals. Priests mediated between the people and God. Common people went to the priest for cleansing, prayer and forgiveness. If you were a gentile outsider or a woman, getting to the center was not an option.

Practices: Certain sacrifices, prayers, blessings and offerings were only performed by certain people and in certain places. There was a high degree of ceremony and liturgy. Music and festivals were all centered around the temple. The tithe went to support the centralized worship system of holy people and places.

When we look at Israel's temple forms, we see a consistent message. God is holy. God is set apart. From what? From things that are unholy. Remember, the word holy means *set apart* or *separate*. The forms of **place, people** and **practices** all affirm this basic message.

If I were to summarize the temple forms in one sentence, it is a **holy place where holy people do holy things**. That is the essence of a religious *fourth place*.

Now we know that Israel's relationship with God was more dynamic than just the Jerusalem temple. There was a mountain, and fire, a

tabernacle and eventually the synagogue. God spoke through prophets and the Angel of the Lord and even a donkey. I am not attempting to summarize the entire Old Testament here. I am only giving a picture of one of the main forms in which Israel encountered God, the temple system.

I am focusing on the temple because it is very significant for the church in our modern era. I am making a case that the Western church is still in large part using temple media today. This is not to say there was anything wrong with the Old Testament temple. On the contrary, God himself gave the instructions for the temple. My point is not that the temple was bad. My point is that it was the correct medium **for its time**. But not for us. Not for the church of Jesus. Not for the temple of the Holy Spirit.

In Chapter 4 we are going to learn the story of Constantine. When Christianity became the official religion of Rome, Constantine wanted to present himself as a new Moses, a new David. He used an abusive version of Old Testament temple medium to impose Christianity on the world. While the Old Testament temple was a beautiful gift from God, Constantine's temple was the wrong medium for the wrong time.

In order to understand Constantine and later Christendom, we need to understand the relational reality that temple forms are designed to convey; they are designed to communicate **separation**.

That's what *fourth places* do—they separate things.

They divide insider from outsider, holy from unholy, sacred from secular. What country clubs do in the social sphere, temples do in the religious sphere. And it is the exact opposite of what Jesus came to do. He came to restore. To connect. To reconcile. To bring separated things back together.

Church Forms

I made the claim in the first chapter that most of our churches are part of the *fourth place*. Hopefully you have been asking yourself the question, “Is that true? Are we part of the *fourth place*? Are we really using temple media today?”

Let me ask the question another way—do our forms speak of **separation** or **integration**? I would suggest that most of our church forms today lean more toward **separation**.

Of course, it is rarely black or white. Clearly there are all kinds of churches and all kinds of media, especially when we consider Eastern and Western church expressions. I will state at the outset that my focus will primarily be on the West—those cultures most directly shaped by European thought and civilization.

Consider the average Western person’s view of what *church* means. For most people, church is an event they go to at a religious building where professional clergy lead the people in religious practices. In terms of **place, people** and **practices**, notice how our media are very similar to those of the temple:

Place: We have separate religious buildings where we go to worship God.

People: We separate clergy from laity (everyone not a professional Christian); a professional “sacred” class distinct from “secular” occupations. People who are pastors are seen as more called to do God’s work than the rest of us. The US Tax Code even validates this distinction.

Practices: We typically think of worship as the things we do at the religious building. Even if our theology tells us that worship is all of life,

our church budgets, stages, staffing and Sunday anxiety all reflect worship as focused in the building.

Let's be honest, when you say the word *worship*, most people will picture a band or a choir on a stage and a room full of people singing. Many of us don't know that church can or should be any different from that. That's okay. For now, I just want to get us seriously considering the question, do our forms emphasize **separation** or **integration**? Again, I'm not referring to the sermon content or the song lyrics, just the structures.

I would argue that both our basic definition of church AND that of the temple could be summarized with the same phrase: **a holy place where holy people do holy things**. We are a religious *fourth place*. This is a problem. Why? Because the gospel speaks of radical **integration**.

No more Holy of Holies. The curtain was torn.

No more priests. We all have direct access to God.

No more sacrifices. We are already holy because of one sacrifice—Jesus.

Our forms should proclaim these great messages. They don't. They still speak messages of separation.

Of course I am not saying that all Christians only try to connect to God at their building. I am not saying everyone thinks their pastor is their only link to God or that singing is their only worship. I am not saying that we are teaching the wrong messages. I'm saying that our media are speaking their own messages. And they are loud.

The reason we so often have to remind people that worship is all of life is because our forms are speaking the opposite message. The reason people still need the senior pastor to show up when they are in the hospital is that our stages are still elevating them above the rest of us.

Regardless of what we say with our mouths, our *fourth place* media are still at work.

When people show up at a church and make a joke that God is going to strike them with lightning because of what they've done, it's because they see our buildings as a holy place. When people are afraid to use their normal colorful language around a person because he or she is a pastor, it is because they see them as a holy person. Our forms are separating us from our world.

Think about it. If our buildings are saying, "This is God's house," then what is that saying about the rest of the world? If our pulpits are saying, "This is God's man," what are they saying about the rest of us? If our music is saying, "This is God's worship," what does that mean for the rest of life?

Brick Solutions

by Dudley Callison

I was invited to preach at a church that had been in decline for fifteen years. The regional leader plotted the trajectory and determined that within twelve more years the church would close if something didn't change. When I arrived, I noticed that the front of the church was odd. A brick wall contained double doors, and behind them were the original steps and front doors of the church. I asked about this out of curiosity. A deacon explained, "We were having a terrible problem with homeless people on our steps on Sundays. So we solved the problem by adding a brick wall that prevented them from accessing our front steps. It worked!" Sadly, I asked him when this construction took place. His answer, "About fifteen years ago." I thought to myself, "Maybe your church is in decline because you designed your building to exclude the very people Jesus came to love."

People who don't believe in Jesus don't just feel judged because of what we say. They feel judged because our buildings look holier than thou. Our stages look superior to thou. Our worship is so one-dimensional that real art looks profane. Our definition of God's work is so limited that people actually start to believe that being a doctor or electrician or teacher is less holy than being a pastor.

What a tragedy to think that all of God's goodness, beauty, creativity and justice are all locked up in a dusty old building. No! The curtain was torn. The antenna was restored. All of life is worship. All of life is God's. Do we understand what our media are doing to our message?

Now this is just the tip of the iceberg. This is simply to get us warmed up. I understand that it is hard to even imagine what media pointing toward **integration** might look like.

We will discuss integration much more in the next chapter. To start though, we need to admit that yes, indeed, many of our forms speak messages of separation—clergy and laity, insiders and outsiders, sacred and secular. We are part of the *fourth place*.

Why Did It Work Before?

I understand this may be a stretch for a lot of people. This may be a pretty different paradigm for understanding church. Maybe you have some questions at this point. Why did church seem to work so well before? If this is true, then why is it just coming up now? I see what you mean about public perception of church and people feeling judged, but why did church work for my parents and grandparents? Why is it still working in the Bible belt or for more rural areas?

Those are great questions.

To help answer them, Tim Keller, Alan Roxborough, Alan Hirsch, Phyllis Tickle and many others would point to a major cultural shift

happening in the West over the past century. According to Keller, “Until the middle of the 20th century...most conservative Christians in Western societies felt basically at home in their own cultures.”⁶ He states, “...that [earlier] era had cultural consensus about basic moral convictions.”⁷

In other words, if you have a dominant Christian culture and that culture is pretty homogenous, temple forms will still do okay. That’s what they were designed for. One nation. One culture. One language.

But aside from a few places, that is no longer the world in which we live. If you have wondered why Sunday morning is the most racially segregated time of the week, this is the reason. Each tribe goes to their own *fourth place*. If your church is struggling trying to figure out how to lead worship for multiple languages, multiple races, multiple economic classes, this is why. Temple forms don’t cross cultures well. Temple forms are great at attracting people to one dominant religious culture. Unfortunately, they are terrible at affirming a world of diversity.

Thankfully, Jesus gave us a better way. In the next chapter we will look at how Jesus moved church *out of the fourth place* and back into the full range of life.

Sermons Not Enough

Many people will read this and think, “Wow, sounds like I need to do another sermon series on treating all of life as worship.” But our problem is not a lack of preaching. Our problem is that our media are preaching their own messages and they are often out-preaching our sermons. We can teach and preach until we are out of breath, but as long as our forms are working against us, we will see limited progress for the message of Jesus.

⁶ Tim Keller, *Center Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 181.

⁷ Keller, 182.

You may be wondering why in the world we would be doing this. Where did our practices come from if not from the New Testament and Jesus? There are very good historical reasons we are doing the things we are doing. But no, our basic church media do not come from the New Testament, nor Jesus, but from several centuries after Christ.

For now, what is most important is that we face our reality: when our people think about the word *church*, they picture **a holy place where holy people do holy things.**

When Jesus said, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days” (John 2:19), we know he was talking about his body, not about bricks. We know that when he sent the Holy Spirit in Acts, the body of believers became the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19). We know this to be true theologically. The temple is made of people, not buildings. Church is a community, not an event. We even say it with our mouths and with our sermons. The problem is, we deny it with our forms.

Like it or not, to our people, the church is a building. If you ask them, “Where is your church?” they will give you an address. We may have small groups, classes and other forms which modify the basic paradigm slightly, but our budgets, staffing models and people will all attest that church is primarily about **a holy place where holy people do holy things.**

That is our basic paradigm—just like the Old Testament temple. This wouldn’t be such a big deal if God still lived in a building. We could all give the same address: Jerusalem, Mount Moriah, The Temple Mount. We would all know where to point.

What if God, however, were to dwell in a person? Where would we point? What address would we give? What if God himself came to earth as a baby? If the center of worship is wherever God dwells, then what

if God were to eat with prostitutes? Wherever God would go, wouldn't *that* be the center of worship?

The Mobile Temple

When Jesus showed up, everything about temple media was supposed to change from stones to flesh—from centered to mobile. Jesus was a mobile man in a desktop world, a walking technological shift.

“Jesus was a mobile man in a desktop world.”

Let's look at one story from his life as an example. One day Jesus happened upon a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. Everyone avoided her. She was a pariah, a social outcast because she was unclean. The law had a rule about it found in Leviticus 15:19:

When a woman has a discharge, and the discharge in her body is blood, she shall be in her menstrual impurity for seven days, and whoever touches her shall be unclean until the evening.

Not only did she deal everyday with the misery of her health crisis, she had to deal with the looks, the glares, the children hiding behind their parents' legs. She was unclean. Anyone who touched her would be defiled.

Then something amazing happened. This woman came right up to Jesus and touched the edge of his cloak. And guess what? Jesus was not defiled. In fact, it was just the opposite; the woman was made clean! What happened? Did Jesus not have to follow the law? Was he impervious to defilement? Every other Jew who touched this woman

would have had to go back to the center, back to the temple for cleansing. What was the difference for Jesus?

The difference was the temple. Instead of the woman having to go to the temple, the temple came to her. All that the temple represented—the priest, the prophet, the sacrifice for sin, the cleansing of defilement—were at once present to this woman at the simple touch of a robe. Jesus was and is the temple.

Jesus lived *the everywhere worship of Eden*. Wherever Jesus went he was connected to his Father. And when he returned to the Father, the Holy Spirit was sent out so that now every believer would become the temple of the Holy Spirit. Every believer would now have direct access to God at all times and in all places. We would all be mobile. We would all be re-connected. The antenna would be recreated. No more need for a *fourth place*.

The *physical* temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in the year AD 70. Yet even while it stood, a fundamental shift in the temple had already taken place. The goal would no longer be about bringing people to a *fourth place* to worship God. Now worship would be about bringing the temple into the world through people full of the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament speaks of a radical integration. What was formerly broken was made right. What was formerly separated was reconciled. This message changed the world forever.

In the next chapter we're going to see what media of **integration** look like. We are going to see what happens when the medium and the message are one. Before we get there, however, I want to first let you in on some more of my own story. I want to share about my own process of being a worship leader in the church and waking up to the disturbing fact that just about everything I thought the Bible said about worship I had learned from the distorted lens of the *fourth place*.