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## THE FORM OF THE CHURCH

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Once upon a time there was a man named Bill who was fed up with the institutional church. "The Church is so locked in to tradition," he said, "that no spiritual freedom can exist. It's hopeless! I give up on the institutional church."

So Bill gathered a small group of like-minded friends together. "We're going to throw out all the institutionalism and have a simple, unstructured, New Testament church," said Bill.

They all got together one Sunday evening. Eleven of them. They spent about two and one-half hours just sharing, singing, praying and studying the Bible. It was great! Everyone was excited. This was the first time most of them had experienced such free, open fellowship, and the group felt drawn together and spiritually strengthened.

As it came time to break up that evening, Bill said, "Well, this has really been great! I think we've got something started here. Can we meet again next week?"

Everyone agreed. Same time, same place. (The practical question of space and time again.) This new experience of fellowship was worth continuing.

And so a new fellowship—in effect, a new local church—was born. The group grew, diversified somewhat and met

various needs as they arose. What about child care? What about time and length of meetings? What about leadership? What about special holiday observances? What about the cost of materials? In each case, ongoing, fixed arrangements were worked out so the group could function smoothly and would not have to keep making the same minor decisions all over again.

It worked. The group prospered.

But was it unstructured? Of course not! It immediately developed its own structures; it inevitably took on institutional form. Perhaps the forms adopted were good forms; perhaps they were much better than those which had been left behind and better served the true purpose of the Church. Probably so. But structures did indeed appear, for all life must have form. Life without form is sick and dies; it perishes because it cannot sustain itself. That's the way it is with all life, whether spiritual, human or botanical, for God in his creation is consistent.

So we come now to the question of church structure, the form of the Church. The thesis of this chapter is that structure is inevitable, but that not all church structures are equally valid.

We have seen what the Church is biblically: the community of God's people, not an institutional or organizational structure. We also have seen how the Church accomplishes God's plan: through demonstrating the reality of God's salvation in community, and by performing those preordained works which bring substantial healing and point toward the future definitive establishing of the Kingdom of God. Further, we have seen that the Church carries out its mandate by being the messianic community and by witnessing according to the gifts God gives. This is what it means to be the community of the King.

As we take a closer look at structure, I emphasize that the structure is not the Church, just as the wineskin is not the

wine. But the structure is necessary in order for the Church to live and serve in space and time. Every Christian fellowship must have a culturally appropriate way of doing things at certain times and in certain places.

A church which intends to grow and serve the Kingdom of God must be structured in harmony with the biblical understanding of the Church. This is not to say that a church structured otherwise will not grow, for churches with the most diverse structures have obviously grown and survived. But a church not structured in harmony with biblical principles will never achieve the quality of growth and the authenticity of discipleship which God intends.

In itself, church structure is neither evil nor illegitimate. The question concerns the kinds of structures which best serve the Church in its life and witness. Particular structures will be legitimate or illegitimate depending not only on what they are intended to accomplish, but on their function—what they actually do accomplish.

This chapter will look first at criteria for workable structures: How can we be sure specific wineskins are really functional? Second, we will look at the need for structures which especially aid the Church in its witness, and distinguish between the Church and para-church structures. Finally, we will suggest some possible guidelines for church structure today and apply these to the question of the Church's cross-cultural witness.

**Workable Structures** The Bible gives very little specific guidance regarding church structure. It paints a clear profile of what the Church is intended to be, and gives the early history of the Church in two cultural contexts: Palestinian Jewish society and first-century Greco-Roman society. On the basis of this biblical witness the Church in every age forms those wineskins which seem most compatible with its nature and mission within its cultural context.

The question of structure arises within the broad area of freedom within form which the Bible allows. Specific structures are not explicitly prescribed in Scripture. Yet the biblical picture of the Church does help us outline practical criteria for evaluating church structure in any historical context. I suggest three. (It will be helpful to recall here the discussion in chapter four concerning the institutional versus charismatic model for understanding the Church.)

First, *church structure must be biblically valid*. That is, church structure must be compatible with the nature and form of the gospel and of the Church as biblically presented.

New Testament writers were zealous to guard the truth of the gospel and the Church against encroachments from the world or from Judaism. To insist on circumcision was to deny the gospel (Gal. 5:2-6). To make distinctions within the Christian community on the basis of wealth, social status or religious traditions was to transgress God's law (Jas. 2:1-13; Gal. 2:11-21). Jesus warned against canceling out the Word of God by adhering to human tradition (Mt. 15:6). Any tradition, structure or pattern which leads believers to contradict in practice what they profess in faith is unbiblical and must be rejected.

Although this principle should be obvious and fundamental, it is frequently violated. Structures are formed or spawned which are basically contrary to the Bible. They become the unbiblical traditions and rigid institutions mentioned earlier. Yet how often in the Church—even at the local level—we fracture the fellowship into rich and poor, ministers and laymen, black and white, young and old. How devoted we become to preserving programs and how little devoted we are to each other or to structures which help us truly be the Church. We need to ask some hard (and, to some people, shocking) questions: Is the traditional Sunday school structure biblically defensible? Do believers really worship or encounter God in our church services? Is the Word of God really

taught and heard? Do believers really "speak the truth in love" to one another, or only say nice, meaningless things? Do our structures take seriously the gifts of the Spirit and the priesthood of believers? Are there viable structures for *koinonia* and for mission?

Quite simply, the criterion of biblical validity means that all church structures should in fact help the Church be the Church and carry out its mission. They should be structures which promote community, build disciples and sustain witness. Structures which in fact do this are valid; structures which do not are invalid, regardless of how esthetic, efficient or venerated they may be.

Second, *church structure must be culturally viable*. It must be compatible with the cultural forms of the society in which the Church finds itself. This means that church structures cannot be uncritically transplanted from one culture to another without causing serious problems and fundamental misunderstandings as to the true nature of the Church.

The first-century church, for all its problems, still provides remarkable examples of cultural adaptation and viability. Through Stephen, Philip, Paul and others, the early church quickly reached into the Greek-speaking Mediterranean world (Acts 6 and following). Meeting in homes, and generally following the synagogue pattern in local structure, the first Christians were able to multiply rapidly without a large organizational superstructure. Through a pattern of itinerant preachers and evangelists the church maintained a network of communication, teaching and church planting which reached throughout much of the Roman Empire. This pattern was used with great effect by the mendicant preaching orders in the later Middle Ages.

In the modern missionary age, the Church has grown most effectively and most authentically when it has been able to adapt to cultural realities without compromising the transcultural truth of the gospel. On the other hand, the violation

of the principle of cultural viability has at times resulted in slow penetration where cultural differences were great. One of the main factors behind slow church growth in Japan has been the introduction of traditions concerning congregational life and the pastoral ministry which were foreign and not culturally appropriate. This is a violation of the principle of cultural viability. (One may question as well whether these traditions were biblically valid.)

But one need not cross the ocean to encounter a different culture. Modern cities are a cultural microcosm, so effective ministry in urban areas demands sensitivity at this point.

Obviously, biblical validity takes precedence over cultural viability. The Church, after all, will always be in tension with the surrounding culture. But we must take pains to make sure that this tension comes from the antithesis between light and darkness, not from the incompatibility of cultural forms. Where possible, the Church should structure itself along the lines of other structures of a given culture. But this calls for discernment, as it can be done only to the extent that biblical faithfulness is not compromised.

The Church cannot uncritically take over structures from its own surrounding culture any more than it can uncritically import them from outside. But it can evaluate each structure for its biblical validity and cultural viability. Often it will be found that some indigenous structures (for example, perhaps the family structure) are not at all incompatible with the Church's life and witness, once these structures are given to God.

Third, *church structure must be temporally flexible*. It must be open to modification as changing circumstances warrant.

Here we face not only the spatial but also the temporal dimension. Cultures are dynamic, not static. As they change, changes in church structure will also be necessary. The structure that is effective today may be less so thirty (or even ten) years from now. This is especially true in the modern techno-

logical age of discontinuity and rapid change. The fact is that faithfulness to unchanging biblical truth often requires changing structures as time passes.

**Structure in the Early Church** The book of Acts shows that the early church was not entirely unstructured, although no formal organizational structures existed.<sup>1</sup> The necessary functions of worship, community, leadership, nurture and witness were all provided for. The book of Acts shows that all these needs were recognized and cared for in the early Church:

1. *Worship.* The first Christians did not neglect praise and corporate worship. They worshiped together in the temple courts (Acts 2:46; 5:42), "praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:47). Later, of course, when Jewish Christians were barred from Jewish worship and many Gentiles were converted, uniquely Christian worship sprang up. And of course the prayer and fellowship meetings in homes were also worship gatherings.

2. *Community.* The early church was a fellowship or community (*koinonia*). The first Christians "devoted themselves to . . . fellowship" (Acts 2:42). They met as groups in private homes (Acts 2:46; 5:42) and cared for each other's material needs (4:34-35). The home was the center of the common life of the Church during its first two hundred years.

3. *Leadership.* The early church devoted itself "to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). Signs and wonders were done "by the apostles" (Acts 2:43). Leadership initially was in the hands of the original apostles (Acts 4:32-35); later additional leaders also emerged or were chosen. We are reminded that "in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers" (Acts 13:1).

4. *Nurture.* The early church devoted itself "to the apostles' teaching." Nurture didn't just happen; Christian truth was consciously taught. The apostles were "standing in the temple

courts teaching the people" (Acts 5:25), among whom were probably many new converts. And even with persecution, "day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

5. *Witness.* The early church clearly had a dramatic evangelistic witness, both through the apostles' proclamation (Acts 4:33; 5:42) and through the example and witness of the larger body of believers (Acts 8:1-4). The power of the proclamation and the power of love demonstrated in community resulted in the Christians at first "enjoying the favor of all the people," and thus "the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). To the extent that this witness was verbal, it included preaching in the temple and in private homes, open-air preaching and the daily, person-to-person witness of the multitude of believers. But it was more than verbal; it included service (*diakonia*) as well as proclamation.

All these functional needs were met during the very first days of the Christian Church. As we move on through Acts and throughout the New Testament we find these five functions continually being carried out, although in varying ways. Paul himself constantly preached and taught, established Christian communities, emphasized worship and provided for ongoing leadership.

What kind of structures nourished this varied life of the early church? It is fruitless to try to discover a formal organization underlying the life of the early church. The supposition that the first believers "must have had" a more formal organization than appears in the New Testament is unfounded speculation which says more about our modern mania for getting organized than about what the Church really needs in order to be effective. It is noteworthy that not only is no formalized structure detectible, but also that none is prescribed.



If one goes carefully through the book of Acts with an eye to structure, several things come into view:

First, there is considerable evidence of emerging structures throughout the book. Leaders are chosen or arise; patterns of meeting together emerge; decisions are made. We see a young church developing functional forms as particular needs or problems arise.

Second, there is no formal teaching about structures or no exposition of structures as such; no prescriptions.

Third, some structures and leadership terminology are apparently taken over from Jewish practice, such as the synagogue pattern.

Fourth, new structures are created to meet emerging needs. This is evident especially in chapters 2, 4–6, 12, 13, 15 and 20. It is not always evident, however, whether particular arrangements (such as the choosing of the seven in Acts 6) became fixed patterns or were merely one-time provisions.

Fifth, certain things are plainly absent in Acts—most notably, a formally ordained clergy and a formal constitution or book of discipline. We note that although “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7), there is no evidence that they immediately or automatically became leaders in the Christian community.

Finally, Acts reveals differences in structures in different circumstances. We are not told that the pattern of the Jerusalem church (Acts 2–5) was followed in Antioch, or the pattern of Antioch in Ephesus. Doubtless there were many similarities from place to place, but we may assume that differences and adaptations were common. We see no concern to standardize patterns, nor is any overall structure prescribed for all. Common patterns apparently emerged on the basis of common understandings, but with local adaptations and innovations.

What did the local Christian communities in the first century have in common? What structures helped them carry

out necessary functions? From the biblical evidence I have been able to identify very few patterns in the life of the early church which may fairly be called "structures." Of these, the three most general and most basic are charismatic leadership, large-group worship and small-group fellowship.

*Charismatic leadership.* The discussion of spiritual gifts in chapter five has underlined the importance of charismatic leadership for the biblical understanding of the church. The point to emphasize here is that gift-based leadership was, *in practice*, the norm for the early church (not just St. Paul's nice theory!). This may actually be seen as a structure.

In the early church, leadership was essentially a matter of recognizing divinely-appointed leaders through sensitivity to the Spirit's action in giving spiritual gifts. At first there was no formal organizational provision for choosing or replacing leaders; those with leadership gifts exercised them and were recognized as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers. In the local church they were usually called deacons or elders. This, apparently, was the New Testament pattern. Beyond this, no scriptural provisions for leadership structures in the Church can be discerned. So today each local Christian community is free to develop its own leadership patterns, provided these patterns are sensitive to and in harmony with the basic biblical provision of leadership through spiritual gifts.

But isn't "charismatic leadership" fundamentally unstructured? May leadership through spiritual gifts properly be called a structure? Yes, because first of all this is a definite perspective from which to view the matter of leadership; and second, because in the absence of this perspective very definite and fixed patterns rapidly emerge. In any group, it is leadership patterns which become most quickly and firmly institutionalized.

*Large-group and small-group gatherings.* Large-group worship and small-group fellowship are basic, complementary

structures. The early church maintained its life and witness by continuing "to meet together in the temple courts" and by breaking bread in believers' homes (Acts 2:46). The two focal points of its life were "in the temple and at home" (Acts 5:42 RSV). This was the pattern both for witness and for sustaining the life that led to witness.

Not all the large-group gatherings were in the temple, of course. We see a winsome freedom from dependence on buildings in the very early church. Sometimes such gatherings were held in larger homes or rooms (Acts 1:13; 12:12), or were open-air meetings (Acts 2:6-14; 3:11).

Where did the early church learn this use of large-group and small-group gatherings? To a large extent it was, of course, simply the natural way to do things. But it is significant that this was the pattern the apostles had followed with Jesus. For two to three years the Twelve had spent most of their time with Jesus either among outdoor crowds, in the temple or in private small-group conferences with him. There was always this harmonious small-group/large-group rhythm, the small group providing the intense community life which gave depth to the large-group gatherings (whether the latter were for worship or for witness).

Here again extensive examples could be cited, both from Paul's ministry and from the first two centuries of church history. We know that Paul utilized the synagogue, open-air gatherings and (at least on one occasion) a lecture hall (Acts 19:9-10). And we know, as well, of Paul's references to house meetings and "the church that meets in your home" (Philem. 2; Col. 4:15; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19).

**Two Patterns** We, however, are not living in the first century A.D. We look back on the life of the early church through the experience of nearly twenty centuries. Although this is a problem (what do you do with the accumulated weight of two thousand years of ecclesiastical tradition?), it is also an advan-

tage. A careful reading of the intervening centuries should give us a unique perspective from which to examine what happened in those first decades of the Christian era.<sup>2</sup>

Donald Bloesch, in evaluating the impact of the resurgence of Christian communal life in this century, gives us a careful look at varying patterns of Christian discipleship in his book *Wellsprings of Renewal*. Bloesch suggests that while "all Christians are called to holiness or sainthood," still "not all Christians are called to sainthood in the same way." Bloesch believes Scripture presents two patterns of discipleship:

*In biblical and ecclesiastical history two pathways to sanctity can be discerned, and both should be seen as having equal validity in the sight of God. Two patterns of discipleship have arisen, both of which have biblical foundation. On the one hand, there are those who are called to live wholly in the world for the sake of the Gospel, and this entails family life, property, and participation in the affairs of state. . . . On the other hand, some Christians stand under the imperative to fulfill their vocation apart from the world in religious communities or in solitary witness that often entails the renunciation of family, property, and the use of force and violence. Such persons will always be a creative minority, but that they are necessary to the life of the church cannot be denied.*<sup>3</sup>

These comments may be helpful as we look at the question of structure. Bloesch places the current resurgence of Christian communes and other types of intentional communities in the context of the whole monastic tradition. Many of the monastic orders were, at least at their inception, attempts at radical discipleship in terms of both separation from the world and service to the world. The most obvious and, to many, the most appealing example is the Franciscans, followers of St. Francis of Assisi.<sup>4</sup>

The disturbing thing about the suggestion of "two patterns of discipleship"—especially to Protestants—is the implication of a kind of split-level or double-standard ethic which cancels out the tough demands of the gospel for the majority of be-

lievers and elevates a minority to a superspiritual elite. This tendency must be rejected. Certainly there cannot be two levels of discipleship. Some are not called to be holier than others, nor can some legitimately be less obedient than others.

But Bloesch is suggesting not two levels but two patterns (structures) of discipleship. If we can admit that all are called to discipleship but not all are called in the same way, we may further our whole understanding of the problem of church structure.

Bloesch calls the various Christian communities which have arisen "in protest against the worldliness of the church" *para-parochial forms*, "since they exist alongside of the parish or institutional church. At the same time it is important that they be in organic relationship with the church lest they become sectarian. . . . A religious community should ideally be an *ecclesiola* (little church) in the *ecclesia*."<sup>5</sup> Bloesch goes on to suggest seven marks of "a biblically based community or brotherhood in the world today";<sup>6</sup> (1) it should be genuinely evangelical, committed to the gospel and drawing its principal inspiration from the Bible; (2) it should be a small-scale model of the Church, thus visibly demonstrating the reality of the Christian community; (3) it should be an agent of reconciliation between the churches, being in the proper sense catholic as well as evangelical; (4) it should be outreaching, with an evangelistic missionary fervor; (5) it will be in conflict with the principal values and spirit of surrounding culture, thus demonstrating the line between the Church and the world; (6) it should be an eschatological sign of the coming Kingdom of God by its radical witness to the lordship of Christ; and (7) it should give time to study and instruction as well as prayer and proclamation.

In speaking about two patterns of discipleship, Bloesch is really raising the question of church structure. Though not every believer may be called to communal or quasi-communal

life, suggests Bloesch, still the Church needs such intentional communities as a basic pattern within its overall structure. Some believers will be especially called to this pattern. Thus there is a place for the smaller, more intimate fellowship or *ecclesiola* within the larger community of the Church. All Christians are called to the same total commitment to Christ, but the members of such a community are more wholly committed to the other members of the group and to the specific mission for which the group exists.

Historian and missiologist Ralph D. Winter has been examining the question of church structure from another perspective. His primary concern is to find those structures which are most effective in spreading the gospel and planting the Church around the world. He presents a thought-provoking analysis of structures for mission that in some ways parallels Bloesch's "two patterns of discipleship."<sup>7</sup>

As the first of "two structures of God's redemptive mission," Winter points to the local church, the basic characteristic of which is that it includes whole families. Such a structure must, therefore, concern itself with the whole range of human concerns. It cannot focus effectively on just one concern, at least not for long.

*In other words, there is something about the nature of the church—whether a local structure, a nationwide denomination, an international communion or an entire church tradition (e.g., family of churches)—that vitally depends upon human wholeness. The glory of the church, even a local church, is that it patiently endeavors to foster balanced, redemptive community across the whole span of ages, the differences in sex, even differences in station in life.<sup>8</sup>*

In contrast, Winter points to a second "redemptive structure" which is more restricted. Taking an Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship chapter as an example, Winter says such a group "exists expressly (and urgently) to fulfill the need for homogeneous worship and fellowship, but thereby precisely falls short of the other continuing need for heterogeneous

worship and fellowship." The function of such a more restricted group may be contrasted with the broader role of the church: "The church, then, characteristically preserves the wholesome *unity* of the human community while the men's Bible class, the women's association, the church school class and the youth group manifest the wholesome *diversity* of the human community."<sup>9</sup>

Winter believes these two structures—one more inclusive and general, the other more restricted and potentially mission-oriented—can be traced down through church history, even going back to New Testament days.<sup>10</sup> The early church community borrowed its basic structure from the synagogue: "Let us recognize the structure so fondly called 'The New Testament Church' as basically a Christian synagogue."<sup>11</sup> The new churches planted by Paul, in particular, were "essentially built along Jewish synagogue lines, embracing the community of the faithful in any given place."<sup>12</sup> The really unique thing about these new communities was their ability through the reconciling work of Christ to break down "the dividing wall of hostility" between Jew and Gentile and bring both together in one open fellowship (Eph. 2:11-22). The common pattern of the church in the New Testament was a synagogue type of community which (as I have contended above) centered around large-group corporate worship and small-group fellowship and worship cells meeting primarily in homes.

But Winter sees a second, more restricted structure at work in the New Testament, especially in Paul's missionary work: *While we know very little about the structure of the evangelistic outreach within which pre-Pauline Jewish proselytizers worked, we do know . . . that they operated all over the Roman Empire. It would be surprising if Paul didn't follow somewhat the same procedures. And we know a great deal more about the way Paul operated. He was, true enough, sent out by the church in Antioch. But once away from Antioch he seemed very much on his own. The little team he formed was economically self-sufficient when occasion demanded. It was also*



*dependent, from time to time, not alone upon the Antioch church, but upon other churches that had risen as a result of evangelistic labors. Paul's team may certainly be considered a structure.*<sup>13</sup>

In other words, Paul borrowed from Judaism both the synagogue and the structure of a missionary band. These provided the pattern in his church planting and missionary ministry. Thus, according to Winter, "Paul's *missionary band* can be considered a prototype of all subsequent missionary endeavors organized out of committed, experienced workers who affiliated themselves as a second decision beyond membership in the first structure."<sup>14</sup>

This additional second-choice, task-oriented structure maintained a link with the Antioch church, but it was semi-autonomous. Since it was composed of a smaller group of adults all committed to the same mission, it had the freedom and flexibility to carry out its mission (evangelism and church planting) much more effectively than the larger community acting as a whole could do.

What happened as the early church became dominant throughout the Roman Empire? Winter sees the same pattern of two complementary structures continuing, but in different ways. The parish church within a diocese developed throughout the empire and "still preserved the basic constituency of the synagogue, namely, the combination of old and young, male and female—that is, a biologically perpetuating organism." Meanwhile "the monastic tradition in various early forms, developed as a second structure."<sup>15</sup> Thus, *there are already by the fourth century two very different kinds of structure—the diocese and the monastery—both of them significant in the transmission and expansion of Christianity. They are each patterns borrowed from the cultural context of their time, just as were the earlier Christian synagogue and missionary band.*<sup>16</sup>

Many Protestants almost instinctively react against monasticism, but their reaction is usually against the decadent form of monasticism which existed at the time of the Reformation.



Early monasticism, despite an unfortunate dualism in theology, was often highly creative and socially reformatory. In any case, the conversion of much of Europe was due to a great extent to the monastic orders, and many medieval renewal movements began within these orders or led to the founding of new ones. So without justifying all the theology involved, one can at least point out the utility of the structure and cite it as one example of a more restricted, task-oriented group.

Winter draws one final historical parallel: the rise of the independent missionary societies during the past one hundred years, to which the founding of hundreds of new Christian churches around the world has been largely due. Again, the structure is outwardly different from either the New Testament missionary band or the medieval monastic or preaching order, but one can note the functional equivalence and ponder the significance of the parallel.

The principal point of contact between Bloesch's "two patterns of discipleship" and Winter's "two structures of mission" is the recognition of the practical utility of a more restricted, second-decision, committed fellowship for carrying out the Christian mission in the world. Both argue (correctly, I believe) that these two structures are justified biblically and find numerous precedents throughout the history of the Church.

We are dealing here with structures for mission. This means structuring the community of God's people in such a way that it most effectively serves as the agent of the Kingdom, carrying out those tasks "which God prepared in advance." The quite different analyses of Bloesch and Winter, plus my own experience and reflection, convince me of the need within the larger church community for smaller, more restricted mission-oriented groups. This is true at the local level, certainly, and also at denominational and broader levels. Within the local church, for instance, Christians concerned about specific needs or interested in particular ministries could profitably band together as mission groups, functioning as

small-group fellowships around that specific ministry or mission. Gordon Cosby has recently spelled out how such groups can function in his book, *Handbook for Mission Groups*, which draws upon his extensive experience with mission groups in the innovative Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C.<sup>17</sup>

At denominational, regional and other levels similar special-ministry structures are useful. These may take the form of semiautonomous missionary/church-planting societies, as suggested by Winter, or they may be in the form of intentional communities committed to some kind of Christian social ministry, as cited by Bloesch. Such groups may be totally independent from existing denominations or may be denominationally affiliated. The important points are that these structures (1) consist of people committed to each other and to a particular mission and (2) see themselves not as the Church but as an "order" or missionary structure within the Church, with which they remain in fellowship and communication.

On the local level, one can imagine the following scenario. Several different small-group fellowships are functioning within the larger community of the church. These are task-oriented or mission groups, each existing for a specific but different purpose. While Bible study, prayer and sharing are common to all groups, each group also has a very specific mission for which it exists and to which it is dedicated.

Thus on Wednesday evening, for instance, at the church building, the music fellowship has just completed its Bible study and prayer time and is into a music planning session. Some of the group members will be meeting later in the week for rehearsal. Across town another dozen people are meeting in a member's house. This is the missions fellowship. The group has shared in prayer concerning recent requests from the mission field and now is busy with the planning and implementation of the church's missionary program. Simultaneously in another home the social reform fellowship is study-

ing a piece of legislation which has come up in Congress, in order to know what the church's response should be. Meanwhile, two of the evangelistic visitation teams are out in the community and another is involved in a follow-up Bible study. Not all the task groups are meeting tonight, however; the multimedia, Christian nurture and other fellowships meet at other times.<sup>18</sup>

The advantages of this arrangement are many. In particular, such mission groups offer the following positive features:

First, the mission group arrangement recognizes and allows for diversity of personalities and spiritual gifts. Not all Christians are called to the same specific task, nor do they all have the same spiritual gifts. "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them" (Rom. 12:6, RSV). It is a tragedy to try to force every believer into the same ministry, as though all had the same place in the body; it is an even greater tragedy when gifts go unused. Mission groups provide a structure compatible with spiritual gifts.

Second, the mission group arrangement recognizes that certain tasks are so urgent and of such high priority as to demand the total commitment of a few dedicated people. Thus this structure provides for a proper recognition of priorities and a practical way of responding significantly to priority needs. It is more effective and less frustrating to get a small group involved with a specific mission than to attempt to get a large number of people stirred up and committed to that task.

Third, this arrangement also recognizes that mission is best carried out in the context of community. The lone entrepreneur and the rugged individualist do not exemplify the proper model for Christian service. The biblical Christian is called both to community and to mission. This is biblical and it is psychologically realistic. While there is a legitimate place for the strong leader, that leadership should work through a small-group community which allows for team leadership and shared tasks. Effective Christian service is always Jesus Christ

working through his own body, doing the works he did while on earth.

Fourth, the mission group arrangement meets the need for both homogeneous and heterogeneous fellowship and worship.<sup>19</sup> The Church must be a reconciling fellowship which cuts across barriers of sex, social status, age, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and economic standing. Nevertheless, some tasks are best carried out by groups which are in one respect or another more homogeneous. Such an arrangement holds together unity and diversity, homogeneity and heterogeneity, in a way that allows the body of Christ to be what God intended it to be.

Finally, for the above reasons, mission groups are often more effective in accomplishing certain tasks and reaching specific goals than lone individuals, appointed committees and boards, or the whole church community in general. The mission group has a higher level of commitment with regard to the specific mission involved. It concentrates and focuses the light of the gospel so that it cuts through to the goal. Its fewer members, high level of commitment and freedom from other concerns (since it is not encumbered with the whole weight of the church program) give it an enviable flexibility which heightens effectiveness.

All mission groups, however, must be tied in to the body. Each group, really a subcommunity, functions as part of the larger community of the church. Much harm can be done to the body by a small group with an independent spirit which goes off on a tangent and creates division. There must therefore be coordination among such structures, both on the local level and more broadly. In a local church community, at least one person from each group, with some gifts for leadership, should participate in a coordinating group which acts as a clearing-house for information and a center for ideas and planning. Thus the groups are mutually supportive, each contributing to the other, demonstrating in still another re-

spect the mutuality of the body of Christ.

Similarly, each group is not to carry out its specific mission in total isolation or independence from other groups. All groups are part of the body. Cooperation is needed between the groups to achieve maximum effectiveness. This is true within a local church community and the same thing applies to several local churches within a city or suburb. James F. Engel and H. Wilbert Norton in their book *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* demonstrate the need for such cooperation and show how to go about it.<sup>20</sup> This cooperation is equally necessary at regional, national and world levels where cooperative planning and coordination is notoriously lacking among missionary societies, evangelistic organizations and similar groups. As David McKenna suggests, too often in the Church "a wide span . . . exists between brothers who share a common faith and partners who are willing to share common resources."<sup>21</sup>

Structuring the Church, both locally and more generally, on the basis of discerned tasks and discovered spiritual gifts is one way to a more charismatic/organic church structure, which is both more true to the New Testament picture of the Church and more functional in a technological society. Properly conceived and followed through, it is a way to circumvent institutionalism and avoid the deadening effects of impersonal programs and promotions.

But a cautionary word should be added at this point. It is all too easy for the average nominal, well-institutionalized Christian to say, "Yes, that's fine: two structures of discipleship. You take the hard road and I'll take the easy road. Costly discipleship may be your thing, but it's not mine."

Clearly, this will not do. A person is either a disciple of Jesus Christ or no Christian at all. A believer either experiences costly, close *koinonia* with brothers and sisters in Christ or he or she has only the foggiest of notions as to what the Church is all about.

And yet, not all Jesus' disciples were among the Twelve who left all and followed him. To each disciple is given a different gift and a different way of ministry. Some are even given the gift of celibacy (1 Cor. 7:1-7). But all, without exception and to the same degree, are called to discipleship.

We may therefore introduce two qualifications of what has been said in the preceding pages. First, all Christians should be involved in some form of small-group sharing built around the Word. I am not talking here about shallow fellowship groups, but about cells of true *koinonia* where believers take costly responsibility for each other as they live their lives in the world.

Second, we must not confuse any historical expressions of discipleship patterns with the biblical norm. We can learn, for example, from monasticism, from contemporary missionary structures or from New Testament examples. But none of these is being held up here as the perfect model to be imitated today. Above all, we must avoid the split-level view of discipleship which has often compromised the Church's witness in the past. The Church's task today is to find those patterns of obedience which recognize differences in calling on the one hand and the universal summons to discipleship and obedience on the other.

**The Church and Institutional Structures** The discussion of the charismatic versus the institutional dimension of the Church in chapter four emphasized that the Church will inevitably assume some institutional forms, even though the Church is not the institution. It will be helpful to say more about the differences between the Church as the community of God's people, as presented in Scripture, and all supportive institutional or para-church structures which exist ostensibly to serve the Church.

When we look at the contemporary Church, we see not only the community of God's people; we find also a proliferation

of local church organizations, denominations, institutions, agencies, associations and so forth. Such structures obviously have no explicit biblical basis. How should we view them?

The two most common tendencies have been either to say these structures are actually a part of the essence of the Church, and thus sacralize them, or to take an anti-institutional stance and say all such structures are invalid and must be abandoned. The first option is essentially that of traditional Roman Catholic ecclesiology, although many Protestants have unwittingly adopted the same view. The second option is popular among those who have seen the blemishes of institutional Christianity and who, like Bill at the beginning of this chapter, think institutionless Christianity is somehow possible.

A more helpful option, however, is to view all institutional structures as para-church structures which exist alongside of and parallel to the community of God's people but are not themselves the Church. Such structures have three things in common: they are structured institutionally rather than organically or charismatically; they exist alongside or parallel to the church community; and they exist ostensibly to serve the Church.

Para-church structures are useful to the extent that they aid the Church in its mission, but are manmade and culturally determined. Whereas the Church itself is part of the new wine of the gospel, all para-church structures are wineskins—useful, at times indispensable, but also subject to wear and decay.

In dealing with the whole question of church structure, then, it is helpful to make a clear distinction between the Church as the community of God's people and all para-church structures, whether local church organizational forms, denominational structures, mission agencies, evangelistic organizations, educational institutions or other ecclesiastical structures (Figure 5). Thus the Church is a spiritual reality which is always cross-culturally valid. But para-church

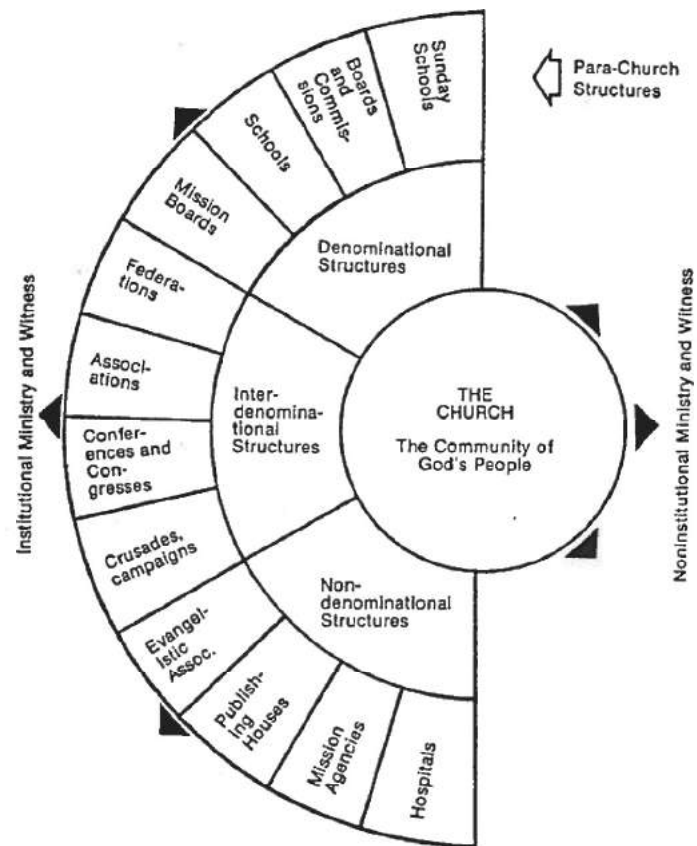


Figure 5. The Church and Para-Church Structures



structures are not the essence of the Church. Believers within these structures, in their common life as a people and a community, are the Church. When such para-church structures are confused with the Church, or seen as part of its essence, all kinds of unfortunate misunderstandings result, and we bind the Church to its particular cultural and structural expression.

Several benefits come from this distinction between the Church and para-church structures. (1) That which is always cross-culturally relevant (the Church) is distinguished from that which is culturally bound and determined (para-church structures). Thus, one is free to see the Church as culturally relevant and involved and yet not as culturally bound. (2) One is free also to modify para-church structures as culture changes, for these are not themselves the Church and therefore are, for the most part, culturally rather than biblically determined. (3) Finally, this distinction makes it possible to see a wide range of legitimacy in denominational confessions and structures. If such structures are not themselves the Church and are culturally determined, then whole volumes of controversy and polemics lose their urgency and become merely secondary. Widely varying confessions are freed (at least potentially) to concentrate on that which unites them, namely, being the people of God and carrying out their kingdom tasks, while relegating structural differences to the plane of cultural and historical relativity. Thus the crucial consideration for structure becomes not biblical legitimacy but functional relevancy.

Table 3 suggests further implications of this distinction between the biblical Church and para-church structures. For the sake of analysis, the differences between the two are set in sharper relief here than normally occurs in the concrete instance.

I would emphasize that this distinction is not merely a restatement of the visible/invisible understanding of the

Church. The Church is both visible and invisible and so are para-church structures; even a secular organization has its invisible dimensions, as Jacques Ellul has pointed out.<sup>22</sup> I am

The Church	Para-Church Structures
1. God's creation	1. Man's creation
2. Spiritual fact	2. Sociological fact
3. Cross-culturally valid	3. Culturally bound
4. Biblically understood and evaluated	4. Sociologically understood and evaluated
5. Validity determined by spiritual qualities and fidelity to Scriptures	5. Validity determined by function in relation to mission of the Church
6. God's agent of evangelism and reconciliation	6. Man's agents for evangelism and service
7. Essential	7. Expendable
8. Eternal	8. Temporal and temporary
9. Divine revelation	9. Human tradition
10. Purpose to glorify God	10. Purpose to serve the Church

**Table 3.** Differences between the Church and Para-Church Structures

distinguishing, rather, between the Church as biblically understood and auxiliary ecclesiastical structures which did not exist normatively in New Testament days but which have appeared in many forms down through church history. These are para-church, for to say any particular structures are theologically necessary to the Church's being would be to say the first-century church was not truly and completely the Church.

The term *para-church structures* has customarily been used to designate nondenominational and interdenominational organizations such as Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, World Vision or a council of churches. But the attempt to make a biblical (rather than

merely pragmatic) analysis of this question encounters a basic difficulty in this traditional understanding. There is no biblical basis for a fundamental distinction between denominational structures and para-denominational organizations; nor is there any basis for considering obviously man-made denominational organizations, which are a relatively recent development in church history, as essential to the Church. In other words, the more basic distinction seems to be between the Church as the body of Christ, the community of God's people, and all institutional structures, including denominations. Ralph Winter has suggested calling such structures *infra-church structures* to emphasize their subordinate but supporting relationship to the Church, and to avoid making a complete break between the Christian community and its structures.

My conviction is that the Protestant view of Scripture and revelation does not allow us to include denominational or other organizational structures not found in the Bible as actually part of the Church itself. There is a fundamental difference here between Protestant and traditional Roman Catholic views of the Church, although the implications of the Reformation in this area of ecclesiology have never been carried through to their logical conclusion. Protestants who distinguish between biblical revelation and church tradition should have no difficulty making a distinction between the biblical Church and institutional church structures. The categories are parallel. The biblical Church is grounded in biblical revelation; para-church or infra-church structures are based in postbiblical church tradition.

Isn't this Church/para-church distinction merely another way of distinguishing between people and organization? In one sense, yes. The Church is *the people* of God. But this people, to be the Church, must live in community through appropriate structures and through the exercise of spiritual gifts—regardless of the institutional organizations within

which they secondarily may be involved. Once we distinguish between ecclesiastical institutional structures and the Church as the people of God (drawing the line of demarcation there rather than between the denomination or local church and nondenominational ministries), then we can see more clearly how effective ministry can and should be carried out.

Biblically speaking it is irrelevant, for instance, whether evangelism is carried out by a denomination or by some nondenominational structure. In both cases the sponsoring structure is in reality a para-church structure, not the Church itself. It is not fundamentally important whether foreign missions (to take another example) are carried out by denominational mission boards or by independent missionary agencies. Both forms of ministry may be equally valid or invalid, depending on whether they do in fact actually extend and build the community of God's people.

Evangelism, regardless of the agency which sponsors it, is legitimate only as it plants and edifies the Church or extends its witness. All social ministry, regardless of its sponsoring structure, is biblically valid only as it is in some way an authentic expression of the community of God's people. Evangelistic and missionary efforts which form new Christian communities or add to those already formed are legitimate if they really build the Church as biblically understood. If they do not, they are a waste of effort, regardless of how they are structured or of the biblical legitimacy they claim. Of course it is fundamentally important that all ministry, whether evangelistic or prophetic, take care to contribute to the visible and spiritual unity, rather than disunity, of the body of Christ.

The important thing for every form of ministry is that the biblical Church be built and grow to maturity in Christ, that is, that local Christian communities or fellowships be multiplied, that such communities truly demonstrate the quality of life seen in Jesus Christ, and that the Church live in the world as the redeemed people of God. From a biblical point of view,

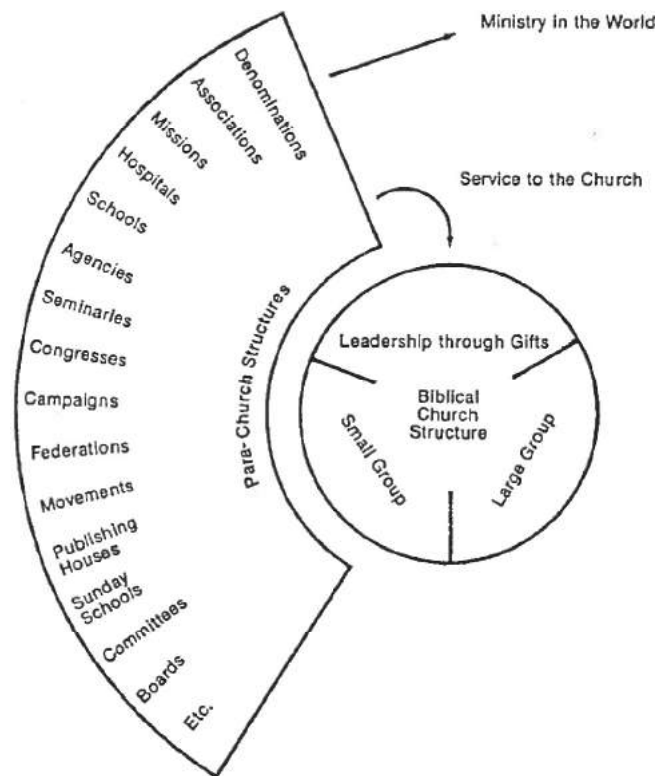


Figure 6. A Model for Church Structure

questions of denominational or nondenominational affiliation or structure are strictly secondary.

In summary, the Church as the community of God's people is best structured on spiritual gifts of leadership and on some form of large-group and small-group gatherings. It should recognize the utility of, and encourage, more restricted, second-decision mission groups within its larger self. Beyond this, the Church should take care to distinguish between its essential self and all para-church structures so that it does not become culture-bound, and, conversely, so that in periods of upheaval the wine is not thrown out with the wineskins. These principles are illustrated in Figure 6.

**Implications for Cross-Cultural Witness** Finally, several conclusions for cross-cultural witness follow from the foregoing discussion of church structure.

1. *The Church as biblically presented is always cross-culturally relevant.* This is true because the Church as the space-time community of believers is a cosmic/historical, charismatic organism that proceeds from divine action and transcends any particular cultural form.

2. Similarly, *the basic structures of charismatic leadership and small-group/large-group gatherings are always cross-culturally viable.* This follows from the foregoing analysis; it also has been demonstrated abundantly throughout church history and in the modern missionary age.

3. On the other hand, *para-church structures are not necessarily cross-culturally valid.* Since these are culturally determined, particular para-church structures will be transferable from one culture to another only to the extent that the two cultures are compatible. Often basic adaptations will have to be made. Missionaries must be concerned with the transfer and implantation of the Church as biblically described, not with the reproduction of secondary institutions or forms which are really nothing other than para-church structures.

4. *The exercise of spiritual gifts will result in cross-cultural evangelism and witness.* Since the first Gentile outreach recorded in the book of Acts and through the ages, God has been calling and sending forth his charismatically equipped missionaries. The Antiochene pattern (Acts 13:1-3) has been repeated countless times and will continue to be repeated until Christ returns (Mt. 24:14). It is God who calls and who gives gifts, and the gift and the call go together.

5. *The Church is itself a missionary community, and any group of missionaries may be a legitimate embodiment of the Church.* This means there can be no question of the Church versus missionary structures. Wherever missionaries are, there is the Church and there missionaries are responsible for demonstrating the reality of Christian community. The real point of tension therefore is between the Church as the community of God's people and institutional expressions of the Church. Missionaries can never go to another culture and leave the Church behind! But they can, and often should, leave behind or modify the para-church forms peculiar to their own culture.

6. On the other hand, *para-church missionary/evangelistic structures should be created wherever needed to get the job done.* While the Church is God's agent of evangelism, dynamic para-church structures can be man's agents of evangelism, useful in God's hands for the more rapid and effective propagation of the gospel. Denominational groups should freely collaborate with other para-church organizations which are doing work they themselves cannot do, or which will help them carry on their own evangelistic work. Such organizations, however, should always be directed ultimately toward the formation of the Church (though in widely different ways), while not allowing themselves to be confused with the Church or to become ends in themselves.

7. Since they are manmade and culturally determined, *all para-church structures should be subjected to continuous rigorous*

*sociological and theological analysis* to determine their effectiveness as instruments of the Church. We should not hesitate to make the most exacting sociological studies of mission agencies, evangelistic movements, social reform groups and denominational structures. History teaches us that many such structures will eventually succumb to institutionalism and become hindrances to the gospel rather than helps. The fact that God has raised up a movement is no warranty against eventual infidelity or idolatry. Having clearly distinguished such structures from the essence of the Church, we can freely ask to what extent these forms are actually functioning without fearing we are somehow desecrating holy things.<sup>23</sup>

In the final analysis, church structure is a question of the community of God's people using their God-given intelligence and creativity to manufacture useful tools to help extend the Church's witness, while always remembering that these manmade tools stand under God's judgment and must never be worshiped.



Chapter 8

<sup>1</sup>One's theology of the Church must be derived predominantly from the Epistles and the Gospels, rather than from Acts. But Acts is the best source of information as to how the early church functioned and was structured.

<sup>2</sup>Christians today are in the remarkable situation of actually knowing more, at least potentially, about the early church and the first Christian centuries than any previous generation. This is due principally to twentieth-century discoveries and advances in archaeology, history, biblical studies and related fields. Those who take seriously the birth and life of the Christian Church as providing guidance for the Church today should be in the forefront of such research.

<sup>3</sup>Donald G. Bloesch, *Wellsprings of Renewal, Promise in Christian Communal Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 19-20. I am concerned, however, that Bloesch makes too easy demands on those not called to the more restrictive form of discipleship.

<sup>4</sup>A new study of St. Francis presenting varied perspectives on the twelfth-century saint is the anthology *Brother Francis*, ed. Lawrence Cunningham (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1975). A recent fictionalized biography by a Protestant author is Glen Williamson's *Repair My House* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Creation House, 1973).

<sup>5</sup>Bloesch, p. 108.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 108-12.

<sup>7</sup>See especially Ralph D. Winter and R. Pierce Beaver, *The Warp and the Woof: Organizing for Mission* (South Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1970), and Winter's "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," *Missiology*, 2:1 (January 1974), pp. 121-39.

<sup>8</sup>Winter and Beaver, *The Warp and the Woof*, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup>Winter terms these two structures *modality* and *sodality*. A modality is an entire church community, comprising whole families, while a sodality is a smaller community within the church with more restricted membership and dedicated usually to one specific task, such as missions or evangelism. See *The Warp and the Woof*, p. 52-62.

<sup>11</sup>Winter, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," p. 121.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 123. To the extent that these *ecclesioles* or mission groups take on institutional forms, they become para-church structures, while the believers within them are no less the true Church. Wherever they are found or however they function, institutional ecclesiastical structures are best seen as para-church, not of the essence of the Church.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 126. The diocesan plan was borrowed from Roman political administra-

tion; Winter sees the monastic community as indebted to Roman military organization.

<sup>17</sup>Gordon Cosby, *Handbook for Mission Groups* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1975).

<sup>18</sup>These specific mission groups are only suggestive, of course. A local church, depending on its size, might have two or more groups involved with very specific social questions, such as drug abuse, abortion, child care or famine relief, rather than one catch-all "social reform fellowship." Likewise several groups might be involved with evangelism of different kinds. Groups arise out of a sense of need, so they will be as varied as the groups' gifts and as specific as the needs identified.

<sup>19</sup>Winter and Beaver, *The Warp and the Wool*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>20</sup>James F. Engel and H. Wilbert Norton, *What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), especially pp. 79-102.

<sup>21</sup>David L. McKenna, "Drinking at a Shrinking Water Hole," *United Evangelical Action*, 34:4 (Winter 1975), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup>Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

<sup>23</sup>Engel and Norton rightly suggest that "it is becoming increasingly apparent that a research department should be a part of any Christian communication organization, no matter how small" (p. 123).