

CHAPTER 2

A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH LIFE

Old Testament Roots of the Church

The Bible, often considered a rulebook, is better described as a book of relationships. To be sure, there were rules or directives from the beginning. God directed the male and female to be fruitful, to fill the earth, to subdue it and rule over its creatures (Gen. 1:26-28). God commanded Adam and Eve *not* to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. These directives or rules were given to humanity, not because they were sinful – sin had not entered into human experience. They were given because of the relationship that existed between God and humanity. As we discussed in the preceding chapter, God made humankind. Humanity was not equal with God, but a reflection of God. Human beings were created in God's image. Indeed, they exist as God's children, God's dependents. Therefore, humanity needs direction and protection. The relationship explains the rules. Thus the Bible should not be read like instructions that come in the box with some equipment to assemble. It should not be read like a manual for some inanimate object: such as a car or a computer. Rules appear in the Bible out of the give and take of relationships.

Rules exist when there is a relationship of dependence, and they multiply when that relationship suffers strain. The Old Testament seems to follow that pattern. Rules were given to people in covenant with God. They multiplied in the context of disobedience and defiance. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God and saw things from the perspective of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, directives and restrictions grew. Rules punctuate the remainder of Genesis, fill portions of Exodus and Numbers and dominate the texts of Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Because Adam and Eve saw life through the filter of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they saw things in terms of morality, good and evil, rather than in the focus of their relationship with their Heavenly Father. God's rules called for them to focus on what pleased or displeased God. The rules pointed to the relationship.

As humanity became increasingly independent and alienated in their wisdom, God established among the peoples of the earth, an alternative community that was focused on a relationship with Him. To some degree that community can be seen in the genealogies of Genesis, but it becomes more fully expressed in both the pledge and actions God took with Noah.

The Bible describes utter alienation and degradation in the time of Noah. Every thought of the people was inclined at every moment to evil (Gen. 6:5). The people filled the earth with violence (Gen. 6:13). God was deeply grieved (Gen. 6:6-7). However, with Noah God was pleased (Gen. 6:8). God revealed to Noah both an approaching flood He was sending and its reason. God directed Noah to build an ark for the preservation of his family, him and animal life. Noah's family would survive and live as an alternative community to the families that had populated the earth. God promised to establish His covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:13-18). That term covenant translates the Hebrew word *berith* and its origin is not clear.¹ Its use with Noah suggests a pledge. God gave His pledge to never destroy the earth again by flood. This pledge was given to all life on earth (Gen. 9:9-11). Yet "pledge" does not adequately express the meaning of *berith*. The English term "pledge" puts the focus on the one making the oath. But the Hebrew *berith* is between God and Noah, between God and every living creature, between God and earth (Gen. 9:12-17). It binds the actions and destiny of two parties together. With a covenant, a new relationship begins.

Such is the case in the twelfth chapter of Genesis. God said to Abram:

Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:1-3)

In this call, God revealed (1) that God wanted Abram to respond to Him with trusting actions, (2) that God would unfold a great destiny for him, (3) that God would respond to others based on their treatment of him and (4) that Abram would be a means of blessing all the peoples of the world. God was establishing a relationship with Abram and his descendants that would

¹ Some scholars suggest that it was borrowed from the Assyrian *biritu*, which commonly is translated "fetter," but also translates "covenant." The Assyrian root is also unclear although the meaning "to bind" is probable. See David Foster Estes, "Covenant," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Electronic Database*, (Biblesoft, 1996).

make a difference and be the difference for his estranged children who lived all over the planet.

God's call and promise to Abram later became solemnized in covenant language. The Bible says that God made a *berith* and promised to give Abram the land of the Canaanites (Gen. 15:18-20). God later reinforced this covenant relationship by calling Abram to walk blamelessly before Him, by promising to increase his numbers, by renaming him Abraham and by reaffirming his previous promise about the land of the Canaanites (Gen. 17:1-8). God memorialized this covenant, not by putting a sign in the sky as He did with Noah (see Gen.9:13, 16), but by having Abraham put the sign in his own body and that of his descendants. Abraham was to keep the *berith* by undergoing circumcision and by circumcising all male descendants (Gen. 17:9-14). Circumcision signaled that all who Abram conceived and all who were conceived through his descendants were in this special relationship with God. God said, "My *berith* in your flesh is to be an everlasting *berith*" (Gen. 17:13).² The covenant resided in Abraham's own body and was everlasting. Although all descendants of Adam suffered from an alienating vision, the descendants of Abraham would be intimately and perpetually reminded of their special relationship with God.² Their community life and practices were to reinforce a relationship-vision in individual participants.

The story of Abraham³ and Isaac in the region of Moriah, where Isaac, at the direction of God, was nearly killed as a human sacrifice (Gen. 22:1-14), abruptly arises in the narrative of Abraham's life⁴ and presents a dilemma to those with an independent moral vision. But in a culture where human sacrifice was offered to other deities and with a son who was the focus of Abraham's future,⁵ this anguishing test served to reinforce the one thing Abraham needed most: a relational (rather than moral) vision that depended upon God.

God continually called for and reinforced in the descendants of Abraham the preeminence of their relationship with Him. As He appeared to them, God identified Himself in dreams and encounters as "the God of Abraham" to Isaac (Gen. 26:24), "the God of your

² History and memory would become thematic throughout the Old Testament. Abram's descendants would continually be urged to remember, the covenant with Abram, God's mighty acts of deliverance, the sacred law and so forth.

³ In renaming Abram as Abraham, father of many nations, God not only had this man construct his identity on the basis of God's promise; but also combining this new name with circumcision, he reinforced the vision within Abraham and his family that their life and destiny rested on this special relationship.

⁴ Sailhamer, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 168.

⁵ See Paul's discussion of Abraham in Romans 4:18-25.

father Abraham and the God of Isaac” to Jacob (Gen. 28:13), and “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” to Moses (Exod. 3:6). The focus of God’s self-revelation and identity was their relationship, and the sign of that relationship existed in their own flesh. This covenant relationship is so defining that the Hebrew term *berith* appears 284 times in the Old Testament.⁶

Despite the sign of the covenant in their own flesh, the descendants of Abraham still suffered from the alienating vision received in the Garden of Eden. God would remind Abraham’s descendant Moses of the covenant (Exod. 6:4-5) and later call him to renew it with Israel (Exod. 19:3-6). God used various experiences to form a community dependent upon him. The glue of oppression in Egypt kept Israel together and forged a national identity. Miraculous deliverance from Egypt pointed them to their God. The trauma of death and a desolate desert turned Israel’s eyes in dependence upon their God. The giving of the law and the recitation of blessings and curses provided an additional lens for the Israelites to see their lives in terms of that relationship. Life in this covenant community was organized to reinforce God’s children’s relationship with Him; but with the passing of both Moses and Joshua’s generation, the covenant community disintegrated (Judg. 2:6-15). They forgot their special relationship with God until submerged in oppression and delivered by some believer (such as Deborah, Gideon or Samson). Again and again they would be reminded of their covenant with God, yet after the rescuing believer died, their relationship with God and one another would again erode forming a repetitious pattern (Judg. 2:10-19).

In the time of the Judges, the Israelites’ pattern of alienation culminated in the rejection of God as king and His priest as leader (1 Sam. 8:1-22, 10:17-19, 12:6-25). Despite this rejection, God did not settle for a secular community. God would deal with the king in a way to turn eyes back to God. The king was to depend upon God. God would establish his rule (1 Sam. 13:5-14). King Saul’s independence from God and disobedience cost him the kingdom and his life (1 Sam. 15:1-35, 28:3-19). The critical qualification for David’s kingship was his heart that hungered for God (1 Sam. 13:14, 16:7). Indeed, David warned his son

⁶ Not all appearances of the term “covenant” signify God’s special relationship with certain human beings. For example, in Genesis 14:13 “covenant” speaks of a special relationship between Abraham and his neighbors who were in league with him. In Genesis 21 “covenant” is used twice to speak of a treaty between Abraham and Abimelech. It later describes a treaty between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 26:28) and one between Laban and Jacob (Gen. 31:44). Treaty is the sense when Israel is forbidden from making a covenant with the people from Canaan or their gods (Exod. 23:32). However, in the vast majority of appearances, *berith* signifies a special relationship with God. God speaks of “my covenant” 50 times. The Ark of the Covenant appears 32 times. The book of the covenant and sign of the covenant each appear 4 times. The blood of the covenant appears once.

Solomon that a heart devoted to God was critical (1 Kings 2:2-4) as proven later when the kingdom was divided (1 Kings 9:13, 11-14).

Even led by a king, Israel was to be a covenant community. King David led the procession that brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. He celebrated the occasion with a psalm that remembered the covenant that God made with Abraham and later confirmed with his descendants (1 Chron. 6:7-36). David's civic leadership was spiritual, and God made a *berith* with him. David's royal line would be established forever (Psa. 89:3-4), and that covenant would give hope to succeeding generations (see Psalm 89).

As David's descendants took the throne, their reigns would be evaluated in the Bible in terms of their devotion and loyalty to God (1 Kings 11:1-13, 14:21-24, 15:1-5, 11-15, 22:41-44, 2 Kings 8:16-19, 26-27, 12:1-3). Similarly, the Bible evaluated the kings who ruled the breakaway northern kingdom. Jeroboam and Ahab were especially condemned. Although God gave Jeroboam power, he led Israel to spurn their special covenant with God. He feared that the kingdom would revert to David's descendants if he did not intervene in their worship (1 Kings 12:26-33). Ahab, led astray by his pagan wife, was condemned for the extent that he ruthlessly led Israel to embrace other gods (1 Kings 16:29-33).

Judah and Israel were together a special community with a special relationship to God. Yet their way of seeing and thinking betrayed that relationship. Although the prophets mounted scathing critiques of the community's moral judgment and actions, morality was not the point. Relationship was. The prophets called Judah and Israel back to their God, reminding them of their covenant with God. In Isaiah, the Israelites are reminded of God's covenant 10 times. Twice their futile covenants with others are exposed (Isa. 28:15, 18). The term *covenant* appears 24 times in Jeremiah's prophecies, 18 in Ezekiel's and 7 times in the book of Daniel. Hosea prophesied:

What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you. For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings. Like Adam, they have broken the covenant – they were unfaithful to me there. (Hos. 6:4-7)

God had called aside a people from the families of the world. This people were to live in special relationship with God. Their community life was to reinforce that relationship. Yet with even the sign of that relationship fixed in their own flesh, they strayed. They eschewed

dependence upon God. They lived as competitive gods with their own sense of good and evil. They made allegiances and alliances independent of God's purposes and plans. The prophet Jeremiah declared:

“The time is coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer. 31:31-34)

With terms like “covenant,” “forefathers,” “husband” and with phrases like “took them by the hand,” “their God,” “my people” and “know me,” God was shouting through the prophet, “relationship!” Relationship was the point. Moreover, a new relationship was coming. God would make a new covenant. This one would exist not in the flesh of humanity, but in their hearts. This covenant would be fixed in the spirit of the people. Furthermore, all in this community would know God, for they would experience His forgiveness.

New Testament Realities

Gospel Roots of the Church

By the time of Christ's birth, many Israelites were fiercely committed to the law of God. Many were convinced that their misfortune was due to their betrayal of God's word. Yet their focus seemed moral or legal rather than relational. They were into knowing and keeping regulations to appease a distant deity rather than walking with a “knowable” God.

Jesus repeatedly challenged Jewish religious leaders for missing the point of Scriptures. He called them blind guides (Matt. 15:14, 23:16, 24). He confronted them regarding the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-8, especially 7), religious washing (Matt. 23:25-26, Mark 7:1-8), and family obligations (Mark 7:8-13). He charged them with being whitewashed (Matt. 23:27-28), and also with preventing people from coming to God (Matt. 23:13-15). Through His teaching and work, Christ developed a new community. He called individuals out from their daily lives to walk with Him (Matt. 9:9). He modeled for them intimacy with God as Father and called them to that intimate relationship (Luke 11:1-13). He taught them to be like teachable, trusting children (Matt. 18:3-4). He sent them out in teams to serve others (Luke 10:1). He modeled

humility in receiving service from others (Luke 7:36-50, John 12:1-8), and He showed them their need for humility in receiving and offering service to one another (John 13:1-17). He claimed that they would be known as His followers by how they “related” with one another (John 13:35). Unlike other communities, however, the new community of Christ did not settle in the desert, form a school in Jerusalem, or takeover a town like Capernaum.

If the aim of this community was simply to inform its members about God, the previous settings would have been vastly superior. This community’s focus, however, was partnership with their Father, a father who hungered for his lost and harassed children. Jesus said, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). He told parables that revealed God’s heart for His alienated “likeness” (Luke 15). He called His followers to pray that more workers would be sent to serve in the mission field of God’s estranged children (Luke 10:2). The result was that mobility was an important aspect of this new community. Much learning occurred in the greater context of reaching out to “the lost sheep of Israel” (Matt. 15:24) as Jesus and disciples visited hamlets and villages throughout the territory. Indeed, when Jesus’ ministry exploded in growth at Capernaum, He withdrew for prayer. As His followers bid Him to return there, He replied, “Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come” (Mark 1:38). Those words, “Let us go,” were Christ’s call to His community. They were to share in His relationship with the Father and together be a team in their Father’s mission.

Although Jesus may have never conversed with his disciples in Greek, his followers used the Greek term *ekklēsia* (Matt. 16:18, 18:17) to convey Jesus’ words about His community, the church. The term can be translated assembly. It describes a gathering assembled for some business.⁷ Even as God separated Israel among the nations for a special relationship and purpose, Jesus assembled from within Israel a community for a special relationship and purpose. Jesus said to Peter, “I will build my *ekklēsia*, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:18). In describing the church, Jesus gave Peter a picture of two buildings. Jesus would build one: His Assembly. The other was the House of Death.⁸

⁷ According to *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Electronic Database*, (Thomas Nelson Publishers: 1985) the term *ekklēsia* is a compound of *ek*, "out of," and *klesis*, "a calling" (*kaleo*, "to call"). It was used among the Greeks of a body of citizens "gathered" to discuss the affairs of state. In the Septuagint it is used to designate the "gathering" of Israel, summoned for any definite purpose, or a "gathering" regarded as representative of the whole nation.

⁸ See the article on Matthew 16:18 from *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament, Electronic Database* (Biblesoft, 1997).

Humanity was trapped within the gates of the latter. Those gates not only stand against the church, keeping people from faith and freedom in Christ; they are hostile to the church. They are electrified. They can overpower those in contact with it.⁹ Yet Jesus promised Peter they would not overcome His assembly. He holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Those keys can unlock the gates of death. When passed onto Peter and other believers, the keys equip them to bind and loose in heaven whatever they bind and loose on earth (Matt. 16:19). Jesus would build His Assembly on the faith of his followers. Those followers would be significant players in this cosmic struggle. They would be partners in their Heavenly Father's mission to reclaim and redeem His lost and bound children.

The roots and mission of the Christian Church are planted in the soil of searching love: love that called in the garden to Adam and Eve hiding in shame, that singled out Noah in an earth filled with violence, that made covenant with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David, that sent prophets to a straying people and that sent Jesus to reclaim from bondage God's alienated children. The Church is bent on relating to a father who calls them to go. Jesus said, "The Son can do nothing by Himself; He can do only what He sees His Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all he does" (John 5:19-20). Jesus' focus is His Father. This relationship is responsible for His perspective and actions. He "sees" what His Father is about. How does He do it? He teaches His followers the key to this vision.

When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to Me by taking from what is Mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is Mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is Mine and make it known to you. (John 16:13-15)

Christ's community was to see as Christ did through their fellowship with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would counsel and guide them. As Christ was Spirit-led, so this new community was also to be Spirit-led. It was to see as Christ did and go as Christ did. Jesus said, "As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you." And with that He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:21-22).

⁹ The term "overcome" is the Greek word *katischio*. It means "to be strong to another's detriment, to prevail against; to be superior in strength; to overpower" (from *Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database*, BibleSoft 2000). It is the compound of *kata* "against" and *ischuo* "to have or exercise force" (*New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*, BibleSoft and International Bible Translators, Inc., 1994).

The Church in the Book of Acts

Even as the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to a covenant fixed in the spirit of God's people (Jer. 31:31-34), Ezekiel to the gift of a new heart and new spirit (Ezek. 11:19-20, 36:26-27), and Joel to the pouring out of God's Spirit on all people (Joel 2:28-29), Jesus told His Assembly to wait for the immanent gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5).¹⁰ With that gift they would have power for their mission (Acts 1:8). They would be clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49).

If there was any question as to how Jesus would build His Church, certainly the gift of the Holy Spirit was the crux of the answer. Jesus counseled his followers that the Holy Spirit would be their teacher, their guide, their counselor and their power (John 14:16-17, 26, 15:26, 16:7, 12-15). John the Baptist prepared his listeners for Jesus by baptizing them with water and exclaiming that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:26-33).

Luke wrote:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:1-4)

This was the decisive moment. This was the birth of the new covenant community; and as the Spirit came on Christ's followers, their mouths spoke about the God who filled them. From their lips a gathering crowd heard the wonders of God in their native tongue (Acts 2:6-11). At the church's inception, as a temple of God's Spirit, it gave witness to God and called people to relationship with God (Acts 2:4-40).

Although proclamation was a central element in the Pentecost event, community was the context for that action. The disciples were all together (Acts 2:1). In his eight affirmations about the New Testament Church, William Easum writes: "The primary task of the first-century Christians was to establish personal, Christian community in the midst of a hostile environment."¹¹ Whether that was the primary task or not, it certainly was an important one.

¹⁰ They were not to leave Jerusalem (Luke 24:49).

¹¹ Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, 47. One could argue with Easum that the primary task of 1st century Christians was to converse with the Holy Spirit. Yet Christian community was critical to one's relationship with the Spirit. Paul warned the

The pattern for that Christian community is described in Acts immediately following the eruption of power on the day of Pentecost.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

An utterly new way of seeing and acting was forming through people who daily gathered together as a movement in temple courts and as teams or huddles in their homes. "The apostles' teaching" provided Christian believers a new perspective on their relationships and life. Its purpose was to recast their vision and thus their action. "The fellowship" or "koinonia" describes their common life. They shared not only their personal stories with one another, but their needs, their concerns, their possessions, their mission, their experience of living. "The breaking of bread" points to the special celebration and commemoration that Christ instituted on the night he was betrayed. These meals reminded believers that life was in a relationship with Jesus.¹² These Jerusalem believers were committed to the vision He gave them through the leading and teaching of His Spirit. "The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63), Jesus told his disciples who struggled over his discourse on his body as food. Everything about the paschal meal emphasized life through the ministry of Christ's Spirit. "Prayer" was their critical, personal and direct connection with their newly discovered Father. Those made "in His likeness" now exposed their hearts to their Father and partnered with His Spirit in intercession for the redemption of the world.¹³ Indeed, prayer for others is a critical task done in partnership with the Spirit and Christ who lives to intercede (Heb. 7:25).

Ephesians that in this hostile time they needed to continually be filled with the Spirit. This would happen in community as they shared with one another in song and thanksgiving and submitted to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:15-21).

¹² It is doubtful that the author of Acts ever intended readers to think that the early believers devoted themselves to eating. For a fuller discussion of the Jewish fellowship meal, the Agape feast and other interpretations of "the breaking of bread," see Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gabelein, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 289-290.

¹³ The intercessory work of the Spirit is described by Paul in Romans 8:26-27. The priestly mission of Christ including his devotion to prayer and intercession on our behalf is discussed in Hebrews 4:14-5:10 and illustrated in John 17.

The New Testament community was awestruck by the works of the Spirit among them. They were together, not off doing their own thing. They helped one another as they had need. They met every day in the temple courts, broke bread together every day in their homes, and cultivated glad and sincere hearts that offered praise to God and won the favor of their neighbors. Attracted by their experience with believers of this community and drawn by the Spirit working among them, new people joined the church each day, for they were being delivered from their vision and also the guilt, enslavement and judgment it brought them.

John Wesley was struck by the communal life described in Acts and the behavioral changes it produced. Willimon and Wilson state:

Not content simply to gain enthusiastic converts who could point to some vague emotional experience as the source of their discipleship, Wesley organized people into a structure whereby they received the support, correction, and encouragement they needed to live as Christians in a society that operated from a set of assumptions other than the gospel.¹⁴

In Jerusalem believers began the task of implementing what the apostles taught in the setting of their own homes. In that context participants could see how the trappings of the old vision and their manipulation through demonic temptation and deception marred what they saw, felt and did. George Hunter calls these small home-group meetings *redemptive cells*. He writes:

Many people... never experience half of what “church” has to offer. Only in their church’s redemptive cells do we really know each other, and support each other, and pull for each other, and draw strength from each other, and weep with each other, and rejoice with each other, and hold each other accountable, and identify each others gifts, and experience what it means to be “members of one another.” That is why Bruce Larson claims that “it is just as important that you be involved in a small group as it is to believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins.” There are some things that God can only do for us through the redemptive cell.¹⁵

Is participation in a small group as critical to your salvation as believing that Christ died for your sins? Frequently, one hears, “I can be a good Christian without going to church.” That is true if “good Christian” means accepting the teachings of the Bible as true in theory (without fully knowing or understanding them), living a life that conforms to the acceptable norms of morality in one’s society, offering some beneficial service to neighbors

¹⁴ Willimon and Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame*, 41.

¹⁵ Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 48.

and engaging in private acts that acknowledge the presence of the God who sent Jesus Christ. However, the term “good Christian” is incompatible with biblical teaching. It is irrelevant because it is rooted in the categories of “good and evil,” not relationship with God. The focus of the gospel is relationship not morality. The issue is not goodness. Such a notion is utterly contrary to the gospel. When a young man called Jesus, “Good Teacher,” Jesus rebuffed him by asking him why he used such a term when only God is good (Mark 10:17-18). Even the term, “good servant,” Christ occasionally used in his parables (see Luke 19:17) speaks not about the person’s ethics but the excellent relationship and trust the servant and master enjoy. The issue is walking in a partnership with God that displaces both the deception of demons and the moral vision of life, which together dominate and frustrate the human family. How can one fully experience such redemption when he or she is isolated from the people who convey it? Fellowship in the new community is not a condition for forgiveness; yet fellowship on this hostile planet is vital for people to experience the fullness of salvation, the fullness of forgiveness and freedom that God has for them.¹⁶

Alongside the concept of a redemptive cell, and a reason for it being redemptive, is the intimate nature of the community described in Acts. The Bible conveys an interaction where people’s personal needs are addressed. At one point Luke wrote, “There was no needy persons [in the Jerusalem Church]. For from time to time, those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.” Such interaction required trust and openness. Easum emphasizes that “community” does not merely mean a gathering or a collection of individuals. It is personal, normally taking place in homes, characterized by honest communication.¹⁷

Observing that striking level of intimacy and Christian fellowship in the Jerusalem Church, Wesley set out to reproduce it in his renewal movement. Willimon and Wilson note:

If Wesley had only been a great preacher or a popular writer, we would have had no United Methodist Church. He organized his followers because he knew that no one can sustain the Christian life alone—the Christian faith must be institutionally embodied through creative political, social, and structural arrangements that enable us to be transformed into new creations that God intends for us to be. Wesley formed his people into “societies,” large groups that assembled for preaching and spiritual instruction, and “classes,” small, disciplined groups of about twelve persons who gathered for prayer, mutual

¹⁶ Consider the healing and freedom received in confession of sins to one another (James 5:16).

¹⁷ Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 47-48.

support, and study. Even smaller “bands” of four and five persons met for closer spiritual direction. The formation of these small groups was the organizational stroke of genius of Methodism.¹⁸

In the Methodist movement, the hiding that began in the Garden of Eden was addressed in the organization of community life. Rigorously applying the structure of spiritual development and social interaction he observed in the Jerusalem Church, Wesley caused many in the 18th Century to experience transformation and become mobilized in evangelization of the planet.

God formed a *community* with Moses’ leadership to help His lost children cultivate a relationship with Him. God covenanted with David for the same purpose. Jesus assembled a *community* in pursuit of that mission; and in Acts He poured God’s Spirit on his followers that their hearts might be changed and their lives empowered. Yet like before, He formed His followers in a *community*. He promised, “Where two or three come together in My name, there I am with them” (Matt. 18:20). In so doing, Jesus reassured his followers that God would respond to their prayers and that He would actually be present with those who come together in His name. Thus the Jerusalem church in Acts was a meeting church. They met in small numbers in their homes and they worshiped in large numbers at the temple. Subsequent experiences of divine power came as they met together (see Acts 4:23-31, 12:1-17).

However, the church was not just attracting new believers because of what was happening *within* their community. As a result of the Spirit’s work in their community, they aggressively proclaimed the gospel of Christ *outside* their community in the face of daunting opposition. Although Easum noted that the first task of the New Testament Christians was to establish a community, he suggests, “The task of these communities was to bring the kingdom of God (salvation or new life) to individuals.”¹⁹ These were outreached-focused communities or teams. That was the pattern of community life the apostles had received from Jesus, and it was the pattern and focus for their leadership. They lived to proclaim. When imprisoned and threatened with further suffering if they did not stop testifying about Christ, Peter and John declared, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God” (Acts 4:19) If they were to continue walking with God, they must proclaim. And they did so,

¹⁸ Willimon & Wilson, *Rekindling the Flame*, 41.

¹⁹ Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, 48-49.

at enormous personal cost. Moreover, they focused on Jerusalem until God led them to other cities and territories.

Ed Silviso notes that cities are central to God's redemptive strategy. He writes, "The Great Commission begins with a city—Jerusalem—and culminates when another city—the new Jerusalem—becomes God's eternal dwelling with His people."²⁰ The early church focused on thoroughly evangelizing the city of Jerusalem. They understood that this was their first task (Acts 1:8). The persecution that broke out in Jerusalem with Stephen's execution was the Spirit's signal for them to expand their mission into the cities of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1, 4-5).²¹

The Spirit offered an additional signal to Christ's followers in Acts 10 and 11. Jesus signaled through Peter that He was now assembling his church not only from Jews and lapsed Jews (Samaritans), but also from all ethnic backgrounds. In Acts 15 the churches' leaders recognized that.

As the church advanced to other cities and ethnic groups, another pattern unfolds in the book of Acts. The gospel is proclaimed differently to Jews than to Gentiles. In the thirteenth chapter of Acts, Paul speaks to Jewish believers in Pisidian Antioch. He recounts God's work with them in their history, and how the life, death and resurrection of Jesus fulfills the promises of their Scriptures (Acts 13:16-41). To the Gentiles of Athens, however, Paul shares a very different message. He affirms their religiosity, quotes their poets and speaks of God's care and desire for a close relationship with all humanity (Acts 17:22-34). His approach was determined by the culture and experience of the unbelievers where he traveled. This "contextualization" or "indigenized" presentation is rooted in Paul's vision and affirmation found in his first epistle to the Corinthians. He writes:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak

²⁰ Ed Silviso, *That None Should Perish: How to reach entire cities for Christ through prayer evangelism* (Ventura: Regal Books, 1994), 21.

²¹ The suggestion that the persecution, which arose with Stephen's martyrdom, somehow forced the first believers into a global vision is unwarranted and inconsistent with the boldness of their witness, the intensity of their commitment and the content of their message. First, their vision truly became global only after Peter's experience with the Gentile Cornelius. Second, aspects of a global vision were clearly present at Pentecost when people from various nations heard the wonders of God proclaimed in their native tongue (Acts 2:4-12).

I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. (1 Cor. 9:19-22)

Since the church of Acts was by nature a missionary church bent on reaching unbelieving peoples and the only pattern the Scriptures give us is a ministry that was culturally adjusted to the unbelieving populations of that day, it can be inferred that this “indigenization” was the pattern of church life. Conversely, churches that perpetuate a culture for believers rather than engage the culture of unbelievers maintain a principally different style of church life than that practiced by the church of Acts.

Music is the most telling arena when it comes to discerning whom a church is targeting today. Music is cultural communication. Although the North American culture has transitioned to something very different, the hymnody of the church predominantly flows from the European classical music period. Lyle Schaller writes:

As interest in classical music waned, record companies cut back on classical recordings to less than 4 percent of the market; radio stations stopped broadcasting classical music; young people did not choose to learn to play the organ; newspapers stopped covering classical music to be equal; and rock, pop, country, and western music began to build huge followings. As a result, a 1996 study by the National Endowment for the Arts reported that classical music performances drew most heavily from people born in the 1936-1945 decade.²²

It is no wonder that the average age of churchgoers in many Christian churches and denominations match well with the NEA’s study. For example, it is estimated that two thirds of all United Methodists were born in the 1940s or earlier.

According to a 1995 survey by the General Council on Ministries, though persons 50 and over constitute only about 26 percent of the American population, they constitute about 61 percent of The United Methodist Church. By the year 2000, if present trends continue, two-thirds of all United Methodists will be over 50 years of age.²³

Churches that seek to preserve a heritage of classical music more closely align themselves with the missions of museums and government-subsidized radio stations rather than their own heritage in the apostolic church. The Church in Acts had a different priority.

²² Schaller, *Discontinuity and Hope*, 33.

²³ Langford and Willimon, *A New Connection*, 106-107.

The Church in the Epistles and Revelation

The Nature of the Church. In the epistles and the book of Revelation, one sees the nature, leadership and mission of the church, reflected through specific teaching. For example three prominent metaphors, used to describe Christ's Assembly are "the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12-27), "the temple of God" (Eph. 2:19-22, 1 Pet. 2:4-10) and "the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). Of course, the church is also the "bride of Christ," "a royal priesthood," "a holy nation" and so on.

The three selected metaphors stress the relatedness, the interdependence and the intimacy members share within the church of Jesus Christ. The parts of a body share one blood, one spirit, one overall purpose and one leader. Similarly, a household shares a common life, common provision, common business, common space and a common leader. A temple is erected for a single purpose, to point to, reveal and provide access to a deity. Each metaphor reinforces the need for believers to be in partnership together. For example, the temple rises as believers are joined and fitted together (Eph. 2:21-22). Each member must be related or placed with another to be useful. In the same discussion, the Apostle Paul describes the church as a body that grows and builds itself up as each part does its work (Eph. 4:16). A part disconnected languishes and dies. Moreover, separated parts cripple the body and inhibit its work. When parts are attached and working together, however, the body then and only then functions as it was designed.

Since we were designed for a relationship, the necessary relational vision is best nurtured, cultivated and imparted through divinely established and directed relationships. Ted Haggard writes:

Life-giving ministry flows through godly relationships, not corporate structures. Corporate structures give us order and define our roles, but relationships empower us. It is the relationships... that are the core of life-giving ministries.²⁴

Haggard helps us to see that biblical metaphors for the church focus on relationships more than structures. The point of the Scriptures (and the purpose for church structures) is fostering godly relationships. Haggard further observes:

Strong healthy friendships make all of us more secure, positive, productive and effective than we could ever be alone... Honest friendships keep us from

²⁴ Haggard, *The Life-giving Church*, 95.

being deceived or diluted into hypocrisy. My friends sharpen me and help me see the blind spots, making me a more capable person.²⁵

Relationships, not structures, build people. Accordingly, the Bible emphasizes relational directives for the church rather than structural plans.

The metaphors of the church, found in the epistles, reinforce both the need for intimate relationships and the necessity of intimate teamwork in the church of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul further demonstrates this in 1 Corinthians where he encourages them to live as an alternative community directed by the Holy Spirit. He condemns certain worship practices (1 Cor. 11:17-34) and commends others (1 Cor. 14:26-33) on the basis of the interdependence and sensitivity to one another.

A second feature of the church is revealed when the church is addressed and described in the epistles and especially in the book of Revelation. In the first chapter of Revelation, John describes a magnificent vision he has of Christ. Christ instructs him to write what he sees. His vision includes seven stars, which are head angels over seven churches (Rev. 1:20), and seven lampstands, which represent the seven churches. Their campuses, leaders or affiliations do not identify the churches. Instead, their city or territory names them. “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write,” instructs Christ (Rev. 2:1). “To the angel of the church in Smyrna write,” and so on instructs Christ seven times (Rev. 2:8-3:14).

If only the city was named in these instructions, one could guess that calling all the believers of a city a church, singular, was a figure of speech and carried no significance. However, the vision depicted an angel with each church; and Christ addressed each angel giving each unique instruction. Although Revelation is a book steeped in symbolism, this language unmistakably identifies the congregations of a territory with *one* angel, with *one* specific calling and as *one church*.²⁶

When the Apostle Paul addresses the believers of Corinth in his first epistle, he writes:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours. (1 Cor. 1:2)

²⁵ Ibid., 104.

²⁶ The suggestion that Christ’s address to the angels is literary convention (or meant figuratively) ignores John’s vision of Christ holding seven stars (the angels) and the spiritual worldview of Jesus and the apostles. Only in the Modern era would it be feasible for a writer to employ this language as a matter of literary license.

The identity of the church is wed to its God and to its mission field. It is the church of Corinth, not the churches. Its membership consists of all those in that city who embrace Christ as Lord. To be sure, there are subunits of the church. As Paul closes this first epistle, he sends a greeting from Aquila and Priscilla and the church that meets at their house (1 Cor. 16:19); and in his letter to “all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7), he identifies the same church by its campus and sends a greeting to them (Rom. 16:5).

The subdivision of the church in a city for fellowship and ministry is not prohibited. It is an acknowledged pattern. The epistles also reveal that their campuses or leaders (see Rom. 16:14-15) identify these smaller churches. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the apostles and Christ, the church is the unit of all believers living and serving in a territory. They are to love one another, serve together and heed Christ’s specific call to their common angel.²⁷

The Leadership of the Church. A third important feature of the church revealed in the epistles is the charismatic nature of its leadership. Because each believer is endowed with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit works through each believer for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). Each believer is a priest (1 Pet. 2:9), and each believer has abilities that are to be recognized as divine gifts and employed that God may be honored (Eph. 4:7, 1 Pet. 4:10-11). The abilities differ from person to person (1 Cor. 12:14-20, Rom. 12:3-5) and thus their ministries differ. Spiritual gifts vary in development and presence over time for individuals and groups (1 Cor. 12:7-11, Rom. 12:3-8), and believers are to eagerly seek the greater gifts (1 Cor. 12:31).

Leadership in the church is related to one’s gifts (Rom. 12:8) rather than one’s heritage, training or affluence. Moreover, there is no exhaustive or comprehensive list of spiritual gifts or ministries given in any epistle. As a result, leadership in the early church was much more fluid. A prophet prophesied accurately. An evangelist produced converts. A teacher had students. A worker of miracles worked miracles. Their fruit was their credentials. Who knew what the Spirit would do with believers next? It was obvious that God appointed some to be apostles, prophets, teachers, wonder workers, healers, administrators and speakers and

²⁷ The notion that there is a single, hierarchal angel for the believers of a specific territory has several root systems within the canonical scriptures as well as without. First, there was wide belief in territorial deities (which is illustrated by the counsel of the Aramean king’s advisers in 1 Kings 20:23). Second, a territorial spirit hinders Daniel’s understanding of a vision (Dan. 10:1-11:1, 12:1). Third, the Pharisees acknowledged a hierarchy of demons, a view that is supported in Revelation (Matt. 12:22-24, Rev. 12:7-9). Fourth, Revelation and Jude both suggest a hierarchy of angels (Rev. 12:7 and Jude 9). Finally, Jesus speaks of the residency, association and levels of wickedness of different spirits (Matt. 12:43-45), and of the presence of personal angels (Matt. 18:10-11).

interpreters of tongues (1 Cor. 12:28) because individuals were doing those things with frequency and effectiveness.

The lack of systematic definitions in the epistles for the various kinds of leaders and ministries probably has less to do with the “age” or “development” of the church than it has to do with the church’s charismatic and relational vision. God was endowing. God was appointing. God was producing. God was forming. Terms, like apostles, prophets and teachers, simply helped people understand and respond to God’s work through individuals. They were not given to rigidly define one’s work or sphere of influence, but instead to recognize and celebrate the work of the Holy Spirit among them. Although studying the usage of these terms in the New Testament can help one better understand how God was moving and organizing his church, the temptation to legalize what God was doing, to see church leadership from the perspective of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, defeats the very thing God was doing in the church, which was forming a people and a vision that made them wholly dependent and fully partnered with God through the Spirit.

It is significant then, that the epistles and Revelation never call the leaders of local churches: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers (Eph. 4:11). Instead, they label these leaders elder (*presbyter*), bishop or overseer (*episkopos*) and deacon or servant (*diakonos*). For the early church, “elder” was a natural designation for the spiritual leaders of a city. The wise and aging leaders of Jewish families had long exercised great influence over their communities. Lothar Coenen writes in an article about *episkopos* and *presbyteros*, “Elders are an established part of the patriarchal clan and tribal system, where an authority which was scarcely challenged, though variously qualified, belonged to the heads of families.”²⁸ This was still true during the time of Jesus (Matt. 15:2, 16:21, 27:1). It would be normal for them to exercise influence and be referred to as elders in their city’s church and to lead congregational units. The title of bishop or overseer flowed from the work they did in the local church. They simply oversaw the work and lives of believers. It is clear from its usage in the New Testament that the terms, elder and overseer, are used interchangeably.²⁹

²⁸ Lothar Coenen, “Elder,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), 194.

²⁹ Merrill Unger notes this usage in his article on “elder” in the *New Unger’s Bible Dictionary, Electronic Database* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988).

“Deacon” carried a slightly different connotation than elder. The term designated people who were entrusted to serve in some special regard, with some special responsibility.³⁰ Some believe that the first deacons were the seven men appointed to lead the mercy ministries of the Jerusalem church in Acts 6 where food was being distributed to widows. Whatever the case, the call for character was no less rigorous for deacons than for bishops or elder (see 1 Tim. 3:1-12, Titus 1:5-9). In each case, these leaders were to exhibit lives where the Holy Spirit was dominating their habits, temperaments and relationships. Both groups of leaders were to have a firm grasp of the gospel. Elders, however, were to be able to refute error and must be established in every community where believers lived (Titus 1:5, 9). Indeed, that was Titus’ mission in Crete.

Peter identifies himself as an apostle of Christ (1 Pet. 1:1) and a fellow elder (1 Pet. 5:1). He exhorts elders to be willing shepherds of the portion of God’s flock that is under their care, serving as overseers (bishops) and examples (1 Pet. 5:2-4). He commands local church leaders to care about the believers, their needs, their hunger, their relationships, their lives, even as the Chief Shepherd does.

The epistles reveal that local church leaders were seasoned people whose relationships revealed the grace of the Spirit, whose gifts strengthened the vision and life of other believers, who had ability to shepherd portions of God’s flock, and whose leadership was recognized by other leaders. Whether their primary call was as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, miracle workers, administrators, or whatever, local church leaders were recognized and established as elders in the church with the responsibility of shepherding people and overseeing the advance of God’s work.

The Mission of the Church. As the Christian community, guided by seasoned elders, continued to equip believers for their call and ministry, especially through those with ministries as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Eph. 4:11-13), they had little doubt about their mission. The gospel was radically altering their lives as they became more like their Lord who came “to seek and to save what was lost” (Luke 19:10). They were a community in partnership with their Father who hungered to embrace in intimacy “His

³⁰ Klaus Hess in “Serve, Deacon, Worship,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Frank E. Gabelein, vol. 3, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 546, writes that the *diakonos* is always one who serves on Christ’s behalf and continues Christ’s service for the outer and inner man; he is concerned with the salvation of men. He further writes that the Seven in Acts 6:1-6 fulfilled that meaning in their service of the widows although “Luke avoids *diakonos*”.

likeness” who had spread over the planet. Their mission was the planet, including every hamlet and neighborhood that populated it.

In the book of Revelation, God supplied them with this vision. John wrote of four living creatures and 24 elders worshiping and singing:

You are worthy... because You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth. (Rev. 5:9)

In this song, God’s salvation includes people from every tribe, language, people and nation. No group is left out. The gospel goes to all, and at least some from every cluster of humanity respond. Exactly how small this cluster may be, how deeply the gospel will penetrate, how widely it will liberate is difficult to ascertain. It is difficult to assess because the phrase—tribe, language, people and nation—is not a progression. It is not a progression because John gives us the impression that the order is unimportant. When John observes saints who come out of the tribulation, he writes:

After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. (Rev. 7:9)

The picture is of people worshiping Christ from every cluster of humanity, but the order has changed to nation, tribe, people and language. When John describes the world’s rejection of God’s two witnesses in Revelation, chapter 11, the order changes again. He writes, “Men from every people, tribe, language and nation will... refuse them burial” (Rev. 11:9). Later, John reveals that the beast is given authority over “every tribe, people, language and nation” (Rev. 13:7). He has changed the order again. Finally, John sees an angel dispatched to proclaim the gospel to “those who live on earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people.” The changes in order are best shown in the following table.³¹

³¹ In addition, there are two close variations where “tribe” is replaced by other words and the plural is used for the three remaining.

Table 1. Clusters of Humanity

Rev. 5:9 <i>Purchased for God</i>	Rev. 7:9 <i>Out of tribulation</i>	Rev. 11:9 <i>Rejected witnesses</i>	Rev. 13:7 <i>Beast's authority</i>	Rev. 14:6 <i>Proclaim gospel to</i>	Rev. 10:11 <i>Prophecy about</i>	Rev. 17:5 <i>Prostitute influences</i>
Tribe	Nation	People	Tribe	Nation	Peoples*	Peoples*
Language	Tribe	Tribe	People	Tribe	Nations*	Multitudes*
People	People	Language	Language	Language	Languages*	Nations*
Nation	Language	Nation	Nation	People	Kings*	Languages*

In all five instances in the book of Revelation, John uses the exact same words; but because they are always in a different order, it is obvious that God is not laying out a methodical strategy for reaching the world. A picture is being painted, however. God is emphasizing that his “team” is to reach all nations and evangelize the ends of the earth.³² The meaning of the terms, nation (*ethnos*), tribe (*phyle*), people (*laos*) and language (*glossa*), offer further insight. No political boundary, racial heritage or linguistic dialect is to serve as a barrier to the gospel. People of every ethnicity (nation)³³ and language are included in the vision and call.

The nature of the terms “tribe” and “people” require fuller examination. Tribe or *phyle* originated from a word that spoke of birth, and Greek-speaking people once used it exclusively to designate a people who shared a “blood relationship.”³⁴ In the early church’s Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, *phyle* frequently denoted blood relations like the tribes of Israel, but it also designated the nations of the world whom God would bless through Abraham (Gen. 12:3).³⁵ However, Greek-speakers most often used the term to describe districts or political wards within a community.³⁶ In Norman Hillyer’s study of the word, he writes that the general meaning of *phyle* is a group of people “united by kinship

³² Those terms remind us of the commission in Matthew 28:19 and Acts 1:8.

³³ Hans Bietenhard in his article on “People, Nation, Gentiles, Crowd, City,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 790, notes that *ethnos* arose from the Greek term *ethos*, which means custom or habit. In its classical meaning, “nation” means a group that is held together by customs.

³⁴ Christian Maurer, “Phyle,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromily and ed. by Gerhard Friedrich, vol. IX (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 245.

³⁵ Norman Hillyer, “Tribe,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, 870-873.

³⁶ Maurer (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. IX, 245-246) and Hillyer (*The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, 870) both note this development.

or habitation.”³⁷ Accordingly, if the church fails to establish an evangelistic presence—the formation of a church or alternative community—in any hamlet, neighborhood, or relational network on the planet, it has not achieved the vision John conveyed in Revelation.³⁸

The term “people,” “laity” or *laos* reinforces this. Hans Bietenhard notes that the translators of the Septuagint used *laos* when emphasizing Israel’s special relationship with God.³⁹ He believes that influences the usage and meaning of the term in the New Testament.⁴⁰ Even as the terms, “individual,” “acquaintance,” “neighbor,” “friend,” and “intimate” describe differing relationships and convey different levels of emotional warmth, so the term “people” carries more emotional and divine warmth than many other names for a group. Whatever defines a people, whether it be their blood, their community, their neighborhood, their vocation, their customs, or their faith, John’s vision calls for a mission among them that is fueled by the warmth of God’s love for them and that results in conversions among them.

The church, addressed in the epistles and Revelation, was organized and challenged to make new disciples among every people. Church planting was a way of life. Churches were planted to establish beachheads in communities, and they were multiplied in those communities to penetrate the networks of kinship and habitation, the tribes. Beachheads were established and then penetration was accomplished. The goal was to plant churches among every people, penetrating every tribe within every community or nation so that Christ may be known and honored in every language.

Summary. In short, church leadership and church life were both charismatic and relational. The community focused on the Holy Spirit’s work and direction for believers as a team. They sought to establish communities where the “tree of life” vision and mission gave their lives focus. Intimate fellowship groups inculcated people with new vision and served as incubators of leadership as spiritual gifts were recognized and nurtured; and as these groups multiplied and penetrated the tribes of a community, the Christian church’s connection to

³⁷ Hillyer, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, 871.

³⁸ Maurer (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IX, 871) notes that of the 31 instances that *phyle* occurs in the New Testament, some 21 of those are in Revelation. Much like the book of Genesis when the “relatedness” of humanity is emphasized through genealogical lists, at the fulfillment of all things in Revelation, our relatedness once again is accentuated as God deliberately unfolds his final redemptive work.

³⁹ Bietenhard, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, 796.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 799.

“unreached” populations grew. People rose to leadership because of their faith-sharing, their spiritual gifts and their relational success. Leadership succession in established churches barely register in scriptural accounts because (1) the church was fluid, multiplying leaders and groups within and beyond their territory, and was bound to no campus, (2) the church was identified with a community and led by elders from that community who had an apostolic connection, (3) relationships and trust were nurtured by the way the Christian community organized in fellowship and ministry, and (4) collective and legal ownership of property and facilities were minimal requiring little emphasis on formal, legally recognized positions.

Historical Deviations and Contemporary Expressions

Historical Deviations

Many assume that any deviation from the practices of the New Testament Church is destructive. In truth, change is an unavoidable and continuous dynamic in every period of history. Change was a difficult dynamic for the early church as they moved, from a people who worshiped every day in the temple courts of Jerusalem and all shared a Jewish heritage, to a multicultural, geographically diverse community. The practices of the early church were not scratched on tablets of stone, nor were they formed into a code in order to judge the actions of subsequent generations. They were simply practices that arose as the Holy Spirit counseled Christian believers. Christians should not embrace the theology and life of the early church by emulating their practices. Peter Wagner writes:

All through the body of Christ there are many people who keep saying, “Our church is not in very good shape now, and we need to get back to having a first-century church.” I could not disagree with that more. The last thing we need is a first-century church. What we need is a 21st-century church. We need a 21st-century church that’s based on all the biblical principles. Every time God has moved in the world through history—through the early church, through the Constantine time, through the Roman Empire, through the British colonization to our present day—He has always provided new wineskins. What we need to be tuned into is the new wineskins.⁴¹

As Wagner suggests, we embrace the faith of the early believers not when we legalistically follow their models and practices, but when we are empowered and led by the Spirit that directed their lives. Jesus’ words are so relevant.

⁴¹ C. Peter Wagner, “What the Doctor Recommends,” *Ministries Today*, July/August 2000 (Lake Mary: Strang Communications), 29.

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life. (John 5:39-40)

Accordingly, deviations from early church practice, which will be exposed here and in subsequent chapters, are offered not to vilify past or present leadership, but to encourage leaders to discern the Spirit's direction for today.

In view of church growth, three shifts in church practice are especially pertinent in our immediate discussion: the stratification of church leadership, the acquisition of property and legal status, and the redefinition of the church.

Stratification of church leadership. William Easum predicts that the distinction between clergy and laity will disappear in the twenty-first century.⁴² The move to a clerical class of believers finds its roots in Paul's instructions to Timothy to appoint elders in Crete.⁴³ The rabid individualism Ignatius fought in the Christian church of the 2nd century⁴⁴ and the needs of Emperor Constantine, who decreed toleration and then adoption of Christianity for his realm in the 4th century, certainly solidified the trend.⁴⁵ Whatever the case, the wide dissemination of Scripture, circulation of broadly accepted doctrinal affirmations and rise of global communication have diminished greatly those pressures.

The change in context suggests evaluation. With pressures for stratification reduced, is it counterproductive to restrict the administration of sacraments (such as baptism and holy communion) to a class of clerics? Has not the priesthood been given to all believers? If so, does not it make sense for all believers to exercise these aspects of ministry? If laity lead others to a saving relationship with Christ, what prevents them from consummating that liberation with baptism and confirming it through communion, other than human traditions? It was exactly the sign of the Spirit's work that validated Cornelius and his household as appropriate subjects for Christian baptism (Acts 10:44-48). Similarly, why would not the

⁴² Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, 13-14.

⁴³ Coenen (*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, 200) suggests that there are tendencies towards the establishment of a body of clergy in the Pastoral Epistles and that they provide the first hints of the emergence of monarchical heads over several churches.

⁴⁴ Clyde L. Manshreck writes in *A History of Christianity In the World* ([Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974], 43-44), that an influential letter to the Corinthians, authored by Clement of Rome in 96 A.D., encouraged the notion of a hierarchy, submission to clergy and apostolic succession. He further notes that a giant leap came with the teaching and writing of Ignatius. See "Trallians 2:2, 3:1" (*The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Jack N. Sparks, [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978], 92-93).

⁴⁵ Widely recognized canonical scriptures were not tools these leaders had at their disposal. They felt a need for a repository of authority within the Christian community.

Spirit's work signal the appropriate instrument of baptism and communion? Philip immediately baptized an Ethiopian Eunuch he led to faith without any known ecclesiastical repercussions (Acts 8:26-39) or a foreseeable shepherding role with the man.

Second, it is significant that the New Testament did not equate pastor with elder.⁴⁶ Although elders definitely had a shepherding function, it was not their identity. This allowed many others, who were not ordained to lead the church (of a city or territory), to embrace the calling, ministry and role of a pastor within the church as their gifts informed them. Although nothing prohibits local church elders from being called pastors, the kingdom may be better served if leaders of congregations are recognized as elders rather than pastors.

At least two crippling effects result from calling the leaders of congregations pastors. The meaning of shepherd becomes diluted. Pastoral care or shepherding degenerate into knowing parishioners' names and offering them support in a crisis or teaching them something in a large group. The ministry of "pastor" is much more intimate and encompassing. It can offer individuals within the body of Christ much greater blessing. Secondly, the role of the elder or church leader can be diminished and eclipsed by expectations and duties that traditionally are associated with pastor. Some see the term "pastor" as a spiritual function more akin to the tribal medicine man than the chief. The pastor is restricted from making business decisions that affect the ministry and mission of the congregation. Others demand that pastors spend most of their time visiting the sheep, because for them that is the defining pattern of a shepherd or pastor. Decisions or use of gifts that in any way hinder that expectation are discouraged. In contrast, Peter was an elder who developed as an apostle. Although his role as an elder in the Jerusalem church was significant (1 Pet. 5:1), he was key to the mission to the Gentiles (Acts 10, 11 and 15) and the multiplication of churches.

When leaders of congregations are identified as leaders, such as elders, rather than with spiritual gifts, such as pastors, their identity allows them to affirm, develop and use their primary gifts, which may lead them to more fully embrace their calling as apostles, prophets, evangelists or teachers rather than pastors. Such a change unleashes growth as both the clergy and laity are encouraged to recognize and fully develop their spiritual gifts and ministries within the body of Christ.

⁴⁶ United Methodism does not ordain pastors. It licenses local pastors but ordains elders and deacons. The church understands that this ordination is the only biblical precedent they have for the presiding leadership of a local church. In The United Methodist Church, a bishop is an elder consecrated for a special ministry of oversight within the denomination.

The stratification of believers into a professional and non-professional class of ministers, the separation of duties accorded these classes, and the titles selected for these classes are not necessitated by biblical theology or exemplified in early church practice nor are they proving particularly helpful in advancing the kingdom today. The contemporary church may benefit from experimenting with some of the leadership patterns that characterized the early church.

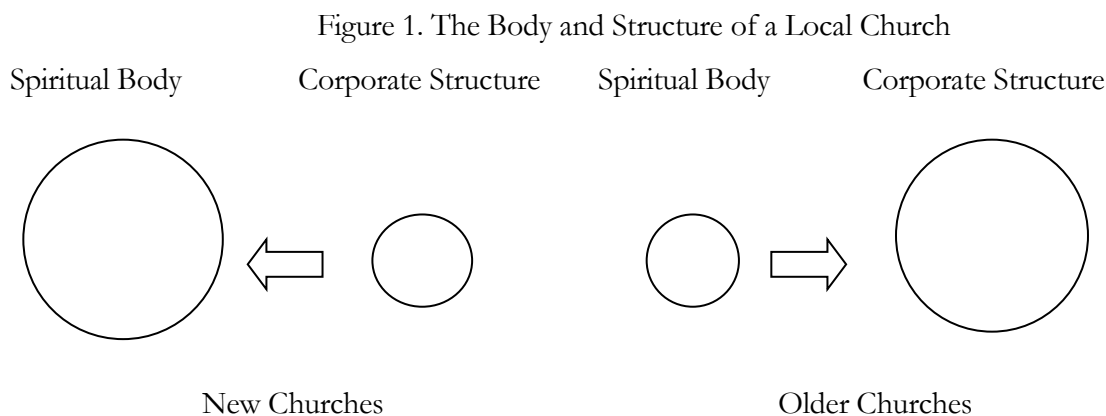
Acquisition of property and legal status. In the fourth chapter of Acts, Barnabas sold a field that he owned and put the money at the apostle's feet. Ananias and Sapphira liked the church's reaction to Barnabas so they pretended to follow suit, but secretly withheld some of the proceeds (Acts 5:1-2). In each case, the church received money rather than property. The church, as a body of believers, had no status, and thus no right to own. When the church received legal status so that it could own and control property, a shift took root.

Before the shift, leadership was primarily spiritual. The spiritual body and life predominated in the mission to reach and develop people as disciples and ambassadors of Christ. The corporation's tasks of counting, giving and spending money were subservient to the spiritual ministry. However, with the acquisition of property, greater administrative energy and leadership were required. In new churches, this division of leadership is kept in perspective. Leadership and energy overwhelmingly focus on the mission of reaching people and making disciples. Facilities and property created a demand but only to serve the mission. As churches age, however, their properties become sacralized and service of them becomes part of the mission. The focus on making disciples is blurred as more attention is given to maintaining and caring for property and the needs of the corporation.

This temptation of blurred priorities existed in the early church despite the lack of legal status. In the metaphor of Acts, chapter six, the emphasis in spiritual leadership was shifting from the ministry of word and prayer to waiting on tables. The leaders found themselves absorbed by practical and personal needs within the body of Christ rather than their missionary call. Their determined response to resist such a temptation is a model for those who face corporate demands as well.

All too soon, the spiritual body serves the corporate structure—"We can't miss a worship service or we won't make budget" or "We need more members to support our church" (the corporate demands). Leaders of the church are identified with those

administering the corporate structure and possessing business skills and acumen rather than those leading the spiritual body in the development of spiritual people.⁴⁷



In addition to the shift in focus, energy and organizational activity, the acquisition of property and legal status as a corporation affects a people's identity. The church soon is identified with a property and location rather than the people. It quickly becomes, in the vision and language of its community, an impersonal institution rather than a relational fellowship. Moreover, identifying a church with a campus profoundly limits the vision and work of believers. Lyle Schaller writes:

The most useful synonym for “church” is not a “building,” but rather a “collection of believers.” That expanded definition of the word “church” helps people understand that one church can consist of five or ten or twenty or two hundred different worshipping communities meeting in many different places. When church is defined as people rather than as real estate, the ceiling on creativity is raised several notches.⁴⁸

Even though this concept of church structure and identity will be more fully explored in subsequent discussions, streamlining the role, power and emphasis of the corporate structures in local congregations and cultivating multiple campuses as a congregation are critical adjustments to historical deviations that currently hinder the church's life and mission.

Redefining the Church. The greatest deviation in the life of the western church is how it is defined and envisioned. Rooted in the birth of Christendom back in 313 A.D. and

⁴⁷ Ted Haggard (*The Life Giving Church*, 113-126) offers insight into maintaining a corporation that clearly serves the spiritual body. His discussion explores this issue in much greater depth.

⁴⁸ Schaller writes this in the forward to a book by J. Timothy Ahlen and J.V. Thomas, *One Church, Many Congregations: The Key Church Strategy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 13.

solidified through the Protestant movement, our vision of the church is fundamentally different from believers of the first three centuries. When a culture is considered Christian, there is freedom to explore and further define oneself within that culture. That occurred to some extent in debates that gave rise to the ecumenical creeds of the church and in the development of monastic orders. However, Protestantism, more than any other factor, reformed our vision of the church. Christian believers became theologically and organizationally independent of each other, at minimum, and violently hostile toward one another at times. The church was no longer identified by territory but by theological beliefs or ecclesiastical practices that distinguished a group of believers from other believers. These distinctions and traditions may serve some educational purpose in a culture dominated by the Christian faith, but outside Christendom they serve to confound and frustrate the advance of the gospel. The Preamble to the Constitution of The United Methodist Church reads: “The church is a community of all true believers under the Lordship of Christ. It is the redeemed and redeeming fellowship... The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.”⁴⁹

It is critical to understand that how we see things as human beings is an outgrowth of a choice made in the Garden of Eden. Aspects of our vision are alienating and resulted from humanity’s fall. That vision leads to our sinful behavior and our dividedness as Christ’s church. The apostle Paul wrote: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the *renewing of your mind*. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will” (Rom. 12:2). In other words, as the Holy Spirit alters our way of seeing and thinking, we will change and see how wonderful and incredible God’s desire and unfolding plans are. The reason we do not see and experience that wonderful plan, especially in Christian unity, is our thinking or vision betrays it. We are divided because we have a divisive outlook, and operate in a way that perpetuates disunity.

Lyle Schaller notes that there is a difference between the official policy and the operational policy of an organization. The official policy may accentuate growth while the summation of several operational decisions (such as cutting advertising and merging worship services to recapture a sense of family unity) may foster decline.⁵⁰ In the same way, while the

⁴⁹ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2000* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2000), 21.

⁵⁰ See a terrific discussion of this dynamic beginning on page 96 of Schaller’s book, *Tattered Trust*.

official *vision* of denominations and congregations may exalt Christian unity, their operational decisions can foster perspectives and actions that perpetuate independence and blindness to the true nature of the church and its mission. Denominations and congregations, which measure growth and assess needs independent of the territorial church, are operationally divisive.

Although many church growth advocates shrugged their shoulders and deplored the fuss of other church leaders when the Southern Baptists recently targeted Chicago for evangelism and church planting, critics accurately described the denominational action as sectarian. Southern Baptists were not coming to Chicago just to make disciples of Jesus, but to make Southern Baptist disciples of Jesus. Indeed, that is all they can do on their own; and surely some of those populating those new congregations will migrate there from Anglican, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian and United Methodist communions. In truth, the church of Chicago will not grow without such efforts. It is absolutely critical to Chicago that such efforts take place, but the goal as stated and the work as advanced are sectarian. Most likely the effort in Chicago will result in both a higher number of Southern Baptists and a greater percentage of Southern Baptists within the Chicago church. Thankfully, there will be new believers in Christ, but the percentage of people in worship on a Sunday morning in the Chicago area will probably go unchanged, and may not even be assessed. When denominations and congregations fail to survey the impact of their evangelistic efforts on the target territory, the growth of the church degenerates into the growth of a sect within the church. It is tantamount to celebrating the growth of Aquila and Priscilla's house church in Rome (Rom. 16:3-5) after they arrived from Ephesus (see Acts 18:2-3, 18-19), oblivious to whether their congregants had been in a different house church before meeting with them and whether the church of Rome was actually making progress evangelizing the city. For much of the last three decades, church growth in the United States has amounted to the rearranging of chairs on Sunday morning from one congregation to another. There has been little or no growth in the proportion of adults worshipping in Christian churches.⁵¹ Ironically, some of the Southern Baptist opponents in Chicago actually encourage the same sectarian vision through congregational goal setting.⁵² When a congregation focuses on their own expansion, their own

⁵¹ Barna, *Marketing the Church*, 22-23.

⁵² It is the purpose of this discussion to illustrate rather than criticize the divisive vision that is endemic in the western church and evidenced by the operational decisions of congregations and denominations. The term "sectarian" is used

growth, their own health and their own ministries, their operational vision is sectarian. Achievement of those goals often comes at the expense of other congregations within a community. Even if no congregation suffers appreciably because of their efforts, their activity most often contributes little to the evangelization of their territory and the influence of Christianity on the community. Moreover, most literature encouraging the growth of historic Protestant denominations is patently sectarian and truncated in vision. In some cases, authors wonder aloud how mainline congregations can “compete” with their conservative counterparts.⁵³ Schaller fingers “competition” as a one-word explanation for denominational churches’ decline. He notes a high degree of competition among churches for new members.⁵⁴ Although it is true that denominational loyalty has waned and competition in that sense exists, his work and the genre, as a whole, focuses on the health of denominations or single congregations, not the accomplishment of reaching people from every nation, tribe, language and people. Yet it is only that vision that communicates the wideness of God's love, the Spirit's passion for the church and an appropriate target for our efforts.

There are strong indications that the Holy Spirit is leading churches today away from a sectarian operating vision and consequently, denominationalism as practiced in North America. Church growth in both numbers and influence have visited congregations that serve in communities where the territorial nature of the church is embraced in the operational decisions of congregational leaders. The church is undergoing redefinition once again, and the implications of this will be discussed in nearly every chapter.

Contemporary Expressions of New Testament Church Principles

During the 20th century much of the Christian church embraced the person and work of the Holy Spirit in ways that parallel the experience of New Testament believers. Wagner writes, “The power of God’s Holy Spirit, particularly in the mighty works of New Testament style signs and wonders, has been more prominent in the twentieth century than in any other period of modern church history.”⁵⁵ He documents three waves of the Holy Spirit in the past

only for purposes of description. When the Christian church, as defined in this discussion, grows in numbers and influence within a community, adherents of other religions undoubtedly see it as sectarian; and within the world community, it is.

⁵³ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 187.

⁵⁴ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 15-16.

⁵⁵ C. Peter Wagner, *The Third Wave of the Holy Spirit: Encountering the Power of Signs and Wonders Today* (Ann Arbor: Vine Books, 1988), 13.

century that have profoundly affected the life and mission of the church.⁵⁶ The consequence is that many growing churches embrace practices that once were dismissed as superstitious and “premodern.” Margaret Poloma, in her study of the Assemblies of God denomination in America, attributes its growth in the 1970s and 1980s to its emphasis on the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit. She writes:

The Assemblies of God represents... an anomaly both for social science theories on secularization and religiosity and for mainline denominations whose leaders have come under secularization theory’s spell. Contrary to writers who allege that the supernatural can no longer be a viable explanation of phenomena for the educated and urbane person, the data from this study will demonstrate that the Assemblies of God, complete with its supernatural emphasis, is thriving *precisely because that is its emphasis* [italics hers].⁵⁷

Although the growth of the Assemblies of God denomination has recently slowed, Poloma demonstrates a strong and defining correlation between charismatic (or supernatural) experience, practice and growth.⁵⁸ John Wimber puts it succinctly:

Clearly the early Christians had an openness to the power of the Spirit, which resulted in signs and wonders and church growth. If we want to be like the early church, we too need to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit’s power.⁵⁹

A second parallel with the early church is the small group movement that is gaining steam. Easum writes:

The transition from the program-based congregation to the small group-based congregation is the most fundamental paradigm shift in the history of North American Christianity... In the crack in history, program-based churches are being replaced by a variety of effective small group-based communities.⁶⁰

It is undeniable. The small group offers a parallel to the intimate community experienced in the house churches and home meetings described in the New Testament. These small

⁵⁶ Ibid., 15-19. Wagner identifies the first wave with the rise of Pentecostalism, the second with the charismatic movement that took root among the historic denominations, and the third wave with the more recent receptivity and practice of conservative evangelicals who rejected some of the Pentecostal and charismatic theology regarding baptism of the Spirit but embraced healing, deliverance, miracles and supernatural, spiritual gifts.

⁵⁷ Margaret M. Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1989), xx.

⁵⁸ The dramatic change in this denomination’s fortunes may result not only from denominational factors that will subsequently be identified, but also from the reality that its local churches no longer offer a unique emphasis on the Holy Spirit in their communities. Many congregations and traditions have embraced aspects of the experience this denomination heralds.

⁵⁹ Wimber, *Power Evangelism*, 31.

⁶⁰ Easum, *Dancing with Dinosaurs*, 60.

fellowships are changing the way believers experience church today. Wagner notes that the two main structures organizing laity in rapidly growing churches are ministry teams and small groups.⁶¹ Each parallels New Testament experience.

Associated with the development of people and their gifts within small groups and teams is the release of laity in pastoral and sacramental ministry. Carl George says, “These clergy of the future have removed the OFF LIMITS signs from every level of pastoral care. They have restructured the training and organization of the entire church to enable every willing person to find a quality opportunity for life-changing ministry.”⁶² For Michael Slaughter of Gingshamberg United Methodist Church in Ohio, empowerment of the laity includes their authorization to minister “sacramentally” in works of baptism and communion.⁶³

A third expression or parallel with the church life of the New Testament is the broad movement by congregations to change from celebrating their European cultural heritage to mission-oriented, indigenous forms and styles of dress, music and communication.⁶⁴ This is singled out again and again by observers of rapidly growing churches. For instance, Schaller notes a shift to a “Made in the America” religion.⁶⁵ Wagner lists “new worship style” as one of nine components shaping the church of the 21st century.⁶⁶ Donald Miller writes that one of the twelve distinctives of new paradigm churches is contemporary worship.⁶⁷ George Hunter lists ten characteristics of growth-producing congregations that parallel the apostolic church of the first century. He declares, “Apostolic congregations adapt to the language, music, and style of the target population’s culture.”⁶⁸ The whole argument of Clayton Berg and Paul Pretiz’s study of Latin American growth is that indigenous forms of Christianity are outperforming their counterparts in every way.

⁶¹ Wagner, *Churchquake*, 218.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 219.

⁶³ Michael Slaughter revealed this further step in empowering laity at a December 1999 seminar for United Methodist Church Leaders in the Minneapolis area.

⁶⁴ This also includes structure; and Schaller’s observation about “Made in America” religion has as much to do (if not more) with organizational structure as it does with dress and worship style.

⁶⁵ Schaller, *Tattered Trust*, 15-16.

⁶⁶ Wagner, *New Apostolic Churches*, 18-25.

⁶⁷ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 20.

⁶⁸ Hunter, *Church for the Unchurched*, 29-33.

The following table lists common attributes of current, rapidly growing churches that parallel the New Testament community according to Hunter and Wagner. Listed along with them are Miller's insights about "new paradigm" churches.⁶⁹

Table 2. Features of Apostolic/New Paradigm Congregations

Nine Components of New Apostolic Churches	Ten Features of Apostolic Congregations	Twelve Distinctives of New Paradigm Churches
New name	Approach in discipling	Started after mid-1960s
New authority structure	Practice & experience of prayer	Members born after 1945
New leadership training	Compassion for lost	Seminary is optional
New ministry focus	Outreach zeal and priority	Contemporary worship
New worship style	Motivating vision	Lay leadership valued
New prayer forms	Indigenous adaptations	Small group ministry
New financing	Small group ministry	Informal dress
New outreach	Gift-directed ministry	Tolerance of personal styles
New power priorities	Regular spiritual conversation	Self-revealing pastors
	Many outreach ministries	Body-involved worship
		Gifts of the Holy Spirit
		Expository vs. topical sermons

Two additional expressions of the New Testament church are so new and innovative that they have missed most observers' lists as important signposts for 21st century Christianity. The first is the advent of multiple campus congregations. This phenomenon is stimulating radical changes in the way we think and do church. In a subsequent chapter we will consider a study of three hundred local congregations that refuse to identify their church with a campus and are mushrooming as they multiply sites for ministry and worship.

The second and most promising contemporary expression of the New Testament church, in terms of real church growth, is the redefinition and identification of the local church with a city, community or territory. This, along with a new sensitivity and faith in regard to the Holy Spirit, offers the greatest hope for fulfillment of the vision that individuals from every nation, tribe, people and language will celebrate their liberation and freedom in Christ.

In every community and region where Christianity is actually growing and transforming the very fabric of community life, local congregations within that territory operate with an exceptional vision. Even though, they may have never reflected on the concept of a territorial church, they operate as one in many ways, but especially as they unite in prayer for their community.

⁶⁹ These lists are found in Wagner's *New Apostolic Churches* (18-25), Hunter's *Church for the Unchurched* (29-33), and Miller's *Reinventing American Protestantism* (20). In the latter two, I paraphrased their observations for brevity and comparison.

George Otis notes at least five common characteristics that are present in nearly every situation where “the church” is growing and the community is being transformed. Three of the five are quickly understandable and will be discussed here. (The other two will be covered later, to some extent, but can be fully explored in his book, *Informed Intercession*.)⁷⁰ Three of the five common elements are persevering leadership, fervent and united prayer, and social reconciliation.⁷¹ The transformation of Hemet, California illustrates these three well.

Community transformation does not come out of a vacuum. Some leader must rise above the din with both a commitment and a call, and then persevere. In Hemet, Bob Beckett is that leader. Critical to Beckett’s leadership was his purchase of gravesites for he and his wife. With that action he made a commitment to that community and its redemption.⁷² Fervent and united prayer was the major instrument in Hemet’s changes. Otis notes that united prayer is not only critical but is achievable even when some choose not to participate. In fact, he observes that evangelistic breakthroughs are more often associated with united prayer than a general sense of unity.⁷³ This is not to negate the importance of unity; instead, it offers hope and a path to unity. Social reconciliation is the third common element, and it frequently begins with reconciliation of believers. In Hemet, California a cross-section of pastors gathered for a special service one evening in which they publicly apologized to one another and the community for the division between them. After that night of tears, according to Beckett, sectarianism lost its power in Hemet, and deep friendships and spiritual unity ensued.⁷⁴

Spiritual unity is a critical element in the transformation that is gripping Colorado Springs.⁷⁵ Ted Haggard offers five principles for promoting and maintaining unity with other Christian leaders. They are to focus on the absolutes of Scripture, to promote the ministry of Christ and His Word above their own mission or method, to pray to raise the “water level” of

⁷⁰ See Otis’s chapter in *Informed Intercession*, entitled, “The Road to Community Transformation,” 55-75.

⁷¹ Otis, *Informed Intercession*, 56.

⁷² Bob Beckett with Rebecca Wagner Sytsema, *Commitment to Conquer: Redeeming Your City by Strategic Intercession* (Grand Rapids: Chosen Books, 1997), 70-76.

⁷³ Otis, *Informed Intercession*, 65.

⁷⁴ Beckett, *Commitment to Conquer*, 149-150, 158-159.

⁷⁵ Haggard, *Primary Purpose*, 30-52, notes both the positive trends and the “bumps in the road” that derailed Christian influence in the community for a time.

the Holy Spirit's activity in their city, to appreciate one another's respected interpretations of Scripture, and to practice supportive speech and actions toward others.⁷⁶ He writes:

All around the world the Holy Spirit is speaking to the Body about forming citywide coalitions of local churches to promote evangelism. These coalitions are groups of churches that strengthen one another by forming strategic alliances.⁷⁷

The coalition of churches in Colorado Springs has three goals. First, they covenant together that between them they will pray for every person in their city by name at least once a year. Second, they commit themselves to communicate the gospel, in an understandable way, to every person in their city at least once a year. Third, they want an additional one percent of their city's population attending church on an average weekend by the end of each year.⁷⁸

These coalitions or city churches are making an impact that is both affecting the fabric of communities and reshaping the landscape of Christianity in the world. Their ecumenicism is distinctly different than the consular variety that tie up denominations in discussions and debate for years. This ecumenicism is practical, spiritual and local. It offers a different vision than that which arose within Christendom and especially accompanied the formation of denominations. Moreover, the concept of a territorial or city church calls at minimum for reassessment of the role and place of denominations. What is the Spirit saying to the relational community of Christians today? In view of the denominations' anemic growth and outright decline, the sectarian nature of their operating vision, and their waning influence and rapid replacement by non-denominational congregations, coalitions and networks, and in view of the great number of believers in denominational churches who love Jesus Christ, what is Christ's call to us who lead denominational churches? Is it to exit our denominations? Concluding that God has no role for denominations, do we leave quietly, walking out on the people of God? Do we leave noisily, coaxing our congregations out of our denomination? Do we leave stealthily, by officially staying in our denominations but operationally isolating ourselves from them? Does Christ, on the other hand, call us to deny, debate or ignore the reality unfolding before us (by holding the course, making some adjustments but avoiding radical change, riding out the present storm)? Denial is typical and tempting.

⁷⁶ Haggard, *Primary Purpose*, 54-103.

⁷⁷ Haggard, *The Life Giving Church*, 107.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Many of us may find ourselves vacillating from day to day and week to week between wholesale denial and a stealth departure of our denominations. However, Christ more likely is calling us to a different task, to the work of pioneers and adventurers. In Christ we keep company with a lifeguard bent on saving people not an umpire disposed to judge people; and in that fellowship, we are presented with an opportunity to bless millions who come from every nation, tribe, language and people on this planet. That will happen as we fundamentally reassess the role and purpose of our denominations, discern how we relate to it as leaders of its congregations, and fully commit ourselves to embrace and pursue God's unique vision for our lives and for the lives of those we lead.