

THE BOUNDARIES OF EVANGELICAL ECCLESIOLOGY

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Introduction

Historically, evangelicals have tended to neglect the study and discussion of ecclesiology in favor of issues like biblical inerrancy, Christology or soteriology.¹ As Alister McGrath has said, "A doctrine of the church is not of defining significance for evangelicals" because we have been intentionally a "nondenominational (or better, transdenominational)" movement.² But that does not mean that there are no ecclesiological beliefs that all (or almost all) evangelicals could affirm.

On this occasion, when we are examining the boundaries of evangelicalism, it seems appropriate to do so for the area of ecclesiology. Such an exercise should prove beneficial for three reasons. First of all, we may be amazed and gratified at the amount of common ground we as evangelicals can affirm in this area, despite admitted differences on some points. Second, in view of our usual neglect (even if benign) of ecclesiology, it will be good to remind ourselves that there are evangelical ecclesiological boundaries and that we cannot approach church life and practice with a totally pragmatic, atheological mindset. Third, there are a number of issues within evangelicalism that can benefit from careful ecclesiological examination. In fact, my

¹ For documentation of evangelical neglect of ecclesiology, see my paper delivered at the 1999 ETS meeting, "What Promise Keepers, Parachurch Groups, and Seeker Churches Have In Common: Evangelicals in Search of an Ecclesiology," available via Theological Research Exchange Network, Portland, OR.

² Alister McGrath, Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 79.

main motivation in writing this paper is to remind us of some boundaries that seem obvious, once mentioned, but often aren't related to issues like seeker churches, megachurches, and parachurch groups.

One preliminary issue attending any paper whose title contains the adjective "evangelical" is the well-known problem of definition. To speak of evangelical ecclesiology presupposes an understanding of the word "evangelical." But defining "evangelical" is the raison d'être for our discussions this week, for it is an increasingly slippery and ambiguous word.

McGrath gives four central assumptions that characterize evangelicalism;³ these bear a strong similarity to the widely cited evangelical quadrilateral developed by David Bebbington.⁴ George Marsden lists three ways in which "evangelical" is used,⁵ and D. A. Carson refers to a formal and a material principle as key for contemporary North American evangelicalism.⁶ Common to most formulations are an emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the Reformation view of the gospel, as salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

³ Alister McGrath, Christian Theology: An Introduction, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997), 121-122.

⁴ David Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 2-3.

⁵ George Marsden, "The Evangelical Denomination," in Evangelicalism and Modern America, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), vii-xix.

⁶ D. A. Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," in Evangelical Affirmations, eds. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Academic Books, 1990), 349.

As well, evangelicalism has been applied to different groups down through history. It is strongly associated with the 16th century Reformation, so much so that even today in Germany, evangelical is virtually synonymous with Protestant.⁷ It counts Puritans and Pietists among its ancestors, but is seen by some as first manifesting some of its central characteristics in the First Great Awakening.⁸ It was the dominant form of Christianity among Protestants in the 19th century, but was eclipsed for a time in the early 20th century. It rebounded from a defensive, fundamentalist phase after World War II to the present era of evangelicalism, represented by numerous individual churches, some denominations, and especially associated with a network of parachurch organizations (such as the Evangelical Theological Society).

While it is not the purpose of this paper to review all the issues involved in defining evangelicalism (that is the work of all the papers and presentations of this week), in the interests of clarity let me simply state that I am using the word "evangelical" in a way consonant with the descriptions given above from McGrath, Bebbington, Marsden and Carson. In particular, I am using evangelical in what Marsden calls the narrower or "card-carrying" sense,⁹ which is the sense I take it is used in the title of this organization.

With these introductory considerations concluded, we may move to the body of the paper. In it I will, first of all, mention a few resources we may draw upon in developing evangelical ecclesiological boundaries. Secondly, I will suggest what some such boundaries should be. Some may seem exceedingly obvious and perhaps simplistic, but need to be stated to accomplish my third purpose, which is to use these boundaries to analyze and evaluate three areas of contemporary evangelical interest and importance; namely, the phenomenon of seeker

⁷ R. V. Pierard, "Evangelicalism," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 379-382.

⁸ Bebbington, 20.

⁹ Marsden, xiv.

churches, the related phenomenon of megachurches, and the place of parachurch groups vis a vis churches.¹⁰

Resources for Evangelical Ecclesiology

It should go without saying that the sole normative resource for evangelical ecclesiology is Scripture. And despite admitted differences in our understanding of Scripture's teaching on the church at some points, I believe we have not sufficiently noted numerous areas of agreement that allow us to speak of a distinctly evangelical ecclesiology. The boundaries I suggest below will seek to reflect what I think are commonly shared understandings of Scripture.

But Scripture is not the only resource we may utilize. As Timothy George has said, "sola Scriptura is not nuda Scriptura."¹¹ By this, he refers to the view of the Reformers that we may and should make a critical use of the tradition of the church in our attempt to understand Scripture. Beyond Scripture, there seem to be two major historical resources. One is the article in the Nicene Creed of belief in "one holy catholic and apostolic Church." While these four

¹⁰ I had originally planned to comment on the importance of ecclesiology for the evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogue as well, because it seems to me that whatever progress has been made in other areas, ecclesiology will prove an insuperable difference. I am refraining from such comments to avoid unduly lengthening the paper, and because the difficulties are already apparent to anyone reading the sharply differing perspectives of Avery Dulles and Timothy George in Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?, ed. Thomas Rausch (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

¹¹ Timothy George, "Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," in Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?, ed. Thomas P. Rausch (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 140.

classical notae of unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity have been most often utilized in Catholic ecclesiology, it is certainly possible to utilize them in an evangelical fashion.¹²

The second resource is the Reformation description of the marks of a true church. Most often cited are the two marks of the pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments.¹³ Other reformers, such as Martin Bucer and John Knox, along with the Anabaptists and early English Separatists, added discipline as a third mark.¹⁴

¹² As do, for example, George, "Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," 132-141, and Edmund P. Clowney, The Church (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 71-98.

¹³ Luther's fullest statement of the marks of the church is found in On the Councils and the Church, vol. 41 of Luther's Works, eds. Helmut Lehmann and Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 148-166. There, in addition to the Word and sacraments, he lists "the office of the keys," authorized ministers, public worship, and "the sacred cross" of suffering and persecution. Of these, clearly the most important is the Word, which is said to be sufficient in itself, apart from any other sign. More often, Luther refers only to the Word and sacraments (as in Against Hanswurst, vol. 41 of Luther's Works, 211.

Calvin's clearest statement is found in the Institutes, IV.i.9-10, where the "distinguishing marks of the church" are said to be "the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution."

¹⁴ See the discussion in Paul D. L. Avis, The Church in the Theology of the Reformers (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 48-63.

More recent resources we may draw upon are articles by D. A. Carson and Timothy George,¹⁵ both directed toward developing an evangelical ecclesiology.¹⁶ They, in turn, draw upon the resources already mentioned, with Carson, as befits a New Testament theologian, focusing more on Scriptural themes, and George, as a historical theologian, utilizing more the classical and Reformation marks.

Carson's article was part of a 1989 attempt to define evangelicalism by stating "evangelical affirmations." In it, he describes his goal in the paper as giving "those features of evangelical ecclesiology that ought to govern our self-understanding and therefore our relations with others."¹⁷ He then lists seven theses that he believes could be affirmed by most evangelicals. His confidence that these theses do represent evangelical ecclesiology is based in part on the agreement he discovered in his work with evangelicals from around the world on the doctrine of the church, conducted under the auspices of the World Evangelical Fellowship and published in the form of two books, both edited by Carson.¹⁸ The seven theses he develops for evangelical ecclesiology are as follows:

"(1) The church is the community of the new covenant."

"(2) The church is the community empowered by the Holy Spirit."

"(3) The church is an eschatological community."

¹⁵ Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," 347-385, George, "Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," 122-148.

¹⁶ In fact, "Toward An Evangelical Ecclesiology" is the title of George's article, and the sub-title of the most pertinent section of Carson's article.

¹⁷ Carson, 348.

¹⁸ Ibid., 358-359. The two books are Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), and The Church in the Bible and the World (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1986).

"(4) The church is the 'gathered' people of God."

"(5) The church is a worshiping community."

"(6) The church is the product of God's gracious self-disclosure in revelation and redemption."

"(7) The church is characterized by mission."¹⁹

Carson develops the biblical basis and the importance of each of these theses for evangelicals, and has been formative in my own thinking on this topic. Though I phrase my boundaries differently, I believe I incorporate all seven of these ideas in my formulation.²⁰

More recently, Timothy George has considered the same issue, that of "consensual evangelical ecclesiology," in connection with the Roman Catholic/Evangelical dialogue.²¹ He delineates evangelical ecclesiology under the rubrics of "the universality of the Church; the priority of the Gospel; and finally, the Church as One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic."²²

The universality of the Church as encompassing all those who have trusted Jesus as Lord, Master and Savior is important for George because it allows evangelicals to recognize "a shared spiritual reality" with "believing Catholics."²³ At the same time, evangelical understanding of the universality of the Church differs from Catholic teaching in not seeing the Church as the continuation of the Incarnation, nor identifying the Church with any "earthly institution;" rather, it is "a heavenly and eschatological entity."²⁴

¹⁹ Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," 359-370.

²⁰ See below, 7-12.

²¹ George, 124.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 126.

²⁴ Ibid., 126-127.

George draws on the Reformation roots of evangelicalism in seeing the gospel, particularly the gospel message of justification by faith alone, as "constitutive for the church" and "the evangelical center of the visible church."²⁵ However, he allows that the substance of the doctrine of justification by faith can be expressed without necessarily using the exact words or formulae of the Reformers themselves.²⁶

George sees the four classical notae as a valid part of evangelical ecclesiology, though understood in distinctive ways at some points. For example, evangelical belief in the oneness, or unity, of the church is coupled with an insistence on the doctrinal integrity of the church, which has made evangelicals wary of the modern ecumenical movement. Still, he believes that modern evangelicals do believe in the unity of the church "based on the fact that we worship one God."²⁷

Evangelicals see the holiness of the church as derived from that of the animating Holy Spirit and the church's head, Jesus Christ. On earth the holiness of the church is incomplete, but nonetheless seen in the practice of church discipline, which reflects the goal of the church, to be a gathered body of visible saints.²⁸

While some evangelicals hesitate over the word "catholic," their practice proclaims their commitment to it, especially in "the worldwide missionary vision which is the heart and soul of the evangelical movement."²⁹

Apostolicity is understood within evangelicalism, not in terms of a succession of ordained bishops, but in terms of the apostolic message. This is why the Reformers insisted so

²⁵ Ibid., 129, 131.

²⁶ Ibid., 131. The background here seems to be George's work on the document called "The Gift of Salvation," produced by a group of evangelicals and Catholics, but criticized by some evangelicals for not including the term "imputation." See George's defense of the document in Timothy George, Thomas C. Oden, and J. I. Packer, "An Open Letter About 'The Gift of Salvation,'" Christianity Today 42:6 (April 27, 1998): 9.

²⁷ George, "Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," 132.

²⁸ Ibid., 135-136.

²⁹ Ibid., 137.

strongly on the preaching of the Word as the key mark of a true church; it insures the church's apostolicity.

These resources and my own reading of Scripture and experience within a fairly wide range of evangelical settings serve as the background for the following ecclesiological boundaries. I offer them as tentative suggestions and as bases for examining some key ecclesiological issues facing evangelicals today. Some may seem too obvious to need stating, but sometimes what is most obvious is overlooked for that very reason. In the area of ecclesiology I fear that is what has happened.

Evangelical Ecclesiological Boundaries

1. The Methodological Boundary: sola Scriptura. By this I mean that the sole normative source for evangelical ecclesiology, as for all areas of evangelical theology, must be Scripture. This idea is reflected to a degree by Carson's sixth thesis ("The church is the product of God's gracious self-disclosure in revelation"³⁰), is implicit in the idea of apostolicity as the apostolic teaching, and is explicit in the Reformation mark of the preaching of the Word as the surest sign of the existence of a true church. Evangelicals do and have disagreed on what Scripture teaches about the church, but the affirmation of its normative authority is central in evangelical ecclesiology and too important to be taken for granted, especially in an era when some evangelical church leaders seem to cite George Barna more than the Bible.

2. The Christological Boundary. This as well may seem too obvious to need stating, but a Christocentric focus has far-reaching implications for understanding the unity of the church, the message of the church, and the nature of the church as a body of believers. Any church which loses such a Christocentric focus has transgressed an important boundary.

Timothy George and Edmund Clowney both see the unity or oneness of the church as based on the common worship of one God,³¹ but it is even more solidly grounded on our union with the Lord and head of the church, Jesus Christ. The metaphor of the church as the body of

³⁰ Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church, 369.

³¹George, "Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," 132 and Clowney, 79.

Christ, while used in different ways in Romans and I Corinthians than in Ephesians and Colossians, supports the idea of unity in Christ in both sets of passages.³²

Furthermore, when Luther speaks of the preaching of the Word as the first, most important, and defining mark of the church, he is in essence speaking of Christ, who was for Luther "the center of Scripture and the Lord of Scripture."³³ The gospel that Luther saw as "constitutive for the church"³⁴ was the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Carson's idea of the church as "the community of the new covenant"³⁵ implies a Christocentric focus for the church, for the new covenant is that which Christ himself inaugurated. Any ecclesiology which does not keep Christ in the center warps the foundation upon which the church is established (I Cor. 3:11).

The nature of the church in terms of its membership is also shaped by the Christological boundary. For if the church is the body of Christ, how can one be a member of that body if one is not of Christ? Thus Carson says, "By definition, the church is made up of regenerate believers."³⁶ He realizes the difficulty such a claim involves for evangelicals who seek to minister in "mixed" churches, but insists that "evangelical theology, to be consistent with itself, must adopt as a limiting guideline that the church is made up of regenerate believers."³⁷ I would simply add that it is an implicit corollary of the Christological boundary of the church.

³² See Robert Banks, Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 62-70.

³³ Timothy George, The Theology of the Reformers (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1988), 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁵ Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," 359.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 371.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 374.

A further implication of the Christological boundary is the importance of church discipline for those whose conduct belies their profession of Christ.³⁸ The disappearance of church discipline from many evangelical churches thus raises questions not only about our lack of courage and "tough love," but also about our ecclesiological awareness and acumen.

3. The Pneumatological Boundary. Whether dispensational or covenant in their theology, evangelicals realize that something significant for the church happened at Pentecost. In the twentieth century, the Pentecostal/charismatic movement highlighted the importance of the Holy Spirit and the growth and presence of Pentecostals within evangelicalism has brought a greater pneumatological awareness to evangelicalism as a whole. This is reflected in Carson's statement that "The church is a community empowered by the Holy Spirit" and by George's linkage of the Spirit to the holiness of the church.³⁹ As Douglas Farrow has perceptively noted in a recent book, even the Ascension, and the corresponding real absence of Christ, force us to see the church as profoundly pneumatological.⁴⁰

The danger here is perhaps not in what we say explicitly in our ecclesiology, but the ecclesiology implied by our practice. Any church whose reliance is on careful demographic study and market analysis as the tools for growth has forgotten the word that says, "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty" (Zech. 4:6). The ecclesiological

³⁸ Ibid. Carson draws this same implication, noting that it has a long history as the third Reformation mark of the church, and "as virtually mandated by the nature of the church."

³⁹ See Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," 362, and George, "Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," 134.

⁴⁰ Douglas Farrow, Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), esp. 176-178.)

assumptions behind one's practice can "mean the difference between church growth as true faith and church growth as a form of streamlined humanistic engineering."⁴¹

4. The Eschatological Boundary. This boundary reminds us that the church's life and purpose can never be fully understood from the perspective of this present evil age. Carson says, "the church is an eschatological outpost in time; its very identity turns on this reality. That, in turn, entails numerous evangelistic, ethical and social responsibilities."⁴²

Moreover, if D. A. Carson and Bruce Ware are correct in their view that some variety of inaugurated eschatology is gaining widespread acceptance among evangelicals,⁴³ we may be even more specific and see the church as partaking fully of both the already and the not yet. Thus, it is both holy and not yet holy; one and not yet one.

This guards against both a premature triumphalism and a premature pessimism. In the words of Timothy George, the church on earth is always "ecclesia in via (Kirche im Werden), the church in a state of becoming, buffeted by struggles, beset by the eschatological 'groanings' which mark those 'upon whom the ends of the world have come.'"⁴⁴ Thus, we must always have the courage and perspective to see the church through the eyes of faith in the coming consummation. Only then will we see the church clearly.

5. The Liturgical Boundary. By this boundary, I refer not to any one style of worship, but to the necessity of worship as inherent in the life of the church and its relatedness to God.

⁴¹ Os Guinness, Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 27.

⁴² Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," 364.

⁴³ Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism and the Church," 363, and Bruce Ware, "New Dimensions in Eschatology," in New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought: Essays in Honor of Millard J. Erickson, ed. David S. Dockery (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 357-358.)

⁴⁴ George, "Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," 141.

Here I must register one area of disagreement with Carson. He states, "From an evangelical perspective, it is not strictly necessary to list the sacraments/ordinances as one of the defining marks of the church, even though the overwhelming majority of us are happy to do so. Otherwise we could not conceive of evangelical Salvationists, Quakers and others."⁴⁵ I have no wish to exclude Salvationists (though some would view them as a parachurch group, not a church) nor Quakers from evangelicalism, but I think both Scripture and history force us to a more weighty view of baptism and the Lord's Supper. True, these rites are not of the essence of salvation, but they were included by Luther and Calvin as the second mark of a true church ("where the sacraments are rightly administered") and seem to be part of the church's mandate until the close of the age and Christ's return (Matt. 28:19-20, I Cor. 11:24-26). While evangelicals will certainly differ on the meaning of and proper participants in the sacraments, these acts are given to us as gifts, visible words and aids to our physical senses, and thus we should not value them less than warranted by Scripture.

6. The Missiological Boundary. By this I mean that the church is by its nature separated from the world but sent into the world (John 17:18, 20:21) on a mission of service. This mission is to be full-orbed, including both ministering to its own members (by means of teaching, fellowship, and serving one another) and the world beyond its doors (in evangelism, ministry to physical needs, etc). Any church that sees its ministry as limited to itself is, at best, ecclesiologically incomplete, or, in the worst cases, ecclesiologically invalid.

This boundary is reinforced by a proper understanding of the catholicity of the church. One of the identifying marks of evangelicalism over the past 200 years has been their commitment to geographical catholicity via the "missionary vision which is the heart and soul of the evangelical movement."⁴⁶ But catholicity also involves "inclusive membership, gathered from all classes and ranks [and races and ages] of human society."⁴⁷ At this point, there are still some churches which, to their shame, deny this type of catholicity by excluding certain classes or

⁴⁵ Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," 376. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ George, "Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology," 137.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

racers from their membership, and there is a church growth principle called the "homogeneous unit principle" that, if not carefully applied, can encourage such practices.⁴⁸ Catholicity in membership and ministry is also one factor that distinguishes churches from parachurch groups. While a church as a matter of strategy may target a specific group, and be better equipped in certain areas of ministry than others, its call still is to catholicity. It cannot exclude anyone because of age or background. It is ecclesiologicaly invalid for a church to admit only high school students to its membership, or to minister only in the area of relieving physical needs. It does not have the option to be like Young Life or World Vision; its missiological boundary calls upon it to offer all types of ministry to all types of people.

7. The Structural Boundary. While this aspect of ecclesiology is not addressed as repeatedly or clearly as some other aspects in Scripture and other resources, it still deserves mention as a part of evangelical ecclesiology. Virtually all evangelicals recognize that the church is more than a mass of people; it has some structural, organizational form. Almost all denominations have some form of authorized leadership.⁴⁹ Almost all recognize the need for some lines of authority, whether delineated in a congregational, presbyterian, or episcopal manner. Indeed, a structure with some source of authority (under Christ's headship and ultimate authority) would seem to be presupposed in the idea of church discipline.

Beyond the bare affirmations of structure and authority, perhaps there is little that could be said that would apply to all evangelicals. Honest differences in church government have been a long-standing area of disagreement among evangelicals. But there is at least one pertinent application. The idea of a divinely given structure and authority in the church provides another point of distinction between churches and parachurch groups and another reason why those in parachurch groups need the church. The church is authorized to shepherd believers, to provide

⁴⁸ For the homogeneous unit idea, see Donald A. McGavran, Understanding Church Growth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970).

⁴⁹ In On the Councils and the Church, Luther does include the calling of ministers, bishops, pastors or preachers as one sign or mark of the church. See Luther, Luther's Works, vol. 41, 154.

them with accountability and discipline. Other groups may do so, but without a similar explicit mandate.

These boundaries do not claim to be all that evangelicals could say or need to say about the church. However, they do provide a basis for examination of some key issues of interest to evangelicals today.

Applying Ecclesiological Boundaries to Contemporary Issues

Ecclesiological neglect has caught up with evangelicals. While we slept, ecclesiotogically sleeping, a number of developments in church life happened. Lacking, and in some cases, not wanting, theological guidance, most have been developed and evaluated by pragmatic criteria alone. Now is the time to evaluate, analyze and raise questions about them, on a consciously, explicitly ecclesiological level.

Seeker Sensitive Churches

One of the most important and controversial developments in American evangelical church life has been what are called seeker sensitive churches. Represented most prominently by Willow Creek Church in Chicago and Saddleback Valley Church in California, these are churches characterized by services that require no prior knowledge of Christianity or Christian jargon; that seek intentionally to be sensitive to those who may be seeking God; that try to find bridges from felt needs (family life, money management) to spiritual needs; that feel free to innovate in terms of music, drama, and style of preaching to reach seekers; that seek to place no unnecessary barriers between a seeker and the gospel.

As Harry Poe says, "The seeker service as a major trend has sparked conflict in evangelical ranks, some believing that this worship style is the wave of the future and others holding that it constitutes 'dining with the devil.'"⁵⁰ Some see such churches as the cutting edge

⁵⁰ Harry L. Poe, "New Dimensions in Worship and Ministry," in New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought: Essays in Honor of Millard J. Erickson, ed. David S. Dockery (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 428. The phrase Poe quotes is the title of a book by Os Guinness, Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts With Modernity (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993).

of Christianity with the evident blessing of God upon them; others see them as representing a sell-out to American culture. When analyzed in terms of ecclesiological boundaries, they do raise several questions.

In their desire to be relevant and effective in meeting the needs of seekers, seeker sensitive churches face several dangers. If they are too deeply shaped by market analysis, demographics, and secular media rather than Scripture, they risk crossing the methodological boundary. This seems to be the concern of Os Guinness. He fears pastors are abandoning the truths of Scripture and sound theology for "the latest insights of sociology."⁵¹ Peter Drucker has much the same concern for such churches: "They find their guiding light not from church tradition or doctrine so much as their analysis of their target audience."⁵²

Another concern is the express and strong desire of seeker sensitive churches to make unbelievers feel at home in the church. Douglas Webster sees this as a violation of the nature of the church as a Christologically bounded body: "the church is not based on human opinion, no matter how positive. It is not an audience positively inclined toward Jesus, but a company of committed individuals whose lives depend upon the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord."⁵³ If Carson is right in claiming that the church is "an eschatological outpost in time," with "more important and more enduring" ties with the world to come than this world,⁵⁴ how far can a church go in making nonbelievers feel at home? Certainly, unnecessary barriers can be removed, but Carson

⁵¹ Guinness, 12.

⁵² Tim Stafford, "The Business of the Kingdom," Christianity Today 43:13 (November 15, 1999): 50. In this article Stafford interviews Peter Drucker.

⁵³ Douglas Webster, Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 16.

⁵⁴ Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," 364.

claims that this eschatological nature is more than incidental: "its [the church's] very identity turns on this reality."⁵⁵ How do seeker church leaders respond to these criticisms?

In reading key books by leading seeker church pastors,⁵⁶ I discerned their genuine desire to be both biblically sound and pragmatically effective. The two aims exist in some tension, which can be creative or destructive. My concern is that the tension be negotiated with theological reflection.

I am encouraged by a recent interview in which Hybels said of Willow Creek, "We've set up all our leadership structures and goals to grow a full-functioning Acts 2 community, as opposed to just an evangelizing machine that doesn't drive the roots down deep and do all the other things it's supposed to do."⁵⁷ I think Hybels gives here an important clue to how a seeker church must function if it is to avoid wandering outside ecclesiological boundaries. The big Sunday morning service, with the non-traditional sermon and the drama and the cutting edge music, may be seen as "the evangelizing machine." It is not the church that is seeker sensitive; it is the evangelistic service. There must be another time and place where Willow Creek or any other seeker church becomes believer's church and does what is necessary to "drive the roots down deep and do all the other things" a church must do.

Charles Colson thinks Willow Creek is doing both. Their Sunday morning service for seekers is evangelism; their Wednesday evening service is worship for Christians.⁵⁸ Harry Poe compares Willow Creek's Sunday morning services to that of Sunday evening services a century

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Such as Rick Warren, The Purpose Driven Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), Lynne and Bill Hybels, Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek Community Church.

⁵⁷ Verla Gillmor, "Community Is Their Middle Name," Christianity Today 44:13 (November 13, 2000), 50.

⁵⁸ Charles Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, The Body (Dallas: Word, 1992), 343.

ago, designed as "an alternative outreach service" with "upbeat music and testimonies designed for non-Christians."⁵⁹

Hybels himself says Willow Creek combats the acknowledged dangers of seeker services with an emphasis on small groups: "Church leaders decided Willow would become not just a church with small groups but a church of small groups."⁶⁰ If these small groups can function in the areas of discipleship and accountability, a seeker friendly church can also be a ecclesiologicaly sound church. That is Poe's verdict as well; his concern is for those who imitate Hybels without recognizing the dangers. "While Willow Creek Church and Saddleback Valley do an outstanding job of attending to the theological foundations for their ministries, their imitators do not always have the same concern."⁶¹ I would concur, and add that there is thus still a great need to urge church leaders to think ecclesiologicaly as well as strategically.

Megachurches

While there have always been some large churches throughout church history, something unusual has been happening in our era. John Vaughan writes, "The recent rise of larger and larger churches at an increasingly faster rate of growth is unique to this final quarter of the twentieth century."⁶² He notes that, worldwide, there were more than 40 congregations with more than 10,000 members as of 1993, and congregations surpassing 2000 attenders were

⁵⁹ Poe, 441.

⁶⁰ Gillmor, 50. Emphasis in original.

⁶¹ Poe, 442.

⁶² John N. Vaughan, Megachurches and America's Cities (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 40.

growing at the rate of one every two weeks in the U.S. alone.⁶³ A more recent work estimates that half the churchgoers in the U.S. attend the top 12% of the nation's churches.⁶⁴

Some see the rise of megachurches in a positive light. Their size enables them to provide a myriad of specialized services to their members that smaller churches cannot provide. Some have said, "The large church replaces the need for denominations. The large church can have the enlarged ministry that is often delegated to denominations . . . the large church can provide all these services for itself and does not run the risk of encouraging 'institutionalization' or 'centralization' of power."⁶⁵ But I think there are also risks the megachurch runs that must be recognized.

First, if the church is a gathered and disciplined body of believers in Christ (the Christological boundary), under some form of authorized leadership to provide pastoral ministry (the structural boundary), the megachurch raises certain practical problems. How does a church keep track of 10,000 members and insure that they are walking with Christ? How does it provide guidance and shepherding to so many?

A second problem megachurches must address is the fact that some of the ministries churches are called upon to perform (the missiological boundary) cannot be accomplished in large group settings. Worship and teaching are amenable to large groups, but community and discipleship require more intimate settings.

⁶³ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁴ C. Trueheart, "Welcome to the Next Church," *Atlantic Monthly*, August, 1996, 38, cited in Wesley K. Willmer and J. David Schmidt, with Martyn Smith, *The Prospering Parachurch: Enlarging the Boundaries of God's Kingdom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 193-194.

⁶⁵ Elmer Towns and Jerry Falwell, *Church Aflame* (Nashville, TN: Impact Books, 1971), 41-42.

One answer to both these problems, historically and contemporarily, has been small groups, or ecclesiolae in ecclesia.⁶⁶ Howard Snyder says, "the Christian faith can be fully experienced in some such 'subecclesial' or small-church form."⁶⁷ This has been the solution of Willow Creek Church, which is both a seeker church and a megachurch.⁶⁸ As noted above, they have intentionally decided to be, not just "a church with small groups, but a church of small groups."⁶⁹ This implicitly recognizes the problems and limitations of megachurches.

There is a third problem, that, while not unique to megachurches, is accentuated by them. It is the danger of ignoring the oneness of believers in Christ (the Christological boundary). Certainly, any church, large or small, can have an isolationist spirit, but denominations, at their best, have allowed churches to give at least some visible witness to the unity of the larger body of Christ, without the doctrinal compromises perceived by many as a problem with larger ecumenical groups such as National or World Council of Churches. A powerful incentive to the formation of denominations was certainly the pragmatic difficulty local churches found in accomplishing certain ministries alone (funding foreign or home missionaries, publishing literature, sponsoring theological education), but there was also an ecclesiological basis for them. Connectional ecclesiology was undergirded by the belief that local churches should be connected to one another to manifest the unity of the body of Christ.⁷⁰ But megachurches, who do not need

⁶⁶ See the historical survey in Howard Snyder, Signs of the Spirit: How God Reshapes the Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1989).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 277.

⁶⁸ It should be noted that, while some seeker churches are megachurches as well, the two terms are not synonymous. Seeker church relates to the style, especially that of the Sunday morning service; megachurch relates only to size.

⁶⁹ See n. 60 above.

⁷⁰ For the development of this theme in early Baptist life, see G. Hugh Wamble, "The

the pragmatic help of denominations, can forget that they do need the ecclesiological help of other churches to manifest the unity of the body of Christ in a way larger than their own assembly. Megachurches need to recognize the ecclesiological value of associating with other churches.⁷¹

Parachurch Groups

It is difficult to overstate the prominence of parachurch groups in contemporary evangelicalism. To a large degree, evangelicalism has been formed around a network of parachurch groups;⁷² ETS is one of thousands of such groups. Worldwide giving to such groups has recently surpassed worldwide giving to churches,⁷³ and the positive contributions of such

Concept and Practice of Christian Fellowship: The Connectional and Interdenominational Aspects Thereof, Among Seventeenth Century English Baptists" (Th.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955); for more recent affirmation of the same idea, see Dale Moody, "The Shaping of Baptist Polity," Baptist History and Heritage 14 (July, 1979): 1-11.

⁷¹ It is interesting to note that there is also now a Willow Creek Association, a loosely affiliated group of 5600 churches, who themselves belong to 90 different denominations. The purpose of the Association is stated in pragmatic terms (to share insights on seeker sensitive ministry) but they also serve, even if unconsciously, an ecclesiological purpose. See the discussion in Michael Hamilton, "Willow Creek's Place in History," Christianity Today 44:13 (November 13, 2000), 67-68.

⁷² George Marsden defines evangelicals, in a narrow sense, as those "who have some sense of belonging to a complicated fellowship and infrastructure of transdenominational evangelical organizations." See Marsden, xiv.

⁷³ According to David Barrett, "Annual Statistical Table of Global Missions: 1996," International Bulletin of Missionary Research 18:1 (1997): 23-24. While complete figures are

groups have been and continue to be immense. Our presence at this ETS meeting is testimony to our belief in the value of at least this parachurch group.

Yet such groups have received very little theological investigation. Willmer and Schmidt, in one of the few books devoted to parachurch groups, lament this scholarly lacuna: "It seems strange that in the midst of a religious landscape in which many parachurches surpass many denominations in total budget and in influence, there is so little scholarly attention given to the parachurch. . . . As a result of this neglect, there is confusion as to the place of the parachurch in the context of the Church."⁷⁴ Yet their book does little to remedy the problem, devoting only one chapter of fifteen to theological issues.

I have discussed the relationship of church and parachurch at some length in other contexts;⁷⁵ here I want only to note the ecclesiological boundaries they risk crossing unless they see themselves and their ministries in an ecclesiological perspective.

In terms of the methodological boundary, parachurch groups are in something of an anomalous position. Churches seek to define and describe themselves with Scripture as the sole normative source, and with history and tradition helping to interpret Scripture. But parachurch groups are not mentioned in Scripture, and emerged only relatively recently (19th century) in church history.⁷⁶ Thus, parachurch groups have developed most often in response to pragmatic

not available, Barrett estimates that worldwide receipts of parachurch groups for 1996 totalled \$100 billion, while churches received about \$94 billion.

⁷⁴ Willmer and Schmidt, 177.

⁷⁵ See John S. Hammett, "Selected Parachurch Groups and Southern Baptists: An Ecclesiological Debate" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991); also by the same author, "How Church and Parachurch Should Relate: Arguments for a Servant-Partnership Model," Missiology: An International Review 28:2 (April, 2000): 199-207, and the 1999 ETS paper cited above in n. 1.

⁷⁶ For responses to claims of Scriptural and historical precedents, see Hammett, "Selected

needs, without a carefully thought through rationale. That does not invalidate them, but it raises questions that need to be considered, and, I would say, places them secondary to that which is mentioned explicitly in Scripture, namely, the church. Sadly, however, Leith Anderson's assessment is, I think, accurate: "Most para-church organizations say they are extensions of the church and subject to the church, but in reality that is seldom true."⁷⁷

The absence of scriptural guidance for parachurch groups also raises difficulties for them in terms of the eschatological boundary. I think parachurch group leaders need to recognize that part of the reason for their dramatic growth and prominence is the way they "fit" the entrepreneurial, independent American spirit. Alan Youngren notes four aspects of this "fit:" Americans have less respect for tradition, a preference for autonomous groups, a generally independent spirit, and "an infatuation with almost anything new."⁷⁸ The danger is that such groups, lacking biblical guidance as to what they should be as a corporate entity, will take their cue from the culture in which they exist. As Anderson notes, while parachurch groups may "seek to operate by the same New Testament principles as the local church . . . they often are more open to adopting the organizing structures of secular institutions, businesses, and universities."⁷⁹ To be sure, churches face this same danger, but they have Scriptural guidelines that should allow them to be "eschatological outposts"⁸⁰ in space and time; parachurch groups lack such Scriptural guidance.

In terms of the liturgical boundary, most parachurch groups have refrained from celebrating the sacraments out of deference to the idea that they seek to complement, rather than compete with, the ministry of churches. I think such an idea of complementariness, or

Parachurch Groups," 110-129.

⁷⁷ Leith Anderson, Dying for Change (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1990), 17.

⁷⁸ J. Alan Youngren, "Parachurch Proliferation: The Frontier Spirit Caught in Traffic," Christianity Today 25:19 (November 6, 1981): 38-41.

⁷⁹ Anderson, 17.

⁸⁰ This is Carson's phrase. See Carson, "Evangelicals, Ecumenism, and the Church," 364.

partnership, is the model churches and parachurches need to develop in their relationships with one another.⁸¹ Celebration of the sacraments is one of a number of areas where the church's responsibility should be acknowledged.⁸²

Partnership is also a model that can be applied to the missiological boundary. Churches are charged with providing wholistic ministry to all of their own members, young and old, married and single (teaching, worship, discipleship) as well as ministry in and to the world (missions, evangelism, service). They cannot focus on any one group or aspect of ministry to the exclusion of all others; parachurch groups can and do and thus develop expertise and resources that can be utilized in partnership with churches. The need is to make partnership more than mere words, but "a deeply held value,"⁸³ replacing fear, disdain, suspicion, competition, and independence.

Finally, the parachurch lacks the organizational component of churches reflected in the structural boundary. Anderson notes that to be a church, a group of Christians must meet certain conditions, the "most visible condition . . . [being] one of organization, including the offices of elder (bishop) and deacon."⁸⁴ Thus, there is something churches can offer to parachurch groups and something parachurch groups should seek: an authority (be it congregational, presbyterian, or episcopal) to whom they may properly submit for discipline and accountability.⁸⁵

⁸¹ I develop this idea in terms of a servant partnership in the article cited above, in n.75, Hammett, "How Church and Parachurch Should Relate."

⁸² Willmer and Schmidt, 176-178, endorse the idea of partnership, and relate it specifically to the sacraments.

⁸³ Ibid., 181.

⁸⁴ Anderson, 16.

⁸⁵ Further reasons for such a relationship and how it might work out in practice are found in an important handbook from the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, International

Conclusion

None of these questions I raise for seeker churches, megachurches or parachurch groups should be seen as attacks on such groups or a denigration of the tremendous contributions they have made to my own life personally and to the cause of Christ worldwide. But here as in many other areas, the good may be the enemy of the best. And the best is awareness and evaluation of the ecclesiological implications of all the practices we develop in evangelical life to meet pragmatic needs. Numerical success here is not the only criterion; relating to ecclesiological boundaries properly is also valuable, but has thus far been too little recognized among evangelicals. This paper is an attempt to start a conversation that needs to continue, and be renewed in every generation.

Commission on Evangelical Co-operation, Co-operating in World Evangelization: A Handbook on Church/Para-church Relationships, Lausanne Occasional Paper no. 24 (Wheaton, IL: 1982), 13-34, especially the Theological Preamble by John Stott, and in Hammett, "Selected Parachurch Groups," 235-240.