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The Context of
Team Leadership

Teams—we see them all the time. We root for—or against—them. We function in them, both in the family and in the workplace. We watch them on TV—many of the currently popular TV shows depict teams, or groups of dissimilar people, bonding together. In that bonding, they face enemies without and conflicts within. Depending on the circumstances, differing members of the team may take starring or lead roles.

This elevation of teams, personal bonding, and leadership by gift hardly represents a new theme in literature or art. Nevertheless, the emphasis on individual giftedness or talent driving the leadership of a particular situation reflects a shift in general leadership philosophy. George Weber emphasizes that "the historic command-structure organization is dead" and reminds us:

> The successful leader of the future must have one more attribute that weighs perhaps as much as all the others on the scale of effectiveness; he or she must be a tireless, inventive, observant, risk-taking, and ever-hopeful builder and enabler of

management and leadership teams within and among the organization's constituent parts.[1]

Is this shift biblical? Many churches and Christian organizations have practiced authoritative, visionary leadership, top-down administrative policies since their inception, and have prospered in the doing. Does team leadership have a place in the church? Do we risk importing the idea from current secular literature without critical and biblical reflection? Or have those thinkers discerned the truth of leadership principles in a way that is thoroughly biblical?

My bias, as a supporter of team leadership, shows itself immediately. Years of study and practice have demonstrated to me that this sound biblical concept is a biblical mandate as well.

Our understanding of Christian leadership must properly proceed from theology to philosophy to practical implementation. Therefore, a book about team leadership should begin with a theological examination of the church itself as the context and matrix of leadership.

Much of the confusion we face today stems from the lack of a clear-cut ministry philosophy, carrying with it the weight of specific objectives that have their truth and value laid firmly in the Word of God. Christian leadership should be competent; even more essential, however, is that it be thoroughly biblical.

CONTEMPORARY CONFUSION REGARDING THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

Secular Analysis

In the 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s, abundant literature provided a sociological analysis of the church's problems from such noted educators as Gibson Winter, Martin Marty, and R. J. Havighurst. The religious book market was flooded with volumes analyzing the church as though it were the local supermarket or a branch of a major industry. From such examination

the church can well learn some of the organizational defects into which it has fallen through the years. We have had ample opportunity to study its alleged irrelevance, tradition-bound immobility, and inability to meet the needs of modern society. Some of the criticism was deserved and much of it, helpful. Nevertheless, one basic erroneous note flowed through most of the literature dissecting the church during those decades. It viewed the church largely as *organization* and failed to realize that it is also *organism*.

The Distorted Image of Fiction

Another problem the church has faced today is the image it has inherited in contemporary fiction and cinema. The picture of Jonathan Edwards thundering the truth of God to a people who trembled before His sovereignty has now given way to *Leap of Faith*—the movie about a phony con man, grasping for personal profit in religious merchandise. After identifying modern man as confused, complacent, chaotic, rebellious, and desperately in need of help, the writers of twentieth-century fiction have been able to construct nothing better than a "picaresque saint." The voices of Kafka and Camus, of Coppola, Lear, and Allen, have been heard more clearly on college campuses than the voice of God. Even the educated American has nearly lost sight of what the New Testament church was all about.

The Gospel of a Cause

Still another voice clamoring to be heard in the darkness is what may be called "The Gospel of a Cause." Strangely enough, prophets of this position can be found in the ranks of variant theological extremes. Their paths differ and their traveling gear seems diverse, but they end up at the same crossroads—the banner of a *cause*. Some tell us the church must become more involved in human rights, using the influence of pastor and parish to push for affirmative action, school integration, equal

job opportunities, and a dozen other aspects of pressing social problems.

Others would press the church into the battle for world peace. Only in such a noble and worldwide cause for the benefit of the human race, they threaten, can the church redeem itself from its years of apathy and injustice. Still others tell us that the church must be in the foreground, fighting abortion and homosexuality in the public arena.

But many of the above causes (and dozens more like them) have often failed to distinguish between the supernatural work of regeneration and its accompanying results in individual behavior and society. Human rights on earth are not to be equated with heavenly citizenship; world peace, though a noble cause, forms a shoddy substitute for the eternal peace of God in the human heart; and American democracy dare not be equated with biblical Christianity. The problem of the gospel of a cause, therefore, is that it offers itself as a substitute for the gospel of the Cross!

Polarization of a Philosophy of Ministry

A number of beliefs and behaviors have divided evangelicals throughout the twentieth century—levels and extent of separation of church and state; arguments over prophecy; disputes related to systems of biblical interpretation; and positions on the doctrine of inerrancy. Increasingly obvious as a divisive force is the attitude toward how the church should minister and what forms that ministry should take. Part of the issue, for example, is size. One wing of conservative Christianity focuses on what we have come to call the "megachurch." On the other hand, the "metachurch" stresses the importance of small groups, discipleship training, and a heavy emphasis on "sharing." Obviously, local churches represent almost every point on a continuum line between those views, and people feel comfortable in many and varied ministerial styles. In a future chapter I will address the issue of ministry philosophy.

The Meaning of the Word "Church"

The English Words

The English word *church* is one of the most abused and misused words in the twentieth-century vocabulary. Unfortunately, like Caesar, it suffers more at the hands of its friends than its enemies. Let's look at the four common uses that many Christians make of the word *church,* some within and some without its proper biblical context.

Building. Many people refer to the building in which the congregation assembles as the "church." A man may say to his wife, "I am going down to the church to pick up my hat, which I left there after the morning service," fully knowing that no other person will likely be in the building at the time he arrives.

Denomination. It is quite common to speak of a collection of churches which have assembled themselves together in some kind of organization or association as "the Baptist church," "the Methodist church," or "the Presbyterian church."

Universal church. The universal church refers to all members of the body of Christ in all places and all ages. Some theologians have referred to this as the "church invisible," but in actuality the church has never been invisible.

Local church. The local church is a given geographical representation of the universal church. This usage of the word is most in focus throughout the pages of this book.

Of the four common usages of the word *church* mentioned above, only two are biblical. The first two have grown up in the jargon of ecclesiastical years. It is not necessarily a great error to use the word *church* in these ways, unless by so doing one forgets the emphasis of the New Testament—that the church is always people. The last two uses, universal and local, are the only scriptural usages of the concept of church; we will examine these further below.

The Greek Word

The Greek word used in the New Testament to designate either universal church or local church is *ecclesia*. To the Greeks the word indicated an assembly of free citizens; however, to the Jews it had more theocratic connotations. In the New Testament the word takes three basic uses:

1. *A political assembly of free citizens.* The word *ecclesia* appears in this context in Acts 19:32, 39, 41. The English word used in the Authorized translation is *assembly,* which is quite proper in describing the situation. God had worked various miracles through Paul at Ephesus, and Demetrius, representative of the silversmiths in Ephesus, expressed their fear that their patron deity was in jeopardy because of the increasing number of people turning to the gospel. In the confusion that followed, mob violence was averted by the speech of the town clerk. When the mob is in complete chaos (and when it is formally dismissed by the town clerk), it is referred to as an *ecclesia*.

2. *Jewish assembly of the Old Testament.* In his sermon just before his martyrdom, Stephen speaks of Moses and "the church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38 KJV). The word *ecclesia* in this context obviously cannot be a reference to the New Testament church but speaks in a general way of the congregation or the gathering of Israelites in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses.

3. *The Christian church.* Almost all other New Testament passages deal with the Christian church in either its universal or local form. Because of the extreme importance of this concept, one cannot properly perceive of the doctrine of the church without a thorough understanding of these two uses of the word *ecclesia*. The universal church contains only true believers, whereas the local church may include those who profess Christianity but who have not yet had an experience of regeneration.

The Universal Church

The Old Testament presented the church in typological form. Sample types might include Ruth, the Gentile bride and Israel, God's remnant in the world.

In the Gospels God's revelation of the church proceeds to prophetic form as Jesus Himself pronounces, "Upon this rock I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18 NASB). The book of Acts describes the history of the church in its early days; the spread of the gospel through the church, beginning at Jerusalem and continuing today around the world, is a literal fulfillment of Acts 1:8.

It is not until we read the Epistles, however, that we confront any kind of formalized church doctrine, since God's sovereign plan largely confined such information to the writings of the apostle Paul. The crown of church doctrine comes in the epistle to the church at Ephesus and its most glittering jewel, chapter 4, a passage which comes into focus frequently in any study of Christian leadership.

The universal church includes all Christians (1 Cor. 1:1–2), only Christians (Eph. 5:23–27), and is represented by those brought together through the Holy Spirit. The teaching on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 offers clear evidence of the nature of the church as organism. The universal church is, in the language of the apostle Paul, "the body of Christ."

The Local Church

God's pattern has always designed the local church to manifest the universal church (Rom. 16:16), and Acts 2:41–47 represents the local church at Jerusalem carrying out the purposes and program of the universal church. No evidence in the Word of God suggests that Christ ever abandoned the program and format of the local church as the basic foundation for all forms of Christian mission in the world.

Membership. Membership in the local church seems to have been taken for granted by New Testament believers. Various passages seem to indicate that specific rolls were kept, but there is very little clear-cut teaching on the nature of those rolls (Acts 1:15; 2:41; 6:2–5; 1 Cor. 5:13; 1 Tim. 5:9).

Organization. Like the matter of membership, church organization is not specifically outlined in the New Testament. The Lord somewhat assumes it in Matthew 18 when He talks about establishing the facts of a dispute through collective hearing by the church. As apostolic authority passed off the scene, team leadership seems to have taken its place. In Acts 8, for example, Peter remonstrates with Simon the sorcerer on the basis of unilateral authority. Just a few years later Paul writes to the church at Corinth that they have the collective responsibility to judge wicked persons in their midst (1 Cor. 5:13).

Another characteristic of organization in the early church is that it arose largely in response to the needs and problems that the church encountered. The selection of the deacons in Acts 6 provides the most obvious example of this. In a sense, the indigenous principle of missions is a more refined development of this earliest principle of organization.

Government. An important part of organization in the local church is its government. Although evangelicals differ regarding the significance of such words as *episkopos* (bishop or overseer) and *presbuteros* (elder), several biblical principles of church government are enunciated in the New Testament. We will explore these issues more fully in chapters 3 and 4.

ASPECTS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Church Government Should Be Biblical in Constitution

Young Timothy represents early church leadership, and to him the apostle Paul writes that leaders should constantly con-

form to "sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness" (1 Tim. 6:3 NASB). Of course some would immediately point out that "words" here refers to the words of the living Son of God and not to the words written in the Bible. Nevertheless, our understanding of the words of Christ exclusively depends upon God's inspired record of those words. One of the great errors of liberal theology through the years has been a fabricated separation of the written Word from the incarnate Word.

Church Government Should Be Participatory in Form

The existence of numerous evangelical denominations with varying attitudes regarding church government demonstrates that the Scriptures do not detail the issue. Some interpret the New Testament to teach congregational government, others favor a presbyterian form, and still others the more hierarchical Episcopalian structure. Quite obviously, each group will defend its preference from Scripture and history. The only point I wish to make here, therefore, is the renewed emphasis on the church as people. Evidence throughout the book of Acts strongly suggests that whatever emphasis we may place on the role of elders, the New Testament will never let us forget the participatory role of people in team leadership of the church. That omission came about by later corruption of medieval forms.

Church Government Should Be Representative in Function

How easy it could have been in Acts 6 for the apostles themselves to select those seven men whom they desired to serve in the "daily ministration" (KJV). Nevertheless, they carefully restrained themselves and asked the entire group to make the selection. The statement of verse 5 is quite clear: "The whole multitude . . . chose" (KJV).

Church Government Should Be Spiritual in Function

The biblical, participatory, and spiritual aspects of church administration find their clearest practical application in the selection of the first missionaries. It seems clear in Acts 13 that the process of selecting and sending those missionaries depended solely upon the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit through prayer. The Holy Spirit selected the missionaries, and the Holy Spirit sent them to a particular place. The local church served as an intermediary agency, a physical representation of the hand of God in His world.

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

Without a clear-cut set of objectives, any organization suffers. The church has been less than outstanding in its clarification of mission in the late twentieth century. Not all church leaders have been silent, however, and at least one leading educator has specified in print an attempt to answer the question, "What is the church for?"

> The answer is no mystery. Scripture makes it plain that the church is to be a worshipping body, committed to "show forth the praises of him who has called (it) out of darkness into his marvelous light"; that it is to proclaim the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world; and that it is to obey all the teachings of Jesus Christ, its great head and Lord.[2]

For thirty years Dr. Frank E. Gaebelein gave careful thought to the issues of Christian education and philosophy. Unfortunately, however, no one individual can speak for all local churches. Each body of believers must reassess the purpose of its own existence and clarify its relationship to the universal church. The New Testament seems to set forth four basic objectives for the church, though church leaders may verbalize them differently.

The Church Structures a Climate for Worship

A host of passages invites our attention to the subject of the church promoting worship. It may be beneficial, however, to confine our observation to the epistle of Ephesians. In chapter 1 Paul immediately declares that the purpose of God's predestination and adoption is that His people might be "to the praise of the glory of His grace" (NASB). Lest his readers miss the emphasis, the apostle repeats the worship theme in verses 12 and 14. The great benediction of chapter 3 also focuses on the concept of worship as Paul writes, "To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Eph. 3:21).

To say that the church purposes to worship does not guarantee that the church fully accomplishes this objective. Providing opportunities for believers to pray, sing, hear Scripture, read publicly, or engage in any other kind of physical or verbal activity is just the beginning. As a matter of fact, worship is not primarily an *activity* but rather an *attitude* of heart and mind which comprehends God and rejoices in the realization.

The Church Provides the Setting for Fellowship

A little phrase in Ephesians 3:18 is often overlooked: "with all the saints." These words speak volumes regarding the nature of the church. Isolationism has never been God's way, and biblical separation today should be interpreted neither as *isolation* from others nor as *insulation* from the very world that needs the witness of the church. The apostle John writes of fellowship in his first epistle: "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3 NASB). In other words, horizontal fellowship among God's people depends upon vertical fellowship between individual Christians and their Lord. The world must see Chris-

tians living together in harmonious love demonstrative of the Christ whom they serve (John 13:35).

The Church Develops a Strategy for Evangelism

Biblically, evangelism is the clear proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, leaving the results entirely up to the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Some churches have viewed evangelism as the *only* task of the church and have subordinated all other purposes to it. Unfortunately, such churches fill their rolls with baby Christians who, instead of growing week by week on the milk, bread, and meat of the Word, receive only a constant barrage of the elementary principles of the gospel.

Such excesses, however, should not cloud the fact that evangelism is a legitimate task of the church. Surely some have a special gift of evangelism, but their ministry does not excuse the responsibility of every Christian to communicate the gospel. Paul speaks for the church in Ephesians 3:8 when he says of himself, "This grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." In Acts 8:4, when the apostles remained at Jerusalem for some reason during a mass persecution, Luke records that the church "went about preaching the word" (NASB).

Some would prefer to describe this concept of the church's purpose as "service," a more inclusive word. God's people render varied kinds of service through the church, and not all of them have to do directly with evangelism. Perhaps we can say that the church both *has* a mission in the world and *is* a mission in the world.

The Church Maintains a Ministry of Education

Some would say that the church has a responsibility for instruction or edification. The Great Commission is a teaching commission (Matt. 28:19–20; Acts 2:42). James Deforest Murch, in a classic book title, once warned us to "Teach or Perish." It

seems inappropriate to move on to matters of team leadership before examining that golden deposit of truth, Ephesians 4:11–16, which speaks so clearly regarding the church's educational task. Note carefully the *New International Version* translation of the passage:

> It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.
>
> Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

In this passage several facts form a biblical basis for the church's ministry:

1. The church's ministry is carried on by those first gifted by the Holy Spirit to lead and then given to the church for that purpose (v. 11).
2. A major purpose of the church's ministry is to help God's people mature so that they can minister. Maturation is edification, a "building up" process (v. 12).
3. Properly carried out, the church's ministry will result in a harmonious relationship among believers. The process of growing into this maturity and harmony is one of becoming more like Jesus Christ (v. 13).
4. The church's ministry is highly theological, producing discerning students of truth who are able—because of

their understanding of truth—to detect and avoid error (v. 14).

5. A properly functioning church will effectively combine truth and love without sacrificing either on the altar of the other. A mature Christian (v. 15) will be like his Lord, "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

To state it simply and yet biblically, *the overwhelming and all-encompassing objective of the church is total Christian maturity for all its members.* Total Christian maturity includes an individual and collective life of biblical worship, biblical fellowship, and biblical evangelism, all of which are stimulated by and produced through properly functioning team leadership.

FOR FURTHER READING

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2. Frank E. Gaebelein, *A Varied Harvest* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 160.