

THE CHURCH AS GOD'S AGENT IN EVANGELISM

Howard A. Snyder

Participants in this Congress have already had opportunity to study my paper on "The Church as God's Agent in Evangelism." In that paper I attempted to show that the affirmation, "The Church is God's agent in evangelism" makes sense only if we understand what the Bible means by "the church."

By way of summary, let me review the main points of my original paper.

1. *The Church biblically understood*

Traditionally we have thought of the Church as both a visible institution on earth and as an invisible mystical communion which transcends both space and time. The second reality was considered more basic and more important and helped counterbalance the imperfections and flaws of the visible reality.

This dualistic way of seeing the Church is not necessarily incorrect, but it has led us at times to undervalue the importance of the Christian community on earth and to depreciate cultural considerations. In the biblical view, the earthly and cosmic perspectives fit together in one whole and do not leave us with two incompatible churches or with a split-level view of the Church.

a. *The Bible sees the Church in cosmic-historical perspective.* The Church is the people of God which God has been forming and through which he has been acting down through history. Our space-time world is part of a larger spiritual universe in which God reigns. God has chosen to place the Church with Christ at the very center of his plan to reconcile the world to himself as the body given to the conquering Savior (Eph. 1:20-23).

b. *The Bible sees the Church in charismatic, rather than institutional, terms.* While the Church is in a broad sense an institution, it is more fundamentally a charismatic community. That is, it exists by the grace (Greek, *charis*) of God and is built up by the gifts of grace (*charismata*) bestowed by the Spirit. As seen biblically, it is structured the way the human body is structured, on the basis of *life*. At its most basic level, it is a *community*, not a hierarchy; an *organism*, not an organization.

c. *The Bible sees the Church as the community of God's people.* Here the cosmic and the charismatic are united, and we see the Church as both within the world and transcending the world.

Since the Church is the people of God, it includes all God's people in all times and in all places, as well as those who have now crossed the space-time boundary and live in the more immediate presence of God.

But the people of God must have a visible, local expression, and at the local level the Church is the community of the Holy Spirit. As Samuel Escobar has well said in his paper for this Congress, "God calls those who become his people to be part of a community. So, the new humanity that Christ is creating becomes visible in communities that have a quality of life that reflects Christ's example."

2. *Church-based evangelism*

From the biblical perspective, evangelism can best be understood as the outgrowth of the normal body life of the Church. Evangelism must therefore be Church-centered. Or, perhaps better, evangelism must be *Church based*. It centers in Christ and is based in the life of the witnessing community.

Among other factors which could be noted, I have emphasized that the biblical church normally grows through (i) direct evangelistic proclamation, (ii) the multiplication of local congregations, (iii) the building of Christ-centered community, and (iv) the exercise of spiritual gifts. Each of these four factors contributes to the others in an ongoing cycle of edification and expansion.

Structures for an evangelistic Church

Neither denominational structures nor para-denominational structures such as Christian schools, evangelistic associations, and missionary societies existed in New Testament days. It should be self-evident that such structures have no explicit biblical basis. Therefore, *such structures are not themselves the Church*, although they may bear some important relationship to Christ's body.

It is for this reason that I have chosen to call *all* institutional and organizational structures, including denominations, "para-church structures." Such structures exist alongside of and parallel to the community of God's people, but are not themselves the Church. They are useful to the extent they aid the Church in its mission, but are man-made and culturally influenced.

The Bible gives us three basic structures for the Church: leadership through spiritual gifts, the large-group gathering, and the small group. All biblical material concerning apostles, prophets, pastors, deacons, bishops, and so on, should be seen as part of the New Testament pattern of leadership through gifts of the Spirit. Large and small-group gatherings were also normative in the Early Church and still have validity today.

The Church is God's agent of evangelism, then, as it truly becomes the community of God's people.

Delegates' reactions to my paper have centered around four basic questions with which I shall attempt to deal during the remainder of my time this morning:

a. Precisely what is meant by "para-church structures," and how do these relate to the Church?

b. In what sense is the Church charismatic and in what sense institutional?

c. Is the principle of the multiplication of congregations biblically based and applicable in all situations?

d. Precisely what is the role of spiritual gifts in the evangelistic ministry of the Church?

The first two of these questions relate to the problem of *the visible reality of the Church*. I shall address myself first to this problem, and then to the questions of growth-by-division and the exercise of spiritual gifts.

PART ONE: *The visible reality of the Church*

I have emphasized that the Bible presents the Church primarily as

a charismatic community, rather than as an organizational institution. It is necessary, however, to define more precisely what we mean by "institutional" and "charismatic."

1. *Is the Church an institution?* The Church as the people of God is definitely *not* an institution in the same sense that General Motors, Oxford University, or the United Nations are institutions. On the other hand, the Church does have an institutional side in the same way the family does, and the Church has given rise to literally thousands of institutional structures which, sociologically, are markedly similar to other human organizations, corporations, and bureaucracies.

It is sociologically naive to say the Church is in no sense an institution. *Any pattern of collective behavior which becomes habitual or customary is an institution.* In this broad sense the Lord's Supper is an institution, and even a small-group Bible study, if it meets continually over a period of time, becomes an institution.

A certain degree of institutionalization is therefore inevitable and even desirable. It is, in fact, one result of the fact that man lives in space and time. Institutionalization would be unimaginable in eternity!

David O. Moberg, one of the few qualified sociologists of religion within evangelicalism, has written,

"Every religious organization has some degree of formalism or institutionalization. This is true of groups that claim to be 'merely a fellowship, not a denomination,' and of those so informally and loosely organized that they claim to lack organization altogether."

In this sense, some institutionalization of the Church is already evident in the New Testament. The striking thing, however, is that the institutional elements were decidedly *secondary* in the Holy Church, and were highly *functional*. No officially structured, formalized organizations in the sense of modern-day denominations or societies are to be found in the New Testament. Institutionalization of this more rigid, hierarchical, and organizational type grew up only in the third century, in part as a reaction to the charismatic excesses of the Montanists.

These considerations lead to the following conclusion: *The Church will inevitably manifest some institutional patterns, but no institution can ever be the Church.* The Church can never be *essentially* an institution, even though it will necessarily be institutional in some aspects of its life.

In many areas, the Church today is encased in rigid institutional structures which impede growth. Perhaps 80 per cent of such structures are not formal and official, but are simply traditional and cultural. In the United States, for instance, few if any denominations have adopted an article of faith stating that worship services must be held between ten and twelve o'clock on Sunday morning — and yet this is one of the most rigid institutional patterns of American Christianity. In many areas, the same thing applies to liturgy, the decision-making process, ideas about the "clergy," and even methods of evangelism. Much of this is simply tradition; only a small percentage is a part of official church polity. And yet it is precisely this traditional, only half-perceived part of church structure which is most rigid, most resistant to change, and often

most deadening to the Church's life. I am reminded here of John Wesley's initial reaction to "field preaching" in England, two centuries ago: "I should have thought the saving of souls a sin if it had not been done in church."

Is there hope for churches whose spiritual spontaneity and community life are stifled by rigid institutional forms? This is a question of *institutional renewal*. In such churches, individual spiritual renewal among the believers is not enough, and by itself may provoke divisions and factions, just as new wine bursts old wineskins. A general principle for highly institutional churches is that *institutional renewal must accompany personal renewal*. Where this is not possible, the old institution may have to be abandoned and new structures formed. There are times when old wineskins must be replaced by new ones.

Is the Church, then, an institution? In the broadest sociological sense, we may say it is — but even in this sense the institutional element is strictly secondary and derivative and must be functional. In the more restricted sense of a formally constituted, hierarchical organization, the Church is not and never can be an institution, for the Church is the community of God's people.

2. *What does it mean to say the Church is "charismatic"?*

As the community of God's people, the Church is essentially a *charismatic community* rather than an institution. The New Testament and the writings of the first church fathers show that the Early Church saw itself as a charismatic community. With the gradual institutionalization of the Church, however, the idea of the Church as an organization became more prominent and largely crowded out the charismatic-organic view. Thus "in the history of theology the Church as assembled community of the faithful has been too often neglected in favor of the Church as institution," notes Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung.

I use "charismatic" here in the precise biblical sense of pertaining to the working and empowering of the grace (*charis*) of God. In this sense "charismatic" has no specific reference to glossolalia except in the general sense that tongues-speaking is one of the charisms mentioned in the New Testament.

The charismatic emphasis — and particularly the doctrine of spiritual gifts — is too important to be abandoned because of controversy over a word. "Charismatic" is a good and highly biblical term that needs to be restored to the Church in all its biblical significance. As Geoffrey Bromiley has commented, Reformation Protestantism today must come to "a fresh realization that Christian ministry always is, and has to be, a charismatic movement."

As Bromiley suggests, the charismatic emphasis relates particularly to the *ministry* of the Church — and thus is important for evangelism. Too often the churches I know are *not* charismatic communities in which each person ministers according to the gift he has received. Rather they are simply organizations not fundamentally different from other organizations in the same culture. Such institutionalized churches attempt vainly to minister through ever improved programs, training, and techniques. Under unusually talented leadership such churches succeed, and everyone praises that success and uses it as a model. But

in the majority of cases such "spiritual technology" fails and leaves local churches frustrated and starving for real spiritual fellowship.

I suggest, therefore, that the contemporary church should self-consciously seek a *charismatic model* for its life to take the place of the prevailing *institutional model*.

A *charismatic* or *organic model* is one characterized by community, inter-personal relationships, mutuality, and interdependence. It is flexible and leaves room for a high degree of spontaneity. The Bible gives us such a model for the Church: the human body. The human body itself is charismatic, and the Body of Christ is charismatic.

As I have already suggested, basic components of a charismatic, organic structure for the Church include leadership and ministry through spiritual gifts, community life through the use of small groups, and worship, teaching, and public witness through large groups. I propose that there be further study to develop more fully a charismatic-organic understanding of church structure, particularly at the national and worldwide levels.

3. *The Church and para-Church structures*

It is precisely here that the distinction between the Church and para-church structures is useful. This distinction is definitely *not* merely a restatement of the visible-invisible view of the Church. The Church is both visible and invisible, and so are para-church structures; even a secular organization has its invisible dimensions, as Jacques Ellul reminds us — I am distinguishing, rather, between the Church as biblically understood, and auxiliary ecclesiastical structures which did not exist in New Testament days but which have grown up through church history.

In my invitation to present a paper at this Congress, I was specifically asked to deal with the question of para-church structures in relation to evangelism. I was aware that "para-church structures" was understood to mean non-denominational and interdenominational organizations such as Intersarsity, Campus Crusade for Christ, and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. But in attempting to make a biblical (rather than merely pragmatic) analysis, I encountered a basic difficulty. I could find no *biblical* basis for a fundamental distinction between denominational structures and para-denominational structures. The more basic distinction seems to be between *the Church* as the body of Christ and the community of God's people, and *all institutional structures*, including denominations. Thus I would make a basic distinction between the Church and all para-church structures, and then sub-divide such institutional structures into *denominational* and *non-denominational* structures.

There is a fundamental difference here between Protestant and Roman Catholic views of the Church, although the implications of the Reformation in this area have never been carried through to their logical conclusion. Protestants who distinguish between biblical revelation and church tradition should have no difficulty making a distinction between the biblical Church and institutional church structures. The categories are parallel. The biblical Church is grounded in biblical revelation; all para-church structures are based in post-biblical church tradition.

In regard to evangelism, I would particularly stress the following two points:

a. Biblically speaking, it is irrelevant whether evangelism is carried out by a denomination or some non-denominational structure, for in both cases the sponsoring structure is in reality a para-church institution. It is not fundamentally important whether foreign missions, for example, are carried out by denominational mission boards or by independent missionary agencies. Both forms of evangelism may be equally *valid* or *invalid*, depending on their relationship to the biblical Church.

b. All evangelism, regardless of the agency which sponsors it, is legitimate only as it plants and edifies the Church or extends its witness. Evangelistic and missionary efforts which form new Christian communities or add to those already formed are legitimate if they are really building the Church as biblically understood. If they are not, they are a waste of effort, regardless of how they are structured or of the biblical legitimacy they may claim. Of course, it is fundamentally important that all evangelistic and church-planting efforts take care to contribute to the visible and spiritual unity, rather than disunity, of the Body of Christ.

This means that the important thing for evangelism is that *the biblical Church be built* — that is, that local Christian communities or fellowships be multiplied, that such communities truly demonstrate the quality of life seen in Jesus Christ, and that the Church live in the world as the redeemed people of God. From a biblical point of view, questions of denominational or non-denominational affiliation or structure are strictly secondary.

PART TWO: THE PRINCIPLE OF GROWTH-BY-DIVISION

I will limit myself here to a few of the more fundamental questions which relate specifically to the biblical view of the Church.

1. *Is growth-by-division a biblical principle?*

Growth-by-division (the multiplication of local congregations) is not a biblical principle in the same sense that Christian community life or the exercise of spiritual gifts are biblical principles. It is rather a conclusion reached through studying the New Testament Church and church growth throughout history. Its biblical basis is twofold: The analogy from physical life and the example of the Early Church.

We know that the Early Church grew rapidly, that its life centered largely in small home gatherings, and that it experienced an intense corporate or community life which strongly attracted non-believers. The faith quickly spread from town to town and from one province to another. This growth can be explained only as a process of multiplying local cells of believers.

This conclusion is reinforced by the analogy from biological life. The Bible specifically uses natural reproduction and growth as an analogy for spiritual things and for the Church. The principle by which life extends itself is the principle of reproduction and cell division.

2. *Is growth-by-division possible in all situations?*

The multiplication of local cells of believers is more difficult in some cultures than in others, but is totally impossible only under the most repressive totalitarian regimes. Where the vigilance of the state is practically complete, this principle will be difficult to follow. This is something we must leave in the hands of God.

It is important to point out, however, that I am not speaking here either of the multiplication of *buildings* nor the multiplication of *official government-sanctioned church organizations*. I am speaking of the proliferation of local, perhaps highly informal, cells of Christian believers. In totalitarian regimes, these may not be able to grow into large churches. But even in such situations the multiplication of small fellowships is often possible, even if risky.

In some cases the Church must simply continue to live as the suffering Church, its community life restricted almost totally to individual families, awaiting either the day of harvest or the day of deliverance. In the majority of cases, however, growth-by-division *can* take place if there is the vision for it.

3. *Is growth-by-division wise in areas where many Christian churches already exist?*

Let me state once again that I am not speaking of multiplying buildings or organizations. In many Western cities, the last thing the Church needs is more buildings! What it often *does* need, however, is to rediscover true Christian community. The small group is helpful here. And as small groups are formed, they will tend to multiply. The number of official organized churches may remain the same, while the number of real *biblical* churches is actually multiplying rapidly as more and more individuals discover new life in Christ and a new life-style in Christian community. Rather than discouraging such a movement, the organized churches should encourage and stimulate it, seeking to guide it in biblical channels.

4. *Does not division usually occur for carnal, rather than spiritual, reasons?*

Too often this is the case. Many churches have multiplied and grown, not because they had a vision for growth, but because the brethren couldn't get along with each other! This is clearly wrong, and yet God has miraculously used such divisions for the growth of the Church.

But unholy splits develop often precisely for the *lack* of a healthy vision for church multiplication. If new churches are formed with the vision for eventual growth-by-division, if this is the focus, then growth will occur naturally for the right, rather than the wrong, reasons. Church division for inferior motives does not cancel out the principle of growth-by-division, any more than cancer invalidates the principle of normal cell division. It is a question of planning for growth-by-division for the right reasons, rather than letting it occur for the wrong reasons.

5. *Where does the Church find sufficient leadership for new congregations?*

The answer to this question is found in the fact of spiritual gifts and in the community life of the Church. If we live with our brethren in true Christian community and if we expect the Spirit to provide the necessary spiritual gifts, the right gifts of leadership will appear at the right time to take care of the demands of growth.

The multiplication of congregations should result from the growth of small-group fellowships. Such groups offer the ideal structure to awaken, discipline, and train spiritual gifts. When the Church is truly the community of God's people, it is God the Spirit who provides the necessary leadership. This is his promise to us.

PART THREE: EVANGELISM AND SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Finally, I would make the following affirmations concerning the importance of spiritual gifts for Church-based evangelism.

1. *The doctrine of spiritual gifts is a necessary and valid emphasis*

The basic question is not whether specific spiritual gifts, such as apostle, prophet, or tongues-speaking, are valid today. The question is whether the Spirit still "gives gifts to men," and the answer is *yes*. Precisely which gifts he gives in any particular age is God's prerogative, and we are justified in making no *a priori* judgments about this. We have no biblical warrant to restrict the *charismata* to the Early Church, nor to outlaw any specific gift today.

2. *Spiritual gifts play a fundamental role in evangelism*

All Christians are called to some "work of ministry," but this ministry is not the same for each person. The ministry of each believer is largely determined by the spiritual gifts which he has received. We will impede church growth and create frustrated Christians if we try to force believers into ministries — even in evangelism — for which they are not spiritually gifted.

Paul clearly states that his "gift of God's grace" as an apostle was "to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery" of the Gospel (Eph. 3:7-9).

Philip was an evangelist. Agabus was a prophet; we have no evidence he was an evangelist. Dorcas was "full of good works and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36); it was thus that she exercised her spiritual gifts. Lydia of Philippi led a prayer group and practised the gift of hospitality (Acts 16:13-15). Silas was a prophet (Acts 15:32), and Phoebe was a deaconess (Romans 16:1). And so on throughout the Early Church. Not all of these were evangelists, but all were witnesses to the grace of God. And each one, in his own way, was useful in the evangelistic witness of the Church.

The way to biblical evangelism today is to bring each believer to discover and use his spiritual gift. When this happens, not only does evangelism occur, but there is also a *valid Christian community* to welcome new converts and a *valid Christian life-style* of faith and good works that creates no credibility gap with the world.

3. *The Church's leadership ministries are based on spiritual gifts*

One of the most ubiquitous institutional structures which has grown up in the Church throughout centuries of tradition is the professional clergy, with the resultant clergy-laity dichotomy. The very basis of this dichotomy is undercut by the biblical teaching that the entire Church is a people or laity (*laos*) and all Christians are ministers. Biblically, everyone here today is a *layman*. And every one of us is a *minister*. And we are all called to the *ministry*.

A professional, distinct priesthood did exist in Old Testament days. But in the New Testament this priesthood is replaced by two truths: Jesus Christ as our great High Priest, and the Church as a Kingdom of Priests (Heb. 4:14, 8:1; I Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:6).

The New Testament doctrine of ministry, therefore, rests not on the clergy-laity distinction but on the twin pillars of *the priesthood of all believers* and *the gifts of the Spirit*. Today, four centuries after the Reformation, the full implications of this Protestant affirmation have

yet to be worked out.

The New Testament view of ministry relates directly to evangelism. For one thing, it is no longer a question of "getting laymen involved in evangelism"; rather it is a question of helping the Church to live as a priestly community of interdependent gifts. God himself will gift some men and women for specifically evangelistic ministries, and he will gift others to minister in other ways which are supportive for evangelism (prayer, social work, hospitality, healing, counseling, administration, and many, many others).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would like to offer two simple suggestions which may be helpful in aiding this Congress to formulate a biblical strategy for worldwide evangelism in these days.

The first suggestion is that *local churches throughout the world be encouraged to make use of small-group meetings as a basic structure for the Church's community life*. If this principle could be self-consciously endorsed, and if millions of small-group fellowships could be formed around the world to seriously pray, study the Bible, and share the joy of life in Christ, a revolutionary outbreak of New Testament Christianity could shake this whole groaning world.

Second, I would suggest that wherever possible in cities around the world, *large public rallies be held regularly, uniting in the city all the people of God who will cooperate*. If in major cities around the world all true Christians could unite *regularly* in a monthly "great congregation" to praise God, hear the Scriptures, and bear witness, the impact would be incalculable. Such rallies would give public, visible testimony to the unity of the Body of Christ and put the Faith in the center of the public arena once again. They would also help individual believers and local congregations to identify with the larger body of Christ. I suggest that "The City" is the primary context in which Christian unity needs to be demonstrated today.

Evangelism and the growth of the Church are not a matter of bringing to the Church that which is needed for success in the way of methods, techniques, or strategies. *Evangelism is rather a matter of removing the hindrances to growth*. Once these hindrances are removed — not only individual sin but also human traditions, worn-out structures, and fundamental misconceptions about the nature of the Church — then the Church will grow through the power of God within it.

When Lazarus was raised from death, he was "bound with bandages, and his face wrapped with a cloth." Jesus said, "Unbind him, and let him go!" (John 11:44).

This is a lesson for the Church today. The Church has resurrection life within it; it has been called to life by Jesus Christ. The body of Christ does not need a new suit of clothes. It does not need to have something added. It needs only to be unbound and let go.

Jesus Christ is life! The Church, his body and bride, is life! Our need today is to return to the Word of God and let it speak to us concerning the Church and its place in God's cosmic plan.

Let both the Spirit and the Bride say, "Come!"

FORM AND FREEDOM IN THE CHURCH

Francis A. Schaeffer

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My original paper presented four points which are needed if we are to meet the need of our generation. These four points are: two contents and two realities. If you have not read my original paper I would say, please do so.

The first content of my original paper is the need of a clear doctrinal content concerning the central elements of Christianity. There must be no compromise with liberal theology, including neo-orthodox existential theology. There will be borderline things in which we will have differences, but on the central issues there must be no compromise.

With this goes the need to emphasize content in our messages. We are not to fall into the cheap solution (which seems so fascinating at first) of just moving people to make decisions without a sufficient content, nor after they are Christians not giving them sufficient content for their comprehension and for their lives.

Another element of the way in which we must be careful of the content which we present is that we on our part must not destroy the absolutes of the Word of God in the opposite way than the liberal destroys the absolutes of the Word of God. The liberal destroys the absolutes concerning the Word of God by philosophically not believing that such a thing as absolutes exist and religiously specifically not believing that the Bible gives absolutes. We can destroy the absolutes of the Word of God in the opposite way. We can add other things to the absolutes of the Word of God and in this way destroy the absolutes also. We can take the middle class norms, we can take our culturally related things, and we can elevate them to become equal with the absolutes of the Word of God. And when we do, in our own way we destroy the absolutes of the Word of God almost as badly as the liberal destroys them in his way.

The first point of the original paper is the need of a clear doctrinal content concerning the central elements of Christianity. A corollary of this is that we must *practice the truth* we say we maintain. We must practice this truth in the area of religious cooperation. We must practice this truth in the area of religious cooperation where it is costly. We must practice this truth in the area of religious cooperation where it may be observed. If we say that Christianity is truth yet for any reason, including evangelism, we blur the line between liberal theology and biblical Christianity in the area of religious cooperation, we lose credibility with the world today which does not believe that truth exists in any form. The hallmark of our generation, in contrast to the previous generations, is that this generation does not believe that truth exists. All is relativistic. There is no such thing as "truth as truth." And this is why it is not a tautology to use the expression "true truth" to make this plain.

The first reason we should not have religious cooperation with