

The Brilliant Church

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . .
to present her to himself as a brilliant church. Ephesians 5:25-7

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The immediate trigger for the writing of this pamphlet was reading *The Forgotten Ways* by Alan Hirsch (Brazos Press 2006).

The exploding church

What if there was a way, hidden for centuries in neglect, for God's church to be powerfully effective? There could be—but it could run counter to much of our way of doing things, and therefore is liable to meet resistance.

Alan Hirsch in his book *The Forgotten Ways* describes how the church has undergone explosively rapid growth at certain times in its history. In AD 100 there were about 25,000 Christians. In AD 310 (before Constantine stepped in) there were about 20 million. In this period they were an illegal religion, without church buildings as we know them, largely without the Scriptures, without an institution, or the professional form of leadership which goes with an institution. They actually made it hard for outsiders to join the church!

How did they do it?

The underground church in China has undergone similar growth. When Mao Tse-tung took power there were about 2 million Chinese Christians in churches largely modelled on Western forms. One of the cruellest persecutions of Christians on record then ensued. Mao banished all foreign missionaries and ministers, nationalized all church property, killed all the senior leaders, killed or imprisoned more junior leaders, and banned public meetings by Christians. By the early 80s there were about 60 million Christians in the underground churches. Now it is perhaps 80 million. They have had very few Bibles, no professional clergy, no official leadership structure, no central organisation, almost no mass meetings.

How did they do it?

One answer is, of course, the Holy Spirit. Such movements could not possibly occur unless God the Holy Spirit were moving in power. But that is not the whole story. The Holy Spirit is promised to all God's people in all ages. God does not deliberately withhold his power except when there is persistence in sin. We must look for other reasons for the general lack of power.

In the absence of water, no amount of pipework will give you irrigation. On the other hand, if you have gushing water, the pipes may serve to limit the flow, or even to obstruct it altogether.

In the same way, the structure of the church can never take the place of the Spirit's power—but when the Spirit is moving, his work

may be limited by the structure. Let us look at the way the structure of the church has changed and how this has affected its life.

Constantine

In the first centuries the early church was a persecuted, underground movement. This was to change radically in the fourth century. By the Edict of Milan (313 AD) Constantine declared Christianity to be the official state religion. Church and state were bonded together. There was a centralised church organisation based on Rome. This was the start of 'Christendom'.

According to Stuart Murray, the shift to Christendom meant;

- The adoption of Christianity as the official religion of an area;
- Transfer of the church from the margins of society to the centre;
- All citizens (except the Jews) assumed to be Christian by birth;
- Infant baptism as a token of this;
- Sunday as an official rest day and obligatory church attendance;
- The imposition of 'Christian' morality on the entire society;
- Massive church buildings with large congregations;
- A distinction between clergy (active) and laity (passive);
- The use of the Old Testament to support these changes.

The Old Testament religion defined a nation which was to be wholly devoted to God. Its members were from their birth part of that theocracy, and the male children were circumcised at eight days old as a sign of it. A separate group (priests and Levites) were specially designated as those who could come near to God. A special building (the temple) was erected; this was where God was to be found. The resemblance between Old Testament structures and the Christendom installed by Constantine is clear to see.

So the church had gone from being a persecuted group (whose ethos had been a spiritual link with God) to the only permitted legal religion (whose basis was largely legalistic, formalistic and external).

Present-day churches

The all-encompassing monolithic church enforced by the State is no longer in being. However, some of the changes which Constantine brought in are current to this day.

The churches are for the most part centralised institutions. This applies to the major denominations, and even to most of the charismatic new churches. They usually have a central organisation from which there descends a hierarchy of control.

Most churches have ordained ministers who have undergone specific training, who alone are able to minister the sacraments. They are not usually considered priests, yet theirs can often be an exclusive ministry just as if they were priests.

Special buildings are considered so important that we have great difficulty trying to get people in general to understand that the word 'church' means the congregation and not the edifice. These special buildings are usually so arranged that the laity listen passively and have minimal involvement.

God does use (and has used) this mode of church. The members are often sincere and genuine Christians. Such a structure should not be ruled out merely because it does not feature in the New Testament. However, we need to consider whether this configuration for the church is effective in accomplishing the goals which God intends. As some of these ways of working are not decreed by the scriptures, we need not be reluctant to examine them critically.

One problem is that the current highly institutional version of Christianity is so deeply embedded in our collective psyche that we find it impossible to consider any other mode of operating. We have confused the present mode of church with the kingdom of God. We must go to the roots of the problem. C. S. Lewis observed that 'there exists in every church something that sooner or later works against the very purpose for which it came into existence. So we must strive very hard, by the grace of God to keep the church focused on the mission that Christ originally gave to it.'

The Church's function

What is the function of the church to be? There are two aspects to it: what the church is to be for believers on the one hand, and unbelievers on the other.

For believers, those who have come into a personal relationship with God through Jesus, the church is a family. As each one has a relationship with God, we have a relationship with one another. This

community is where believers are loved, helped, disciplined, taught, built up in the faith.

The church is also the body from which the good news is sounded forth to unbelievers.

C. S. Lewis held that the purpose of the church was to draw people to Christ and make them like Christ, and that it existed for no other purpose. 'If the church is not doing this, then all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible, are a waste of time.'

Leadership

A group such as a church obviously needs leaders. When Paul writes to a church, he addresses the 'elders and deacons' of that church.

The word 'deacon' means 'servant'. We are not given much information about the function of deacons. Perhaps those selected in Acts 6 to relieve the apostles of a mundane task were the first deacons.

We have much more information concerning elders ('old people'). They are also called 'bishops', which means 'overseers' (compare Titus 1 v. 5 and v. 7). Their function is to rule (1 Tim. 5:17), to shepherd the flock (1 Pet. 5:1-3), and some of them are to preach and teach (1 Tim. 5:17). In fact, one qualification for an elder is that he have an ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:2).

This may sound as if the ministers of current-day churches are being described. However, it should be noted that within each local church in the New Testaments there were a number of such elders (bishops!).

Another factor to be borne in mind is that if the church is to grow explosively, then each local church must be developing and training those who can be elders in the newly-formed churches which will rapidly be planted.

Ministries

When considering the structure and functioning of a church, organisation is often uppermost in our minds. In the New Testament the emphasis is rather on the spiritual basis and nourishment for the church. In Ephesians 4:11-13 the risen Christ endows the church with gifts to build up his church and bring each member to maturity.

These gifts take the form of four types of ministry. There are (1) apostles; (2) prophets; (3) evangelists; (4) pastor-teachers. If we are to have churches which share the power and effectiveness of the early church, we cannot do without the gifts which Christ himself provided. Let us consider these ministries in turn.

Apostles. We should not consider this to mean the twelve apostles only. Others are called 'apostles' in the New Testament (Paul, Barnabas, Andronicus, Junias etc.) The word 'apostle' means 'one who is sent'. Perhaps we are to think in terms of an itinerant church-planter, who brings a church community into being, and then watches over it (as Paul did, for instance). The apostle might then be compared to scaffolding around a new church, to be taken down when that church is strong enough to stand alone.

Prophets. We should not think merely in terms of the Old Testament prophets. A prophet brings a message from God for a specific situation. It is a supernatural gift. In our modern churches we have often lost the supernatural. For a church which is experiencing rapid Holy Spirit growth, the supernatural is indispensable. One effect of the coming of the Holy Spirit is 'your sons and daughters will prophesy' (Acts 2:17). We are to seek the spiritual gifts, and especially prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1). Prophetic messages are to be subjected to the discernment of the rest of the church (1 Cor. 14:29).

Evangelists. These are those who take the good news to others. Whilst all believers should be ready to do this, there are those who have a particular gift from God for it. When persecution arose after the murder of Stephen, those who were scattered (which did not include the apostles!) went everywhere 'gossiping the gospel' (Acts 8:1, 4).

Pastor-teachers. (The terms are linked in the Greek.) This may describe most of our modern-day ministers. The responsibility of a teacher is 'to proclaim the whole will of God' (Acts 20:27). The scriptures need to be taught in their fulness, not merely as an academic exercise, but applied to the needs of the people. When God gives a person this ministry, he supplies a shepherd heart along with a teaching ability.

These four ministries are needed in the church if it is to function

adequately. God's way is to scatter his gifts through the church (1 Cor. 12:11ff). No one person exhibits all the gifts. This is as true of the spiritual gifts (charismata) described in 1 Corinthians 12-14 as the ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4. The spiritual gifts are also to be used in building up the church (1 Cor. 14:12). So we are to expect that within the church God will raise up various ones with these ministries and gifts. Although, as we have seen, the elders may have ministries as pastor-teachers, this form of ministry may not be confined to the elders. At the present day church 'ministers' seem principally to be pastor-teachers. We need the other ministries as well as this, and we need the freedom for others apart from the church leaders to develop their own God-given ministries.

We need this to happen not just for the local church. As mentioned before, if the church is to explode and other churches are to bud off, we need to encourage and develop God's ministries to be exercised in these new churches too. Often church ministers have considered the public exercise of gifts to be their own prerogative, rather than encouraging and bringing on others who show that God is gifting them.

What kinds of meetings could take the place of the traditional ones? Paul describes meetings in New Testament times at which various ones contributed (1 Corinthians 14:26 ff). In Acts 20:7, when Paul 'extended the speech' (Greek) until midnight, the term used for 'spoke' may equally be translated 'led a discussion'.

Buildings

In the very earliest days of the church, believers met together in Solomon's Colonnade (Acts 5:12). Paul had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9). Apart from these instances, there are no examples of Christians meeting anywhere other than in homes. We certainly do not read of plans to build special meeting places.

Church buildings came in with Constantine, and were of a particular shape. Winston Churchill remarked that, 'We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us.' The formation of our church buildings reflects the pattern of our community structure.

The norm is for the congregation to be in serried ranks (mostly

passive) facing the leader of the service (active). This leader is normally 'six feet above contradiction'.

The cost of erecting and then maintaining a special building is considerable. It can be a great drain on the members of the congregation, and can lead to the need for funds to be raised in all kinds of ways. Non-Christians are often requested to help financially, which gives rise to the idea that the churches are always wanting money.

Such a specialised building can be forbidding to outsiders. The attitude 'Jesus yes, church no' is very common among unbelievers. The church building may be very little used apart from special meetings. The impression may be conveyed that Christianity is separate from ordinary lives, since meeting with God requires a place which is apart from our ordinary locations.

A special building is unsuited to rapid expansion. Where we do not see such expansion, this may be acceptable. But if the church were to grow as it did in the first few centuries, or as it has done in China, one cannot be restricted by erecting special edifices.

The early church met in homes. This limits the number who can conveniently meet together, but such a limitation is a positive thing. The members are not too numerous to be able to relate to each other. Worship and ministry take place in the home where all the other activities of life happen. The spiritual is not separated from the secular. Friends and neighbours may be much less intimidated coming into your home than they would be entering a special 'holy' building.

Believers

There is something distinctive about the believers when the church expands exponentially. Persecution leads to commitment. Believers are sure of their salvation, and sure of the gospel. They may be fearless in their testimony.

One hears stories of parts of the world where young believers dedicate their spare time to going out to unreached villages. There they declare the gospel, and they not only see people coming to Christ, but they are effective in planting new churches there.

A comparison may be made with DNA in living creatures. Every

cell in our bodies contains, coded in DNA, the blueprint for constructing the whole organism. So these new believers have within themselves the seed from which not only new Christians but new churches may be planted.

The heart of this seed is that Jesus is Lord. Because Christ in them is their hope of glory, they proclaim him, admonishing and teaching so as bring everyone to maturity in Christ (Col. 1:27-8). Disciples themselves, they seek to make disciples of all others (Matt. 28:19).

Current moves afoot

In these days many new movements are emerging which are not based on the Constantine model. In different parts of the world (China, India, Vietnam, the United States, Germany, . . .) thousands of churches are coming into being. These are ‘house churches’, churches in homes, not cells or housegroups of a larger church, but autonomous independent churches with fellowship links to other similar churches.

A survey of 5000 randomly selected adult Americans found that during a typical week 9% attend a house church. 20% attend a house church at least once a month. This would mean that 20 million Americans attend a house church weekly, and 43 million attend at least once per month.

Why have we not heard much about these churches? They appear to be flying beneath the radar. The fact is that this is a grassroots movement, carried on by many ordinary people in simple fashion. However, *Time* magazine ran an article on these churches not long ago.

To be part of such a house church and engaged in New Testament church activities is not an outlandish thing. It is happening in our world today. We need to consider whether we should be part of it.

Alan Hirsch in *The Forgotten Ways* tells of three Chinese leaders from the underground church meeting with Western leaders. They asked prayer for three problems. The government did not allow them to gather in groups of more than fifteen people, so when they grew beyond that they had to split. They were not allowed to have church buildings, so they were forced to meet in homes, cafes, karaoke bars and social clubs. They were forbidden to have separate

organizations through which they could train leaders, so they were forced to train leaders within the local church. Some of the Western leaders felt they could not in conscience pray about these things, because in these lay the secret of the Chinese churches’ effectiveness.

What can we do?

There is one thing which, I suggest, all of us have to do. That is to consider these matters. Are the points raised here valid? Are they important?

Perhaps you come to the conclusion that you should remain with the church system in which you currently find yourself rather than a house church. There may be many good reasons why you should do so. Those believers you are closest to are there. You are hearing the scriptures expounded and applied to your personal needs, and are being fed spiritually. You can bring unbelievers in to hear the gospel, be saved and be discipled, and you are in fact seeing this happening. Or, if these things are not true, you may feel that God has brought you into that church for a purpose, to make things better. In that case, stay where you are.

Alternatively, you may consider that God’s goal for the world will not be reached by more of the same thing. Perhaps you recognise that the status quo is not fully in accordance with the Scriptures. Maybe you do not consider the present church system to be a perfectly adequate tool for the growth of believers and the evangelisation of the lost.

Let us suppose that you do see the need for radical change. What should you do about it? The most important thing for you to do is to pray. Such a change must not consist in moving from one man-made scheme to another man-made scheme which seems to be better. We need to know what God thinks about these things, and in which direction he would have us move.

If you are then convinced that God would use you in the building of a church which is along the lines described here, what is the next step? One thing for you to do is to evaluate what gifts and ministries you have—and to seek others whose gifts complement yours.

If you want to know more about the way ahead, I must confess

that I do not know. This is a question which only God can answer, and the answer depends specifically on the individuals and the locality. I only know that God has the answer, and it may involve sacrifice on our part.

What about persecution? The church has thrived in the past and present when persecution has been fiercest. There is no point in seeking persecution. But this I can foresee—if movements spring up which run counter to the traditional forms of church, then persecution will not be long in coming. Is this not what we were told to expect if we linked ourselves with Christ? He told us that in the world we would have trouble (John 16:33). ‘Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’ (2 Tim. 3:12). Whilst we would in no way court persecution, perhaps the absence of it in our country today is an indictment on the church. The powers of darkness will not leave us alone if we assail their kingdoms effectively in the authority of Christ and his word. If we are true to the Lord, persecution will undoubtedly come. But after all, what is the purpose for which we believers are in this world?