

Ecclesiology

Semester 2 – Topic 6 – Parachurches

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Review

Thus far in our study of “practical ecclesiology” we have looked at the characteristics of healthy churches, the definition and practice of worship, body relationships or the ‘one-anothers’, and spiritual gifts. Starting today we will be looking at some modern issues within the church, starting with an evaluation of parachurches.

Reminder

The Greek word for “church” is “ekklesia” is used primarily in two ways.

“Church” takes on a technical and full meaning when referring to the universal church which is the total group of believers, and only believers, during this present age (Matt 16:15-18; Eph 1:22-23; Eph 3:8-12; Col 1:15-20). The universal church is also called the “invisible” church. It is only comprised of the redeemed and is a group that only God can see and know the size and members. The universal church is a united spiritual organism consisting of all members of the body of Christ (Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 12:12-13; Col 1:18; Eph 2:11, 3:6; 3:10). The universal church is what Jesus promised to build (Matt 16:18).

“Church” also refers to a local group of professing believers (Matt 18:17; Acts 20:28; Gal 1:2; Phil 4:15-16; Col 4:15-16; 1 Cor 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; 1 Tim 3:5; Philemon 1-3; James 5:14; 3 John 5-6; Rev 1:11, etc.). This is also called the “visible” church because it is what other believers and the world can see. A unique aspect of the local or visible church is that it is comprised of the redeemed and unredeemed (i.e. there may be unbelievers who have attached themselves to a local body). Members of the universal church are to gather together in local assemblies or bodies (Acts 14:23, 27; 20:17, 28; Gal 1:2; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:11 Cor 11:18-20; Heb 10:25). The local church is organized for the purpose of ministry (Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; Acts 6:1-4). It is the way in which God brings about his mission of disciple-making.

The purpose of the church is to glorify God (Eph 1:13-14; Eph 3:20-21).

The mission of the church is to make disciples (Matt 28:19-20) by going (evangelizing), baptizing (identifying with Christ), and teaching to observe all that Jesus commanded. The church’s disciple making activity includes building itself up in the faith through teaching, fellowship, remembering Jesus’ sacrifice, and prayer (Eph 4:11-16; Acts 2:42).

The local church is led by qualified men who are called elders, overseers, or shepherds. The work of elders is ministry in the lives of the local body by prayer and ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). Elders are men (1 Tim 3:1; Titus 1:5-6; 1 Tim 2:12) who are the caretakers of the church (1 Tim 3:5). They rule and exercise oversight (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Pet 5:2). They preach and teach the Word (1 Tim 5:17; Eph 4:11-12). They shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28) to feed (1 Tim 3:2), lead (Heb 13:7; 1 Pet 5:2), protect and watch over (Heb 13:17), and care for (1 Thess 2:7). Elders lead by example (1 Pet 5:3). They select other leaders within the local body (1 Tim 4:14).

Each believer has a unique spiritual giftedness (1 Pet 4:10). The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts supernaturally and sovereignly (1 Cor 12:11; Heb 2:3-4) distributing spiritual gifts to each believer (Rom 8:9) individually just as He wills. Each believer is given at least one permanent (Rom 11:29) spiritual gift (1 Cor 12:7) which is to be employed to serve other believers as a good steward of God’s grace (1 Pet 4:10). Spiritual gifts are given for the advantage of all (1 Cor 12:7), the edification of the church (1 Cor 14:26), the equipping of the saints (Eph 4:7, 12), and, ultimately, the glory of God (1 Pet 4:10-11).

There are a variety of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:4-7; Rom 12:4-6) among the body that God uses to build His church (1 Cor 14:12). God has designed the body so that each individual is vital to the church's growth – no believer is more significant than another; there is strength in diversity (1 Cor 12:14-18). From the context of the spiritual gifts passages (letters written to specific local churches), it would appear that each true church has the giftedness that it needs to fulfill its mandate of making disciples.

Definition and Scope of “Parachurch”

It is difficult to find Christian leaders who do not lead a parachurch ministry: from the health, wealth, and prosperity teachers like Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, and Joyce Meyer to the biblically orthodox like Chuck Swindoll, Tim Keller, and John MacArthur. Parachurch ministries feed the hungry, heal the sick, cloth the destitute, minister to specific societal groups, evangelize youth, send missionaries, publish biblical teaching (or religious teachings), lobby, educate, broadcast.

So, what exactly is a parachurch? The prefix “para”, is Greek for “beside” or “alongside”. From the name, these are organizations that come alongside local churches. Leaders of parachurch organizations believe that they fulfill a role in the body of Christ that the churches are unable to fulfill due to a lack of resources. Of course, not all parachurches come alongside of the church.

Wikipedia defines parachurch as ... “Parachurch organizations are Christian faith-based organizations that work outside and across denominations to engage in social welfare and evangelism, usually independent of church oversight. These bodies can be businesses, non-profit corporations, or private associations. Most parachurch organizations, at least those normally called *parachurch*, are Protestant and Evangelical. Some of these organizations cater to a defined spectrum among evangelical beliefs, but most are self-consciously interdenominational and many are ecumenical.”

“...religious organizations created for particular tasks, such as evangelism or the reaching of young people. These organizations do not meet for regular Sunday worship services, administer the ordinances, or display other characteristics of the organized church. Their members frequently belong to various churches.” Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*

"Any ministry whose organization is not under the control or authority of a local congregation."
Jerry White, *The Church and the Para-Church*

Essentially, any ministry not under the leadership of a local church can be considered a parachurch.

The big difference between the church and the parachurch is that parachurches are organized around a cause. The church exists for the simple purpose to glorify God with the mission to make disciples. Parachurches may attach themselves to this purpose and mission, but ultimately they are organized around a cause.

There are so many parachurch ministries because there are so many causes. Some reach certain demographics of people like athletes, military members, certain people groups, orphans, divorcees, prisoners, college students, children, teenagers, politicians, Hollywood executives, the homeless, alcoholics, stay at home moms, single moms, etc. Some want to teach certain doctrines like biblical manhood and womanhood, end times, creationism, apologetics, etc. Some seek to be involved in social justice causes like anti-abortion, helping the homeless, helping the poor and destitute (in the US and abroad), etc.

The number of causes is endless, so the number of potential parachurch organizations is huge. For example:

- evangelism (e.g. the Billy Graham Association)
- evangelism and discipleship ministries (e.g. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and The Navigators, AWANA)
- biblical training ministries (e.g. MacArthur’s Grace to You, Piper’s Desiring God, Swindoll’s Insight for Living, Jeremiah’s Turning Point, Kennedy’s Evangelism Explosion, etc.)
- apologetic ministries (e.g. Christian Research Institute, Alpha and Omega Ministries, etc.)
- political and social activist groups and welfare and social services (e.g. right to life groups, homeless shelters, domestic violence, disaster relief programs, food pantries, clothing closets, international aid, etc.)
- music and print publishers, radio and television stations, film studios
- some count study centers and institutes, schools, colleges, universities, and seminaries

For the most part, the parachurch movement is uniquely American. Some writers note that the parachurch movement has been a result of American individualism and the American pastime of entrepreneurship. In addition, individualism’s effects on ecclesiology led to an emphasis on individual experience and independence of the local church.

Comparison of the Church and Parachurch

The primary differences between the church and the parachurch are in mandate and leadership. There are other differences like method of ministry, but the primary differences are in biblical mandate and biblical leadership

1. Mandate

Church – The church (specifically the local church) derives its mandate directly from Scripture: to make disciples (Matt 28:18-20), to equip the saints for the work of service (Eph 4:12), to present every believer complete in Christ (Col 1:28), and be the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim 3:15).

Parachurch – The parachurch has no biblical mandate as a God ordained organization except as individuals seek to utilize their gifts within the body as they believe God directs.

2. Leadership

Church – The local church is led by qualified (1 Tim 3:1-5; Titus 1:5-9) men who are called elders, overseers, or shepherds who are committed to ministry in the lives of the local body by prayer and ministry of the word (Acts 6:4). Elders are men (1 Tim 3:1; Titus 1:5-6; 1 Tim 2:12) who are the caretakers of the church (1 Tim 3:5). They rule and exercise oversight (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17; 1 Pet 5:2). They preach and teach the Word (1 Tim 5:17; Eph 4:11-12). They shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28) to feed (1 Tim 3:2), lead (Heb 13:7; 1 Pet 5:2), protect and watch over (Heb 13:17), and care for (1 Thess 2:7). Elders lead by example (1 Pet 5:3). They select other leaders within the local body (1 Tim 4:14).

Parachurch – The parachurch has no biblical precepts for the qualification of its leaders. As such, in general, a business model takes precedence where a plurality of business leaders (a board of directors) takes on the leadership role instead of a plurality of elder-qualified men. As a result, the parachurch gets very good business leaders (maximizing income or efficient operations), but not necessarily men who are filled with wisdom and the Spirit.

Evaluation of Parachurches

Much of this information is from the VBC position paper “Parachurches”.

Parachurch organizations are not condemned nor promoted in the scriptures. However, their emergence, though offering the potential for positive benefits, also presents the local church with a significant challenge.

1. The church is challenged to make sure that the biblical role of the local church is understood and valued.

The church's role:

The institution of the local church in the NT era stands apart in the Bible as God's sole means of advancing the kingdom of God in the hearts of men.

The church's value:

If biblically patterned after the teachings of God's word, the church provides mature, godly leadership committed to the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry while maintaining the moral, doctrinal, and directional purity of the church.

If biblically patterned after the teachings of God's word, the church will provide a network of individual believers within the local church committed to stimulating one another to holiness in all areas of their lives, using all the means that the Lord has put at their disposal.

If biblically patterned after the teaching of God's word, the church will provide encouragement for every member to take advantage of their own unique opportunities for outreach while enjoying the protection and support of the local fellowship.

2. If the role and value of the local church is not understood or appreciated, God's ordained instrument for advancing His kingdom can actually be weakened by parachurch organizations.

The church can be weakened when members look to outside Christian influences for their nurturing and equipping. This may bring disunity if those influences lead those local church members to embrace doctrines and philosophies of ministries that would be considered detrimental by those men that Lord has entrusted with the oversight of the church.

The church can be weakened by its members becoming so involved with outside Christian influences that the healthy networking of believers within a local fellowship for the purpose of pursuing holiness is weakened or even eliminated except for attendance at worship services.

The church can be weakened when its members, without seeking the protection and support of the local church, commit themselves to formal outreach projects under the sponsorship of outside Christian influences. This may expose them to discouragement and rob them of the strength that comes to Christians when they are supported by a local fellowship.

VBC leadership strongly encourages believers to work through their local church when considering any parachurch involvement. In doing this, they will give testimony to their understanding of the role and value of the local church and bring blessing to their life and ministry.

VBC Involvement with Parachurches

VBC has been involved with many parachurch ministries in the past, for example: International Students International (ISI), Central American Missions (CAM), YUGO (Youth Unlimited Gospel Outreach), Operation Mobilization (OM), Wycliffe Bible Translators, Prison Fellowship's Angel Tree Ministry, The Master's College's Master's Chorale, Campus Crusade for Christ's Missionary Training Center, Family Life Couples Bible Studies and Conferences, GCC's Shepherd's Conference, Masters' Biblical Counseling Department, Masters' Men Discipling Men Conference, Masters' Women Discipling Women Conference, Association of Certified Biblical Counselors (ACBC), BCDA SoCal, etc.

Individually within the body at VBC, the involvement with parachurch organizations is too diverse to even begin to note.

Today, VBC is only involved in a few parachurch organizations.

What has changed that has brought VBC to limit involvement with parachurch organizations? Over time, VBC has developed a set of criteria to apply when considering involvement with parachurches or other churches or ministry organizations.

1. The organization must be consistent with VBC's understanding of biblical doctrine. There are many organizations who view doctrine related to salvation, the church, sanctification, etc. differently than VBC does and therefore makes mutual involvement or using their material difficult.
2. The organization must be consistent with VBC's ministry philosophy (to utilize relationships for the purpose of discipleship). There are many organizations whose purpose of social justice (for example) overshadows their commitment to making disciples. Different ministry philosophies make mutual involvement difficult.
3. The organization must be committed to Christ's purpose for the church. The purpose to make disciples must be primary with the organization.
4. The organization's activities must complement the ministries that we are committed to at VBC. A single ministry that utilizes an exorbitant amount of resources and harm other ongoing ministries would be a miss management of God's resources.
5. There is also an issue with timing of involvement. Becoming overextended in time commitments, opens the church up to the risk being unfaithful to its present commitments.

Based on these principles, the only two equipping parachurches VBC is involved with are Evangelism Explosion and AWANA. The only missions organization VBC is partnered with is Japan Bible Academy to which we have sent two missionary families. We are also partnered with DCN to support their church as they seek to make disciples in the Mexicali area.

In addition, we do not bring teachers in from outside our church. VBC has been blessed with many good Bible teachers and we believe that the best stewardship of our time and resources comes from utilizing what the Lord has provided for us. We do encourage outside reading, we do encourage and support formal Bible training through certain seminaries, we do attend conferences from time to time, etc.

The Bottom Line

The local church is God's means to fulfill His great commission. While parachurch's may be useful, they are not the church and those involved with parachurches must take care to ensure the proper place of the local church in their affections and devotion.