



What is the Church?

Greg H. Parsons



When we hear a new idea or approach to mission work, we may wonder how or if it will work and what the long-term impact will be. Certainly, we wonder if it is true to God's Word. These are necessary questions, and we may not always fully understand the answers or agree with them. At times, this is because we don't understand the context, life experiences and worldview of those involved.

Some, for example, have expressed concern about *Churchless Christianity*, a book we've published. Some assume this book is commending a strategy that some missionary has used in outreach to Hindus in India. In other words, they think the title is *prescriptive* rather than *descriptive*. Actually, this book is primarily *describing* people who long to follow Jesus but not within established forms of Christianity. (We actually considered changing the title to *Christianity-Less Followers of Christ*.) The book concludes with a few suggestions about what these followers might do and what the emerging "church" might look like. *Churchless Christianity* illustrates how some mission leaders are considering afresh how to nurture

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movements toward Christ in the midst of cultures where traditional church-planting has yet to bear fruit. How much of our world is colored by cultural ways of doing church? What is the minimum number of people necessary for a church? Are Paul's methods in Acts prescriptive or descriptive? Unfortunately, the Greek words we translate for "church" don't help us much. Paul's usage alone is both confusing and enlightening: sometimes he refers to the whole Church, sometimes to a church in a whole city (when there must be several smaller fellowships), and sometimes to a household. (See Romans 16 for all of these.)

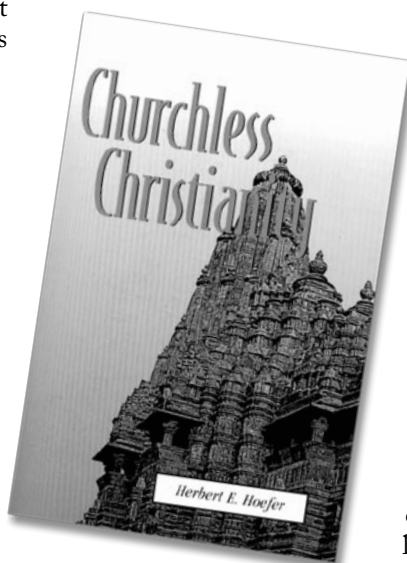
After asserting that He will build His church (Mt. 16:18), Jesus talked about how sin is to be dealt with in His church (Mt. 18). Several of the related parables appear in the context of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom, and they point to the fact that God is the one who will separate people of faith from those are not (Mt. 13:24-30,

47-50; 22:11-14; 25:1-13.) The *NIV Topical Study Bible* notes, "Several parables found only in Matthew show how Jesus' community has both true and false disciples." This deserves much more thought, with implications for pioneer church-planting and the spread of the gospel. We are not in a position to judge who will be acceptable to God and who won't.

Yet believing Jews just after the time of Christ tried to make decisions for God. They were convinced that Greeks could not be a part of Jesus' communities unless they became like Jews. As we follow the story in Acts, the biggest persecution faced by Paul and the early Church seems to come from believers from a Jewish

background – not from unbelieving Jews. Jewish crowds listen to Paul teach about Jesus, his conversion and the resurrection with no negative reaction – they listen attentively. Only when Paul testifies that Jesus told him, "Go! [away from Jerusalem]. For I will send you far away to the Gentiles" that they react and seek his life!

There is no panacea in mission strategy. But given the slowness of the gospel's penetration into Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist mainstreams, we ought to be willing to try – or at least allow – some alternate approaches. 🌐



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