



What is the Church? (Part 2)

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Note: Part 1 on this topic appeared in the January-February 2006 Mission Frontiers.

What do *we* mean by church? What are the key elements of this organism that Jesus said (in Matthew 16:18) he would build?

First, people are involved

We could say “believing people” – and certainly there must be some of these – but it also seems that there will always be some in the church who are not believers yet are part of the church. Jesus hints at this reality in the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:23-30).

Second, regular gathering seems inherent

But *how* regular and what *kinds* of gatherings? The original idea of the Greek word Matthew uses – referring to an open, public assembly – makes us wonder if there *should* be non-believers present to witness how the church demonstrates the life of Christ. Jesus was, of course, talking about *His* church, hinting that some things would be different (from either the synagogue or the open, town-hall meeting) in this new thing called “church.”

I find it interesting that between Jesus’ parables in Matthew 18 about the lost son and the unforgiving servant, He talks about how to deal with sin and how to cultivate right relationships in the church. Key ideas are raised in this section, including (1) the pursuit of the lost sheep (vs. 10-14), (2) the importance of dealing with sin (vs. 15-20), and (3) the significance of forgiveness in relationships (vs. 21-35). A fellowship that does those things will be recognized as people who are not merely church-goers, but who are part of Christ’s Body and who reflect Him.

Third, gifts are exercised

Beyond *people* and *gathering*, other intended elements of “church” are less clear. From Acts 2:42 we learn that the new believers were committed to (1) the Apostles’ teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) breaking of bread, and (4) prayer. When Paul describes, in Ephesians 4 and Romans 12, the equipping of believers for ministry, he lists gifts that operate within the Body – some when they are gathered, some when they are not.

Of course, back then there was no written New Testament. Some of what the Apostles taught became Scripture. Now that we have the Word, what do we need to be and do in this area? The early Church provided teaching, exhortation, and encouragement, but it is not clear *how* these operated. Probably it is good that we don’t know. Perhaps Paul was not explicit on this point because he knew these functions would be performed differently in different settings, even as his approaches varied throughout the book of Acts.

An illustration, from the Murle people of Sudan, might help. In the 1970s and 1980s missionaries with various skills worked on a team to see the gospel planted among the Murle. As this began to happen, the nomadic Murle began to meet every night around the fire. This was a normal, accepted activity, but now it took on new meaning. No one man was designated as pastor and mandated to teach every night. (Talk about burn-out!) Instead, the older men shared in a rotation of teaching – each night a different man would share what he was learning from the Scriptures (which were being translated) and how those insights applied to Murle life. If you’d like to hear more of this story, e-mail me (Greg.Parsons@uscwm.org) with your request, and I’ll give you further details.

The Murle chose a pattern different than we might – neither right or wrong in itself, but a pattern that worked in their situation. Nothing is inherently wrong with most of the patterns we’ve developed, but we should be careful to examine them regularly and not assume that our patterns must be reproduced in new fellowships.

I hope and pray that we will see all kinds of fellowships – from new church-plants that look like “church” to us, to existing social gatherings in homes or under a tree, all becoming vibrant gatherings of believers in Jesus. Do you have stories of creative, alternative expressions of church? Tell me at Greg.Parsons@uscwm.org. 



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