

## A LOOK THROUGH THREE LENSES

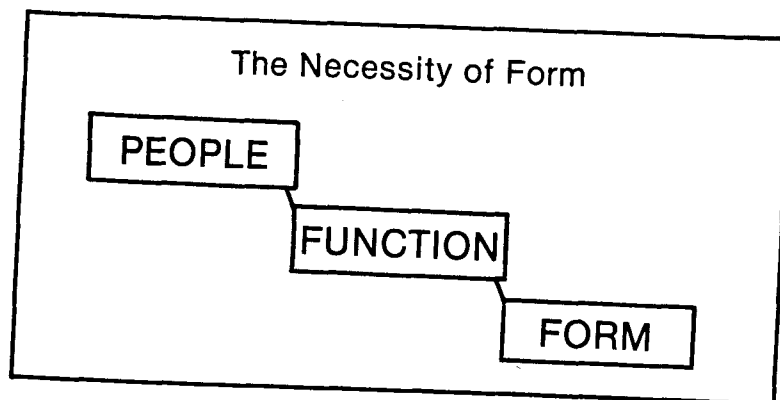


Figure 4.

Wherever you have people, you have function. And wherever you have function, you have form. In other words, "form" and "structure" are inevitable. Put another way, you cannot have "organization" without "organization." Wherever you attempt to achieve a goal or apply a principle, you must develop a procedure or pattern for doing it. You cannot communicate a "message" without a "method." You cannot teach "truth" without developing some kind of "tradition." And to quote Dr. George Peters, "Wherever you have 'pneumena,' you have 'phenomena.'"

The local church is no exception. Wherever you have people

actively functioning in various roles, you have form and structure. You cannot have one without the other.

Note! It is possible to describe function without describing form. The authors of Scripture did it all the time. But in the outworking of the New Testament functions, you can be sure there was always some kind of cultural form.

All of us can identify with this reality. We live within the circle of form and structure (see figure 5). It is what gives us a sense of security. But the important question facing every church leader is, What kind of form and structure should we have in *our* church?

### AN ADEQUATE PHILOSOPHY OF MINISTRY

We cannot answer this question for ourselves or for anyone else unless we have an adequate philosophy of the ministry, which raises one basic question—the question "why?" *Why* do we do what we do? Even as individuals we all have a philosophy that determines the way we function in life. We may not have spelled it out or articulated it to ourselves or others. But it is there, nevertheless, determining our actions and the way we function.

So it is in the church. All church leaders have a philosophy of ministry. Though it may not be obvious to the leaders themselves or the congregations they serve, it is there, nevertheless, determining *how* each church functions (see figure 6).

My concern in writing this book is to help Christians develop

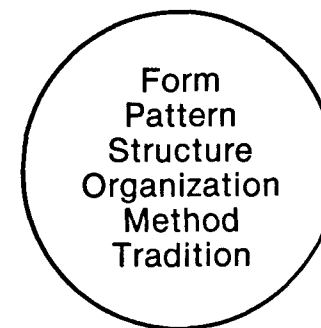


Figure 5. Circle of Form

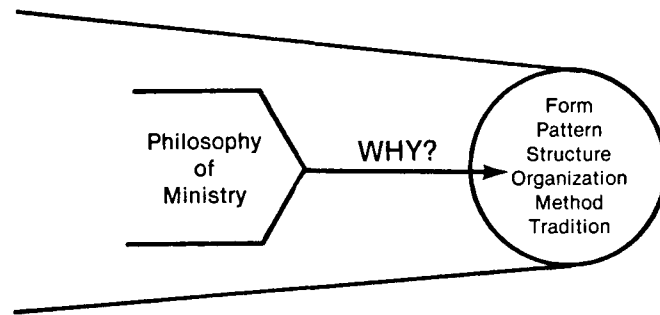


Figure 6. Philosophy of Ministry

a *biblical* philosophy of ministry. It is only then that we can structure and organize our churches properly. It is only then that we can choose methods and patterns that will help the church become what God intended it to become in this world.

Interestingly, the “church growth” writers emphasize how important it is for church leaders to focus their philosophy of ministry in order to experience numerical growth. However, they seldom specify, at least in detail, what that philosophy should be. In fact, they often recognize various philosophies of ministry as being valid and acceptable.<sup>1</sup>

Is it possible to develop a philosophy of ministry that is truly biblical—one that is recognized as what the Scriptures illustrate and teach? I believe it is—if we use an adequate research methodology that helps us arrive at a clear focus regarding what God is saying. Though we may have differences of opinion on minor matters, I believe it is possible to understand God’s specific plan for local churches just as surely as it is possible to discover the truth regarding Christ’s deity, the Trinity, salvation—and other important biblical doctrines.

To develop an adequate philosophy of ministry—one that God espouses—we must look through at least three lenses (see figure 7). The first is basic and foundational—the lens of Scripture. The lenses of history and culture are not unrelated in content to the lens of Scripture, but they also reveal extra biblical insights and are very important in avoiding “tunnel vision” and ecclesiastical

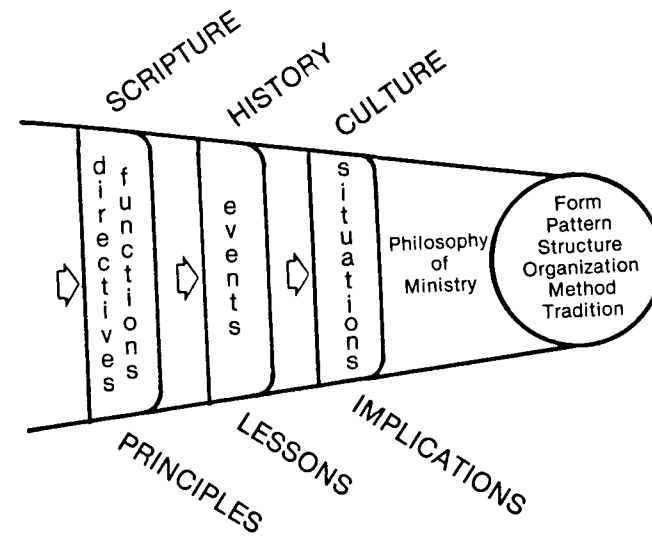


Figure 7. The Three Lenses

myopia as we develop a personal philosophy of ministry. Stating it positively and following through on our analogy, the three lenses can assist us in developing 20-20 vision regarding God’s plan for the church.

How can we use the three lenses? This is the purpose of this book. What follows this chapter are the *results* of this process. What follows immediately in this chapter, however, is an explanation with illustrations of *how to use* this process. In that sense, the three-lens approach comprises a method for biblical, historical, and cultural research.

*The Lens of Scripture.* This is the place to begin in formulating a *biblical* philosophy of ministry. Let me illustrate. Consider the following exhortations in the letter to the Hebrews:

Let us not give up *meeting together*, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us *encourage one another*—and all the more as you see the day approaching (Heb. 10:25, NIV).

This Scripture passage delineates clearly two New Testament

directives and functions. Christians are to “meet together regularly” in order to “encourage one another;” however, it is also clear that no “form” or “structure” is mentioned in this verse for these two functions. This does not mean that the author of this epistle expected Christians to meet together without form. Neither could they “encourage one another” without some type of structure.

Let’s look more carefully at the first directive (see figure 8). These Christians were to meet together regularly. However, the passage does not specify *when* they were to meet, *how often* they were to meet, *where* they were to meet, or what the *specific order of service* should be when they would meet together.

If we look more carefully at the larger context in the New Testament—a very important aspect in accurate biblical interpretation—we will find illustrations of *when* the church met, *how often* they met and *where* they met. To a lesser degree we will find a few references to *how they ordered their services*. However, when you look further you will notice something very significant.

*First*, functions and directives are often described in the New Testament without a description of forms, just as they are in the passage in Hebrews. For example, Luke recorded in the Book of Acts that the apostles “never stopped *teaching and proclaiming*

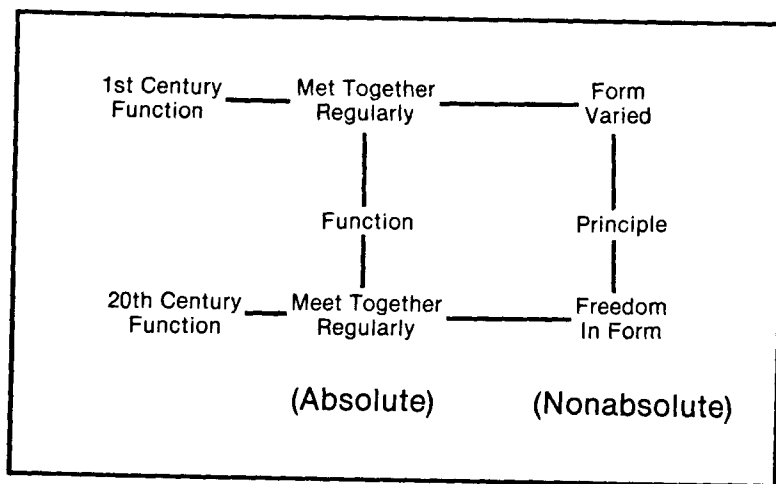


Figure 8. Function and Form

the Good News that Jesus is Christ” (Acts 5:42c, NIV). “Teaching” and “proclaiming” are functions. Though Luke made references to these functions, he did not describe the apostles’ teaching and preaching methodology (form); however, we know that it is impossible to “teach” and “preach” without some kind of form and methodology.

*Second*, when form is described it is always *partial* or *incomplete*. It is never possible to duplicate biblical form and structure exactly because certain details and elements are always missing in the biblical text. For example, Luke recorded in the same passage that the apostles “kept right on teaching and preaching” as they went “from house to house” (5:42b). Going from “house to house” is definitely form and structure. However, the process is not delineated in detail. Did they stop at every house? Or did they go only to the homes of those who had already believed in Christ? Did people invite their neighbors to come and hear the apostles? Did the apostles go “inside the house” or “stand outside” or “go to the rooftop”—as they would be able to do in this culture? We do not know the answers to these questions because the form described (going “from house to house”) is incomplete and partial.

*Third*, form and structure that is partially described varies from one New Testament setting to another. In fact, we see variations within the text we’re looking at. Not only did the apostles teach and preach from house to house, but they also went to the “temple courts” (5:42a, NIV).

This poses a problem immediately. We may not have too much trouble in some cultures going “from house to house” teaching the Gospel of Christ. However, we would have to select our methodology carefully, for if we used the apostles’ approach described in the Book of Acts, we would probably be in violation of most city ordinances and find ourselves in trouble with local authorities.<sup>2</sup>

The problem of cultural restrictions on Christianity impacted me forcefully several years ago when I was sharing principles of New Testament church life with pastors behind the Iron Curtain. In this particular country, it was illegal for groups of people to meet in private homes. Even relatives could not get together in large numbers. It was not just a regulation directed toward Chris-

directives and functions. Christians are to “meet together regularly” in order to “encourage one another;” however, it is also clear that no “form” or “structure” is mentioned in this verse for these two functions. This does not mean that the author of this epistle expected Christians to meet together without form. Neither could they “encourage one another” without some type of structure.

Let’s look more carefully at the first directive (see figure 8). These Christians were to meet together regularly. However, the passage does not specify *when* they were to meet, *how often* they were to meet, *where* they were to meet, or what the *specific order of service* should be when they would meet together.

If we look more carefully at the larger context in the New Testament—a very important aspect in accurate biblical interpretation—we will find illustrations of *when* the church met, *how often* they met and *where* they met. To a lesser degree we will find a few references to *how they ordered their services*. However, when you look further you will notice something very significant.

*First*, functions and directives are often described in the New Testament without a description of forms, just as they are in the passage in Hebrews. For example, Luke recorded in the Book of Acts that the apostles “never stopped *teaching and proclaiming*

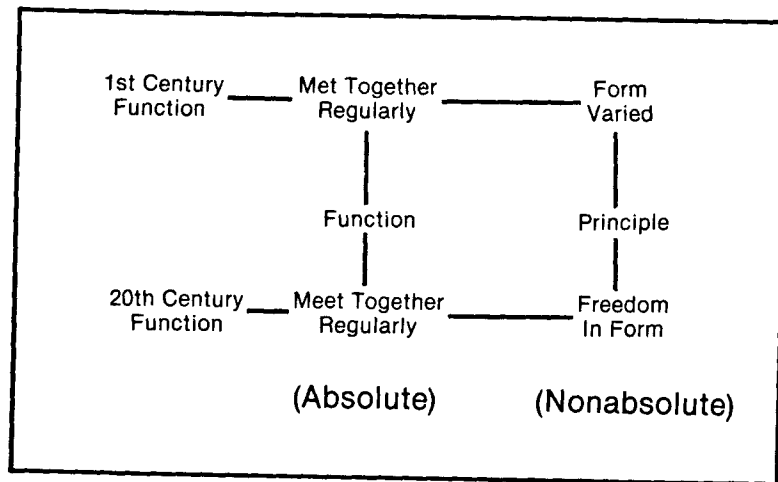


Figure 8. Function and Form

the Good News that Jesus is Christ” (Acts 5:42c, NIV). “Teaching” and “proclaiming” are functions. Though Luke made references to these functions, he did not describe the apostles’ teaching and preaching methodology (form); however, we know that it is impossible to “teach” and “preach” without some kind of form and methodology.

*Second*, when form is described it is always *partial* or *incomplete*. It is never possible to duplicate biblical form and structure exactly because certain details and elements are always missing in the biblical text. For example, Luke recorded in the same passage that the apostles “kept right on teaching and preaching” as they went “from house to house” (5:42b). Going from “house to house” is definitely form and structure. However, the process is not delineated in detail. Did they stop at every house? Or did they go only to the homes of those who had already believed in Christ? Did people invite their neighbors to come and hear the apostles? Did the apostles go “inside the house” or “stand outside” or “go to the rooftop”—as they would be able to do in this culture? We do not know the answers to these questions because the form described (going “from house to house”) is incomplete and partial.

*Third*, form and structure that is partially described varies from one New Testament setting to another. In fact, we see variations within the text we’re looking at. Not only did the apostles teach and preach from house to house, but they also went to the “temple courts” (5:42a, NIV).

This poses a problem immediately. We may not have too much trouble in some cultures going “from house to house” teaching the Gospel of Christ. However, we would have to select our methodology carefully, for if we used the apostles’ approach described in the Book of Acts, we would probably be in violation of most city ordinances and find ourselves in trouble with local authorities.<sup>2</sup>

The problem of cultural restrictions on Christianity impacted me forcefully several years ago when I was sharing principles of New Testament church life with pastors behind the Iron Curtain. In this particular country, it was illegal for groups of people to meet in private homes. Even relatives could not get together in large numbers. It was not just a regulation directed toward Chris-

tians. This government policy was established to avoid any possibility of a conspiracy against state authority. Naturally it restricted Christians greatly in being able to use their homes for any kind of religious service involving more than their immediate families.

Our biggest challenge, however, in any culture today would be to teach the Gospel in “the temple courts.” This was a cultural phenomenon related to the early days of Christianity, which was exclusively Jewish. However, it wasn’t long until even the “temple courts” were off limits to Jewish Christians.

Let me summarize.

- The Bible often teaches function without describing form.
- Where it does describe form it is partial and incomplete.
- What form is described varies from situation to situation.

This leads to a very important conclusion. In church-renewal conferences, I’m often asked how it is possible to distinguish absolutes from nonabsolutes in Scripture. The answer is found in these three observations regarding form in the New Testament. It is not possible to absolutize something that is *not described*; that is always *incomplete*; and that is *always changing* from one setting to another. This is why form and structures are not absolutes in the Bible. I have not found any that do not fit this threefold criteria. In fact, there is only one structure in the entire Bible that is described in detail—the tabernacle in the Old Testament. But even then, it is not possible to reconstruct this Old Testament place of worship without adding some details of our own.

On the other hand, functions and principles *are* absolute—if they appear consistently throughout New Testament history and are not self-delimiting.<sup>3</sup> Our challenge is to “look through the lens of Scripture” and isolate those functions and directives that are absolute and supracultural.

*The Lens of History.* Note, first of all, that we can superimpose the lens of Scripture over the lens of history. Scripture *is* history—that is, divine history, inspired history, or “God-breathed” history. It is here that we find absolute directives and functions that enable us to lay the foundations for a biblical philosophy of ministry.

Furthermore, we can learn valuable lessons from our forefathers. Paul illustrated this point in his letter to the Corinthians

when he wrote: “Now these things happened to them [the Children of Israel] as an example, and they were written [the Old Testament] for *our instruction*, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). Today Christians have not only Old Testament history but New Testament History—God’s divinely inspired history of the church. It too has been recorded for “our instruction” to teach us how to order His church.

However, there is history that extends beyond the sacred pages of Scripture. *Church history* is filled with lessons for twentieth-century Christians. It is this lens that enables us to turn the spotlight on the church the latter part of the first century and throughout the centuries that followed. It is this process that gives us insights that will enable us to accentuate what Christians have done right, hopefully eliminate what we’ve done wrong, and correct what we have done poorly. This process, like the study of the church in Scripture, is open-ended.

There is, however, a special kind of history that can also be studied that offers unusual insights for Christians. Let me illustrate. Not surprisingly, social historians have discovered that wherever you have people, you have function, and wherever you have function, you have form. But they have discovered something else that is extremely relevant to our overall concern in this book.

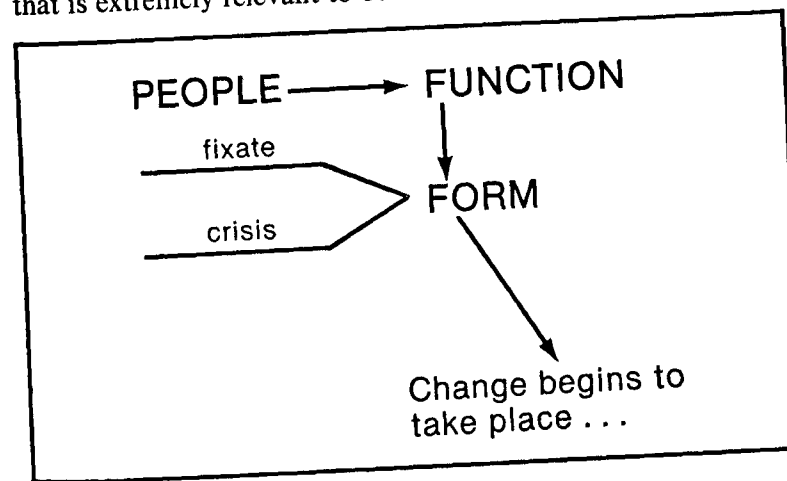


Figure 9. Fixation, Crisis and Change

*Resistance to change.* Social historians have made two important observations (see figure 9). First, in studying people and their societal structures, they have discovered that over a period of time people tend to fixate—particularly on forms. People do not want to change. Studies show there is one constant in history. That constant is fixity.

However, social studies also point out that people *do* change their forms and structures in society, basically under one condition—some kind of *crisis*. Then, and then only, people are open to change. Usually this crisis comes because forms and structures are no longer relevant. They are no longer serving as an effective means to meet the needs of people in that particular society.

Recently this has been illustrated in an unusual way in our own society and others. For years we have built our national economy on such important energy sources as oil, gas and coal. Understandably, these resources will someday be depleted.

What has happened? This energy crisis has precipitated extensive research projects to overcome this problem. If the Lord tarries, we'll no doubt develop *new* energy sources, perhaps to eventually replace the old ones entirely. Already we've learned how to use solar energy in new and different ways and we'll refine this process in the years to come.

The important point is that we would not be exploring new energy sources if we had not faced national and international crises. And so it is with the church. Christians differ little from people in general in their psychological makeup. Structure provides a sense of security. And when we tamper with societal structures, we are tampering with people's emotional stability. This causes anxiety, and anxiety always results in resistance to change.

Let me illustrate this point with a personal experience. Several years ago I left the sacred halls of learning—the theological seminary. After nearly twenty years as a professor, first at Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and then at Dallas Theological Seminary, I decided to become a full-time pastor. I helped launch Fellowship Bible Church in Dallas, and since then a number of churches have come into existence as a result of the first church in 1972. Though in these early days I was enjoying this experience greatly, for a

number of months I also experienced unusual anxiety. I couldn't understand why.

Then one day I got the answer to that question. It suddenly dawned on me that after twenty years in one kind of structure—a structure that I knew very well—I had made a dramatic change. In fact, I was pastoring a renewal church, one that started with functions first, allowing forms to develop naturally in our own cultural setting. I knew the forms forward and backward in a traditional church. I had been down that road before. But here I was, exchanging academic forms for local church forms that were new and innovative. I had not been down that path before. Had I stopped to think before I made the change, I could have predicted the anxiety that followed. It was natural. Once I understood the source of my anxiety, I was able to cope with it and eventually develop security in the new forms I was helping create.

I have often seen this psychological phenomenon in people who visit our services for the first time, particularly if they are unusually entrenched in traditional church structures. At first they feel uncomfortable. It is an understandable emotional reaction.

*Lack of understanding.* We must therefore understand why people resist change. But we must also understand that Christians sometimes have “double-trouble.” Because we believe there are things that should *never* change, we often confuse nonabsolutes (those things that *should* change) with absolutes (things that should *not* change). Often this resistance is rooted in insecurity and fear and leads to rationalization. After all, what better way to rationalize than to *think* we are standing for the truth of Scripture?

However, many Christians resist change because they are honestly confused. They don't understand the differences between absolutes and nonabsolutes. They put “beginning the service with the doxology” in the same category as the “virgin birth.” Or, they think that “meeting at 11 o'clock on Sunday morning” is just as significant as what the Bible teaches about the “second coming of Christ.” Though I'm speaking hyperbolically, these illustrations point to our problem.

It is important to help Christians understand the difference between absolutes and nonabsolutes (see figure 10), between functions and forms, between principles and patterns, between truth

ABSOLUTES	NONABSOLUTES
Function	Form
Principle	Pattern
Organism	Organization
Truth	Tradition
Message	Method
<hr/> SUPRACULTURAL	<hr/> CULTURAL

Figure 10. Absolutes vs. Nonabsolutes

and tradition, between organism and organization, between message and method, between that which is supracultural and that which is purely cultural. This is why it is important to look carefully at the New Testament churches through the lens of Scripture. And, as illustrated, the lens of history will help us discover our successes and failures in making these differentiations in the past.

Furthermore, as Christian leaders, we have a God-given means to bring about crisis in the lives of Christians that can bring significant change. I'm speaking of the Word of God. Wherever and whenever God's truth is taught, it should create a Spirit-directed crisis in the life of every believer who is out of harmony with that truth. If we are to be in the will of God, we must change our attitudes and behavior and conform our lives to God's Word.

This is why it is important to use the lens of Scripture to help Christians understand God's plan for the church. As believers begin to comprehend what is absolute and what is not absolute; what is supracultural and what is cultural; and as they understand that the Bible teaches "freedom in form" in order to effectively carry out the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place in the world and at any moment in history, most will be open to change in areas where they should change. At the same time, they'll be secure in the fact that they are not changing those

things God intended to remain the same. When this happens, they'll understand what Paul really meant when he wrote: "And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews . . . to those without law, as without law . . . I have become all things to all men that I may by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:20-22).

*The Lens of Culture.* Once again, this lens is clearly related to both the lens of Scripture and of history. You can't study the Bible without seeing the influence of culture. And you cannot study history—particularly social history—without encountering culture.

Jesus carried on His ministry within several cultures, and He understood those cultures very well. This was dramatically illustrated when He encountered the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. Her culture was different. Her viewpoint on religion and life in general was very different from the individual who had a typical Jewish background. Jesus used His cultural insight to communicate effectively with this woman. It had a decided effect on His methodology in approaching her and teaching her divine truth. It also had a decided effect on her response.

Paul, more than any other apostle, illustrated how important it is to understand culture. We would expect this since his ministry was primarily to the Gentiles. As we'll see in our chapter on New Testament leadership functions and principles, Paul's insights into the Greek and Roman cultures, for example, affected his use of language.

Thus, we can build a strong case from the lens of Scripture itself showing the importance of understanding culture and how it affects the way people think and feel about life. But, as with history, we need to look beyond Scripture to gain insight and implications from culture.

Secular analyst Alvin Toffler has helped all of us understand the influence on culture much better. His book *Future Shock* was a stimulating study relative to where history is headed. However, his book *Third Wave* was particularly helpful to me personally, especially in contributing to my understanding of how culture affects form and structure. Interestingly, I first read much of this book on my way to Quito, Ecuador to speak to missionaries on the subject of New Testament church principles. I found Toffler's

insights helpful as I entered this setting to minister to Christian leaders who were ministering in several different cultures vastly different from my own.<sup>4</sup>

Toffler has pointed out that for years much of civilization existed in an agrarian culture. Society's forms and structures were relatively small because form "conforms" to the number of people involved in any given situation. Generally speaking, this describes the biblical culture, though certainly there are exceptions, particularly in the Roman Empire that boasted some very large cities. Even then, most structures were relatively small, with the exception of the amphitheaters and some religious temples.

Toffler further states that all of this was destined to change several hundred years ago. We moved from the "agricultural wave" to the "industrial wave" which gave birth to centralization of population, which in turn gave birth to large societal structures—such as towns, cities, and suburbs. These population centers also gave birth to factories, universities, hospitals, and also churches. Large forms and structures came into existence to accommodate functions that involved thousands of people living in a particular geographical area.

This is a significant cultural insight. For a time in my own church planting experience in the Dallas metroplex, I determined to keep church structures small to encourage body function. To achieve this goal, we've made multiple use of buildings and started a number of branch churches. However, the more churches we started, the more growth we experienced, primarily because we were in a growing population area. The churches we started in other areas of the city did not resolve the growth problem in our home-base church.

A couple of things happened that were directly related to culture. First, we soon used up the culturally acceptable times for worship and teaching periods. Second, in about four years we had exhausted geographical areas that were potential areas to start new churches, particularly in relationship to our home-base congregation. Third, we soon reached the maximum number of people we could accommodate in our own building. Fourth, this began to lead to an "ingrown mentality"—a desire to stop reaching new people. Also, we began turning people away, causing

negative feelings on the part of newcomers as well as those who were regulars.

It was then I saw that we were beginning to violate the very principles that we believed in—one being that form follows function. To solve the problem we had to change form—in short, we had to build a larger building. This, in turn, would affect the service form. And here the "church-growth" people have also made a very significant cultural observation. As the church grew in size, it was necessary to move to "celebration" when the church met corporately. The challenge we faced was to encourage and develop forms that would continue to accommodate body function. To do this, we developed home cells—which we call Fellowship Families and mini-churches.

In essence, I'm saying you cannot force church structures to remain small if you are located in a cultural situation that is permeated with people and large structures. That is, you cannot remain small if you're about our Father's business of reaching people for Christ. And if you are reaching these people, you must then design structures to accommodate these people in their own cultural environment without violating New Testament principles of church life.

#### SUMMARY

This is a book designed to help the church develop forms and structures that are effective in carrying out the Great Commission in any given cultural setting. It is not a book *about* form and structures. Rather, it is a book that focuses first and foremost on New Testament directives and functions, which, in turn, can be translated into absolute principles that are applicable in every culture of the world since the first century. In that sense, if they are focused correctly, they become supracultural guidelines that are normative for all time.

The lens of Scripture is basic in formulating these principles. The lens of history and the lens of culture add additional insights, particularly in helping us discern and apply these biblical principles. Together, all three lenses help any seeking person to formulate an adequate philosophy of ministry. It is this kind of philosophy that will enable every church leader to develop forms and



structures and use methods and techniques that are contemporary and relevant but yet in harmony with biblical absolutes. It is this combination that creates dynamic churches that reflect God's purposes and plans in any culture of the world and at any moment in history.

#### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>See C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth*, Regal Books, pp. 175-181, 214-216.

<sup>2</sup>The apostles definitely got in trouble for preaching the Gospel. In fact, some ended up in prison. However, they were incarcerated for challenging their fellow Jewish and religious leaders theologically. Twentieth-century city codes in most instances are designed to guarantee the right of privacy to local citizens. In this sense, we would be in violation of Paul's admonition to obey local magistrates and authorities (Rom. 13:1-7).

<sup>3</sup>A "self-delimiting" function or directive is incapable of being repeated. For example, Paul asked Timothy to bring his cloak and parchments (2 Tim. 4:13).

<sup>4</sup>Alvin Toffler, *Third Wave*, William Morrow and Company, Inc.

## WHY THE CHURCH EXISTS

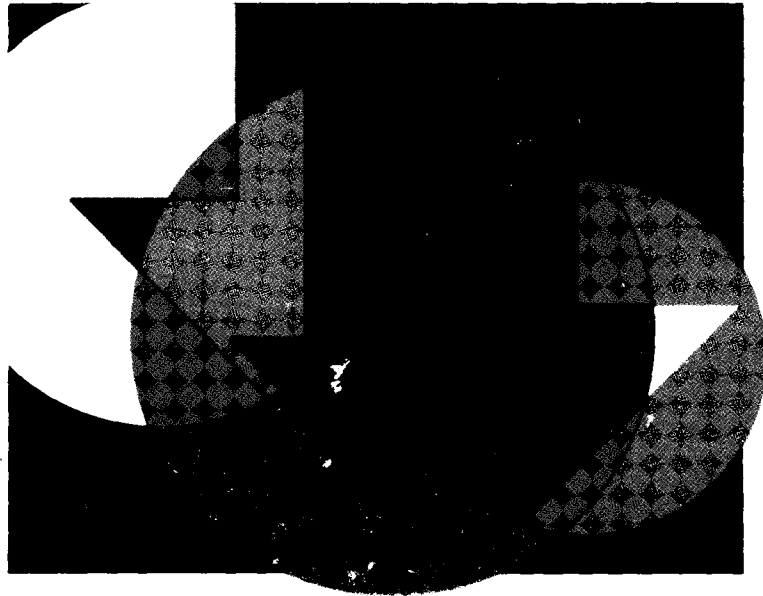
Anyone who attempts to formulate a biblical philosophy of the ministry and develop a contemporary strategy and methodology that stands foursquare on scriptural foundations *must* ask and answer some very fundamental questions. Why does the church exist? What is its ultimate purpose? Why has God left it in the world in the first place?

Jesus Christ, before ascending to the Father, spoke directly to these questions. One day on a mountain in Galilee He spoke in clear and simple language: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20).

Earlier, He had said in the presence of the disciples, and more specifically to Peter, "I will build My church; and the gates of Hades [the power of death] shall not overpower it" (16:18).

Now prior to leaving them to carry on His work and to fulfill His prophetic words, He told them what they must do: "MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL THE NATIONS!" The command is clear, concise, comprehensive! First, they must wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5). Then they would "receive power" and become His witnesses, "both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and even to the remotest part of the earth" (1:8).

The Church Seen Through Three Lenses:  
• New Testament Principles • Contemporary Needs  
• Church History



# SHARPENING THE FOCUS OF THE CHURCH

---

## GENE A. GETZ



A VICTOR BOOK