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GENERAL EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



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Editorial

Evangelicals are in broad agreement as to what the Gospel is, but we are divided on our understanding of the doctrine of the Church. However, this situation is changing. 1983 will be remembered as a year of international conferences—Wheaton '83, Amsterdam '83, Manchester '83, WCC General Assembly. All these gatherings will be grappling directly or indirectly with the issues of the nature and the function of the Church. This year will also be remembered as a year of celebration and reflection on Martin Luther and the roots of the Protestant Reformation.

The Church stands between the proclaimed Word of God and a fallen world and thereby it lives in tension. All tensions lead either to disunity and to self-destruction or to dynamic creativity and unity. Among the rapidly growing churches of the Third World the Church's self-identity is a major issue. People are searching for their roots and they want to know the boundaries of their activities. Therefore the issues of the Church in relation to the Kingdom of God and in relation to the world are crucial. Four areas of identity are important to us. First in relation to God as expressed in our worship and spiritual pilgrimage. Tensions over charismatic gifts either unite or divide churches. Second in relation to the Bible. For some it is the issue of authority and inerrancy; for many it is the hermeneutical one of how we use the Bible to determine our beliefs and practices. Third in relation to the Church. Tensions exist in our understanding of the relationship of function to structures in the Church and in cooperation between churches and para-church agencies. When is a para:church agency a non-church? When does evangelism take priority over social responsibility? Fourthly in relation to the world. There are serious tensions on issues of contextualisation, the Church's growth movement, advocacy of the homogeneous unit principle and the Church's role in social justice. It would be naïve to think that these issues will be solved in 1983 but we do have ears to hear what God's Word through his Spirit is saying to us? This number of *ERT* endeavours to speak to a number of these tensions and point to the need of both theological reformation and spiritual revival in the Church. [p. 192](#)

The Biblical Basis of the Para-Church Movements

A. W. Swamidoss

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The relationship of churches and para-church agencies in the task of world evangelisation emerged as an important issue at COWE, Pattayya in 1980. It will be a major issue at the Wheaton '83 conference as it grapples with the nature and mission of the Church in the wider dimensions of the Church's life and ministry.

In this article a New Testament scholar from India (where the issues of Church and para-church are now extremely acute) looks for exegetical answers. Some will be helped by this

article, others may not be, which fact is itself a reflection on the confusion and complexity of our present situation. For example, it is estimated that there are 10,000 para-church agencies in North America alone. Many now have satellites in the Third World. Indigenous para-church agencies are also mushrooming in most Third World countries. Is this phenomenon building the Church or destroying the Church? Perhaps that is asking the wrong question.

This article directly or indirectly raises issues including the following:

Are local churches and para-church agencies both expressions of the Universal Church?

How far can we correlate the present phenomena with the prototypes of the New Testament era?

When is a para-church agency non-church?

Is there biblical evidence for restricting the administering of the sacraments and the ordaining of ministers to Church structures?

Does the New Testament permit the development of valid structures not found in the New Testament Church?

In defining the nature and function of the Church can we isolate this Church as an organism from the institutes of the Church?

How important are accountability and discipline in defining the nature and mission of both Church and para-church agencies?

Can criteria be developed to test when a para-church agency is 'alongside' the Church and when it is 'in place of' the Church?

(Editor)

Down through the centuries in the history of Christianity two ecclesiastical structures have existed—the local church structure and the para-church structure. Some church leaders question the very [p. 193](#) existence of para-church movements while some others approve of their legitimacy but assert that they ought to play a secondary role and suggest mutual co-existence. Some para-church organisations assert their right to exist and strive for a mutual co-existence, while some others either withdraw quietly or show their resentment by a 'don't care' attitude. The tension between the two structures is very visible. The purpose of this paper is to find out whether there is any biblical basis for the existence of para-church movements.

THE STRUCTURES OF CHURCH AND PARA-CHURCH

Let us divide the subject into two categories—structure and theology. That is, let us find out what the Bible says first about the two structures and then about the theology of the Church. In doing the latter we need to find out the relationship of the local church and the para-church between themselves and the relationship between them and the universal church.

PROPHETIC RENEWAL OF THE CULTIC

The proper place to begin with is the Old Testament. The worship system in Israel was established even from the time of Moses. The Books of Chronicles tell us how elaborate the system was at a later time with Levites, the singing and all the ritual. The cultus had a definite place in the life of Israel. Religion in Israel meant the cult with all its ramifications. For all practical purposes the community was governed by this. However, when the cult became stale and routine and when spiritual numbness set in and when a gulf between the priest and the laity was seen, Yahweh raised up the prophetic movement. The

prophets pronounced things with the formula 'Thus says the Lord'; they condemned the cult yet lived within it. This is analogous to the para-church movements.

This needs to be given serious thought. The prophetic movements appeared in Israel and performed a specific function when the cult needed revival. The cult was the established order and continued throughout Old Testament times. Whenever the established order failed a charismatic movement started. The question here is not which one is superior. Rather, it is this: Did the prophetic movement have a role to play and was it authorised by God? Both existed simultaneously and the prophets claimed a direct touch with God. God was concerned with the need of the times and met those needs. p. 194

PROTO-TYPES OF CHURCH STRUCTURES

Let us look at the New Testament. Do we see a parallel picture there? Here the apostles are the prominent leaders. When the church is born it is these who give leadership. In the Acts of the Apostles Peter wins Jewish converts and a community is born and similarly Paul establishes communities in many places comprising mainly Gentiles. Is there anything here which we can call para-church structure?

In connection with the death of Ananias and Saphira, Acts records that great fear came upon the whole church ([5:11](#)). By 'church' probably the Jerusalem congregation is meant. Similarly in [Acts 6:3](#) the twelve acted in an official capacity and made arrangements for the appointment of the seven to take care of the daily distribution. In [8:14f](#) again the apostles of Jerusalem sent Peter and John to Samaria to find out what was happening. In [9:26-30](#) when Paul made an attempt to join the disciples at Jerusalem there was some hesitation in accepting him. Here again, Luke implies that the hesitation was from the church body. When Peter visited Cornelius and preached Christ to him his action was called in question by Jerusalem authorities in an official capacity ([Acts 11:2, 18](#)). Similarly [11:30](#) reports that the disciples in Antioch sent their relief fund to Jerusalem and this was delivered to the elders. When Antioch received the word of the Lord, the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas there ([11:22](#)) as it sent Peter and John to Samaria. Then the church in Antioch sent off Paul and Barnabas for the missionary task. Later a dispute arose concerning circumcision of the Gentile Christians and Paul and Barnabas were deputed by the Antioch church to the Jerusalem church ([15:3f](#)) to discuss the matter.

On all these occasions the church acts as body, as it were. Specific details about the ecclesiastical government of the church at Jerusalem or Antioch are not known. However, the prototype of a church structure is seen.

PROTO-TYPES OF PARA-CHURCH STRUCTURES

Is there any proto-type of a para-church structure? In other words, was there any activity outside this church 'structure'? When persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the region of Judea and Samaria ([Acts 8:1](#)). They preached the word wherever they went. Some of them travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. Some men from Cyprus and Cyrene brought the word to the Greeks in Antioch ([11:19-21](#)). P. 195

Is this not a proto-type of the para-church structure? The church in Jerusalem did not depute anyone to go and engage in evangelistic activities. Yet the word of God was preached in Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. People preached the word of God wherever they went without any directive from the church ([8:4](#)). Philip, one of the seven appointed along with Stephen went to a city of Samaria and preached the gospel. Philip was not sent in an official capacity (cf. [21:8](#)). Nor was he one of the Twelve. One thing is

very clear. Along with the apostolic activity of Peter ([Acts 10](#), [11:1–18](#)) there was a simultaneous preaching activity by non-apostles, a sort of voluntary missionary movement.

The activity of Philip in chapter [8](#) and of the scattered Hellenists in chapter [11:19ff](#), is clearly a proto-type for the para-church movements since these efforts were not from 'within' the official circles of the Jerusalem church. An objection may be raised: were they not members of the Jerusalem church? They did belong to the mother church, but their evangelistic mission was voluntary and not by the directive of the mother church. This is precisely the point. On these two occasions the Jerusalem apostles sent their representatives to consolidate the efforts made by others. In fact [Acts 8:25](#) makes this plain: Peter and John the official representatives of the Jerusalem church strengthened the disciples in Samaria and returned to Jerusalem and on their way back preached the gospel to many Samaritan villagers. This is an official mission in contrast to the mission undertaken by Philip. Similarly we may contrast the activity of Barnabas and the scattered believers in [Acts 11:19ff](#).

It is particularly noteworthy that the church structure did not find fault with those who brought the word, Philip to Samaria ([8:14](#)) and the scattered believers to Antioch ([11:22](#)). This is noteworthy because the church called into question the activity of Peter ([11:12](#), [18](#)) for having fellowship with the Gentiles which to them was not yet a settled theological issue at that time.

Similarly when Paul was deputed for missions by the church at Antioch there were other efforts going on. When Paul and Barnabas separated two teams came into existence! Barnabas and Mark went off to Cyprus. Mark was still doing ministry (cf. [Col. 4:10](#); [Philm v. 23](#); [II Tim. 4:11](#)). The team of Barnabas was non-official.¹

Another Christian worker named Apollos came from Alexandria to Ephesus and ministered there ([Acts 18:24–28](#)). He came of his own accord as a travelling evangelist. After receiving some more exposition [p. 196](#) of the scriptures from Priscilla and Aquilla he travelled on to Corinth. He got a letter of introduction to Corinth. These are proto-types of structures which are independent of the church structure in the early church.

This is also seen from the second and third epistles of John. There was travelling missionaries who went from place to place preaching the gospel. In [II John 10, 11](#), the evangelist cautions his friends about those who bring wrong doctrine and in [III John 6, 7](#) he wants kindness to be shown to Christian missionaries.

In the Pastoral epistles the qualifications of the church leaders are spelled out. Also, the author is condemning heretical teachings. Even in this context where church structure was getting established and where heresies were condemned vigorously there is no explicit negative reference to independent preaching activities.

Let us come back to Paul. He was deputed by the church at Antioch to the missionary tour. Does Luke mean that this was the normative pattern in the early church? It does not appear so, because the church at Jerusalem did not have any such commissioning service. Also, the church at Antioch itself was established by a para-church structure. If we take the church at Antioch as a pattern we must go a little further and take the pattern of the structure which established this church. The role of the church at Antioch in sending out Paul and Barnabas was a historical detail which Luke wanted to record.

Was Paul deputed by the Antioch church for all his three missionary journeys? For the first one he was. But for the second one he took the decision and it seems that the church approved his decision ([Acts 15:40](#)). Paul started off his third journey on his own. This is seen from [18:23](#) and [21:15, 17](#). He went back to Jerusalem and not to Antioch. When once

¹ See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p.319.

the travel began he was on his own. He was not directly controlled by Antioch. This must put us in caution. When it comes to the structure of the church Paul himself acted as though he were the proto-type of a para-church structure. He can drop people at his will; add people to his company; go to places of his own choice; send emissaries to other churches; write letters; and take decisions on his own—all this not under the directive of Antioch.

[Acts 15:41](#) reports that Paul took Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches. But there is no reference in Acts for pioneering work in this area. In view of [Galatians 1:21](#) it is possible that Paul did the pioneering work before he was introduced to Antioch by Barnabas (cf. [Acts 11:25](#)).² If this is so before his deputation by Antioch p. 197 he had begun his independent missionary activities. Ralph Winter rightly places Paul in both categories:

He (Paul) was, true enough, sent out by the church in Antioch. But once away from Antioch he seemed very much on his own. The little team he formed was economically self-sufficient when occasion demanded. It was also dependent, but upon other churches that had risen as a result of evangelistic labours. Paul's team may certainly be considered a structure.³

That Paul was on his own as though a para-church structure rested in himself and the party, and was not controlled by Antioch, is confirmed by his own writings. He seldom makes any reference to his being sent by Antioch. In fact, the opposite is true. In Galatians he declares very emphatically that his gospel is directly from God. In [Galatians 2:9](#) he makes a reference that the pillars of the Jerusalem church James, Cephas, and John approved of his and Barnabas's going to the Gentiles. This meeting ([Gal. 2:1](#)) is probably the one reported in [Acts 11:30](#). It is strange that Paul is not referring to his Antioch connection in the context of [Galatians 2:9](#). It is worth noting that Paul is very much independent.

We do not know when and how the church of Rome got established. Scholars trace its origin to a time soon after Pentecost giving credit to the visitors from there, both Jews and Proselytes ([Acts 2:10](#)).⁴ Is this then a church-sponsored mission? The same may hold good for Christianity in Alexandria.

PROTO-TYPES FOR PRESENT DAY STRUCTURES

Can independent movements be called proto-types for present day para-church movements? Yes, they can be. For our present-day local churches the congregations mentioned in the New Testament are considered as the model, for example, the church at Thessalonica, Philippi etc. These are only proto-types for our present-day churches in that the latter is not an exact replica of the former. The theological problem of the delay of the Parousia at Thessalonica is not a problem in our local congregations nor are the heretics of our day the same as those at Philippi.

The concept of local church structure is not the only one that was always in focus in the New Testament. There is an inter-relationship between the churches. The Jerusalem church was interested in the conversions at Samaria and Antioch. The Jerusalem council

² E. F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church*, p.244.

³ 'The Two structures of God's Redemptive Mission', p.129. See also the work by R. Winter and R. P. Beaver, *The Warp and the Woof: Organizing for Missing*, 1970.

⁴ R. Winter and R. P. Beaver, *The Warp and Woof*. p.63.

sent p. 198 letters to the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. The church at Antioch ([Acts 11:27–30](#)) was concerned with the financial crisis of the church at Jerusalem and sent in a famine relief fund. Paul's letter to the Galatians is addressed not to one church but to the churches of Galatia, which probably meant the churches he established during his first journey as the South Galatian theory puts forward. In [Colossians 4:16](#) Paul wants the church to pass on his letter to the church of the Laodiceans and wants the members to read the letter from Laodicea. The epistle to the Ephesians where Paul gives his magnificent treatise on the Church is not just a letter to the church at Ephesus. The best manuscripts lack Ephesus in the address in [1:1](#). This letter was probably a circular letter. Paul pleads very strongly and persuasively with the Corinthians for the relief fund to the poor saints in Jerusalem ([II Cor. 8, 9](#)). The major advantage of the present denominational structure is that the individual congregations try to relate to each other, thereby providing a stronger witness for the gospel and promoting mutual upbuilding among themselves. Probably the church at Jerusalem was the proto-type for our denominational structure.

For the present day ecclesiastical functions too, only the proto-type is available. In the Pastorals the church office gets prominence. The church is inevitably moving towards an institutionalized structure. The term 'early catholicism' is very common in New Testament scholarship.⁵ It is alleged that Luke-Acts, Pastorals, Ephesians, and II Peter-Jude exhibit some sort of a 'Catholic' tendency. The notion that church is an institution with a certain kind of people exercising leadership functions is seen in an embryo form within the New Testament literature itself.

When we can refer to a proto-type for local church structure, denominational structure, and the office of ministry there is nothing wrong in calling the independent movements of the New Testament days the proto-type for the present day para-church movements.

Ralph Winter introduces two words from anthropology which bring out the concepts clearly—modality and sodality. The church structures are modalities in which the members span the whole age-sex spectrum of the normal human community. Another example for this would be the state and the local governments. Sodalities are fellowship groups which is different from modalities in the age-sex spectrum of the members.⁶ This is a good differentiation. Paul and his p. 199 team was a sodality which was not necessarily under the direction of the modality as we saw already. Those who brought the gospel to Samaria and Antioch and the itinerant preachers can be classified in the sodality category.

At this point we must consider these two structures from a pragmatic point of view. It is pointed out that para-church structures depend on local church structures for personnel, finance, sacraments, and, if it is a mission agency, to hand down the planted churches. Thus it is derived that the local church structure is superior to the para-church structure.

This is a right observation but the implications drawn are not correct. All para-church leaders are members of some local churches. Financial support for their ministry is raised within the local churches. How does this imply superiority? If the universal church is one having two valid structures any member can take part in both structures. Paul was involved in both structures. So were the Hellenists who preached the gospel to the Gentiles. That the para-church leaders are members of local churches does not elevate the latter. It simply means that there are some believers who serve in both structures.

⁵ See F. Kasemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*. For a healthy reaction see I. H. Marshall, 'Early Catholicism in the New Testament', in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*. pp.217–231.

⁶ R. Winter and R. P. Beaver, *The Warp and Woof*, pp.55f.

Is raising support for the ministry of a para-church organisation in any way robbing the local church? Or does this fact make the para-church dependent on the local church and thereby make it inferior? Here again it must be remembered that the Church is one. All are primarily members of the universal church and all money belongs to God. If the para-church structure is biblically valid how can one structure claim that all money should come only into its structure? There are two issues—the individual's freedom in the use of his tithes and offerings and the organisation's right to demand. In the early church, support for ministry was seldom demanded: In Jerusalem Peter did not force all believers to sell their property and bring the money to the common pool. It was done voluntarily. When Paul pleaded for help for the poor saints in Jerusalem from his Gentile converts at Achaia they were never forced. Similarly he never demanded any support for himself ([Acts 20:34](#)) but received voluntary gifts ([Phil. 4:20; 4:10–20](#)). The principle here is that any structure should depend only upon voluntary support for ministry.

II THE THEOLOGY OF CHURCH AND PARA-CHURCH

We have been discussing the structure of the church. Now we must turn our attention to the *being* or the nature of the church. What exactly do we mean by the concept 'church'?
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Let us look at the theology of the church. Consider [Matthew 18:20](#): 'For where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them.' This occurs in the context of church discipline. There is a three-stage programme to correct an erring brother. First, to talk it out directly with him. Secondly, to talk it out with him in the presence of two or three witnesses and thirdly, to talk it out to the church. Whatever decision the church takes will be ratified by God in heaven. God honours the agreement of even two and the presence of Christ is there even if it be two or three. In the early church situation this refers to the presence of Christ in the worship services, and thus in prayer time in general.

What is meant by 'church' here? We must take a second look at the procedure. A problem is brought to the church—a decision is taken—it is ratified by God—God honours the agreement of even two—Christ is present in the midst of even such a very small company. To understand what is meant by 'church' in this context we have to reverse the whole process. The presence of Christ is in the midst of any company gathered in his name—God honours their prayer and decision—their decision concerning an erring brother is binding—'if there is any like this bring him before this body, the church'.⁹ The implication is very clear. Jesus is present even in small congregations or prayer meetings or Bible study groups.¹⁰ Conversely, any company, be it two or three, gathered in the name of Christ constitutes the church. This body is an expression of the Church universal. For all practical purposes this becomes the local church. Thus para-church which is primarily a fellowship of believers united together by virtue of a common cause is another form of a local church.

On the other hand, if we say that the saying is to establish the authority of the local churches our exegesis is incomplete since we are not probing into what constitutes the local church. If we say that the saying refers to Christ's presence during prayer, then we are taking the saying out of context. **p. 201**

Thus [Matthew 18:20](#) does not envisage any difference between the local church and the para-church. We need to consider now what exactly is the meaning of the term church.

⁹ See D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 276f. His exegesis does not take verses 19 and 20 out of the context of church discipline. See also C.H. Dodd, *New Testament Studies*, pp.58f.

¹⁰ See W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol, II, p.191.

It is often said that Jesus did not wish to establish any community but the followers started the organization. Thus [Matthew 16:17–19](#) and [18:15–20](#) where the sayings of Jesus concerning the church occur are considered unauthentic. This is not the place to discuss authenticity. However, it has been defended well.¹¹ It cannot be denied that Jesus was conscious of a Messianic community.

In [Matthew 16:18](#) Jesus says that he will build his church on Peter, the rock. There is a word play in the use of the two words, ‘Peter’ and ‘rock’, each having the same meaning in Greek or in Aramaic. Matthew has included this saying in the context of the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus tells Peter that the basis of the confession is God’s revelation to him. Clearly there is an elevation of Peter in this periscope. He is considered the foundation-rock on which the church is built. However, we must note that there is no reference to the succession of Peter in this section. Undoubtedly Peter was one of the apostles on whom the beginnings of the Church lay and this pericope highlights this fact. [Ephesians 2:20](#) tells us that the church is built ‘upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone’. From the book of Acts it is clear that Peter was chronologically the first in fulfilling the role of a church builder.

The Septuagint uses *ekklesia* for the Hebrew word *qahal* meaning the congregation of Israel. This is the word used in [Matthew 16:18](#) and [18:17](#). Most probably, then, *ekklesia* refers to the people of God. This people are of a special kind by virtue of their relationship to Jesus since he refers to them as ‘my *ekklesia*’. They belong to Jesus and Jesus belongs to them. This probably was the concept in its embryo form of the later congregations in the apostolic period. However, *ekklesia* can also mean the gathering or assembly of the people owing to the building metaphor used by our Lord.¹² Thus [Matthew 16](#) spells out that Peter was one of the founders of the church and [Matthew 18](#) spells out that two or three gathered in the name of Christ is a local church.

In the Gospel according to John there is no explicit reference to the word *ekklesia* but the Christian Community is referred to in many places ([10:16](#); [17:20, 21](#)). The community in John is primarily an organism and not an organization. The shepherd allegory in chapter [p. 202 10](#) and the vine allegory in chapter [15](#) bring this out clearly. The unity of the community is in focus in chapter [17](#). Any idea of ‘church’ in John is clearly referring to the universal church and not to any local congregation.

Paul uses the term *ekklesia* to mean both local congregations, for example, [Galatians 1:2](#) ‘to the churches of Galatia’ and to a body which transcends geographical or linguistic boundaries, for example, [Galatians 1:13](#), ‘I persecuted the church of God violently’. In the second sense it is the totality or the unity comprising all believers.

This second sense is seen more clearly in Ephesians and Colossians. It is identified as the body of Christ ([Col. 1:18, 24](#); [Eph. 1:23](#)). Here the word *ekklesia* is used in a catholic, i.e. all-comprising sense transcending the local congregation. Hence the term universal church. The implication is clear—the church is more than any local congregation. Christ is the head of the church, his body, and the church is subject to Christ ([Eph. 5:23f.](#)) Also, the church is Christ’s building ([2:20–22](#)) and Christ’s bride ([5:25ff.](#)). It is the people of God ([Rom. 9:25f.](#); [1 Pet. 1:9f.](#)). In all these references in Ephesians ([1:22](#); [3:10, 21](#); [5:23, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32](#)) the term *ekklesia* is used in the universal sense and it means ‘the universal Church within which are included all individual churches and which is at the same time

¹¹ See O. Cullman, *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr*, and D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, p.710f. Cullmann thinks that the saying is authentic but is dislocated.

¹² See D. Guthrie. *N.T. Theology*, p.712.

something more than the aggregation of the parts'.¹³ It involves the relationship of an individual to God and to other such individuals, many of whom he might not have met physically but who are in the body by virtue of the same relationship which they have with Christ. The idea that Christ is the head adds this new dimension to it. There is a solidarity of all those who believe in Christ. All local churches belong to one another because they jointly belong to Christ. No one stands alone and 'Christians are the body and limbs of Christ'.¹⁴ Every believer is a vital part in constituting the organism called the Church Universal. When two or three such members gather together, be it in the form of a local church or a para-church, they are expressions of the church universal.

This body, the universal church, established by Christ is continuous in that it exists through generations. This transcends the time boundary, linguistic and national boundaries. A lonely pioneering missionary who does not have a local church to fellowship with or a man who received the gospel on his death bed and thus is not part of any local church both belong to the universal Church. Thus the p. 203 universal Church transcends the limits of the local church. It has a metaphysical dimension to it.

TWO MANIFESTATIONS OF THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Are the universal and the local church one and the same? Not exactly. The local church is not the universal church in the sense that it is not identical with it. However, there exists a very close relationship between the two. The local church represents the universal church. This is seen from [Acts 20:28](#). K. L. Schmidt writes, 'each community, however small, represents the total community of the church'.¹⁵ This is little more than saying that the local church is a part of the universal Church. G. E. Ladd summarises the relationship clearly:

The local church is not part of the church but is the church in the local expression. This means that the whole power of Christ is available to every local congregation, that each congregation functions in its community as the universal church functions in the world as a whole, and that the local congregation is no isolated group but stands in a state of solidarity with the church as a whole.¹⁶

If this is the concept of the church, then is there any difference between the local church and a para-church? Definitely not. The local church is an assembly of believers. So is any para-church. Paul refers to churches meeting in houses. Some churches consisted of a number of such house-groups. When the word *ekklesia* is used of the total number of believers in a given place, the groups often consisted of a number of associated house-fellowships (cf. [Rom. 16:1](#); [Col. 4:16](#); [Gal. 1:22](#); Philem. v.2).¹⁷ For all practical purposes these are equal to para-churches.

In the New Testament there is no dichotomy of the church as local church and para-church. Any body of believers is addressed as church. In form and function the local church and para-church differ. But in their nature or status both are same. Both are local expressions of the Universal Church. This is the justification or biblical basis for certain

¹³ C. L. Mitton, *Ephesians*, p.75. See this commentary on the verses quoted here from Ephesians.

¹⁴ C. F. D. Moule, *Colossians and Philemon*, p.6

¹⁵ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. III, p.506.

¹⁶ *A Theology of the New Testament*, p.353.

¹⁷ See D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, p.744.

para-church movements which have become local churches and have developed into denominations. In any theology of the church we must note the difference between the function and the status of the church. Also, the distinction between local church and universal church must be kept clear. p. 204

Sacraments and Ordained Ministry in the Theology of the Church

There is a difference between the church and para-church structure. The local church administers sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, through ordained ministry whereas the para-church does not do so. Does the administration of sacraments and the category of ordained ministry belong to the status or the function of the church? At this point the N.T. evidence must be taken very seriously. In the N.T. do we see any evidence for the fact that the administration of the sacraments belongs to the realm of the status of the church? Ephesians and Colossians, where we see Paul's unique delineation of the concept of 'church', do not include this connotation. Neither do the imageries 'people of God', 'the body of Christ', 'the bride of the Lord' convey the notion that sacraments denote the *ontic* nature of the church. In [1 Corinthians 11:17-24](#) where Paul gives injunctions concerning order in celebrating the Lord's Supper he does not indicate that this belongs to the essence of the church. Neither do we see this in the synoptic account where the Lord instituted this, while celebrating the last passover meal with the disciples. In the Book of Acts 'breaking the bread' is an act in which the believers participated, ([2:42](#) and [20:7-12](#)) where Paul himself took part along with a small company of friends. We do not see any reference to the nature of the church here.

This holds good for the rite of Baptism too. Philip the evangelist baptized the Ethiopian officer ([Acts 8](#)). The Philippian jailor was baptized ([Acts 16](#)). In connection with Peter's evangelistic activities there were baptisms ([Acts 2](#) and [10](#)). Nowhere do we see that baptism was associated with the nature of the church. When Paul deals with the theology of Baptism ([Rom. 6:3-5](#); [1 Cor. 12:13](#); [Col. 2:11](#) f.) he does not indicate that this belongs to the essence of the church.

Later in the Pastoral epistles when church structure developed, there is no specific link of the sacrament of baptism or the Lord's Supper with the ontology of the church. In [Ephesians 4:4f.](#) there is reference to one body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God. The stress here is the underlying unity among the believers as in these various aspects. Church and baptism are not linked ontologically. Strangely, reference to the Lord's Supper is missing in these two verses. Thus administering the two sacraments, baptism and Lord's Supper, belongs to the realm of the functions of the local church.

Does the concept of ministry, the practice of an ordained person administering the sacraments, belong to the essence of the church? This practice is a later development. For example, there is no explicit mention that only the apostles baptized the three thousand men nor p. 205 that only they presided while breaking the bread ([Acts 2:42](#)). Philip the evangelist who baptized the Ethiopian officer was not an apostle. In [1 Corinthians 11:18](#) Paul refers to the church having assembled for celebrating the Lord's Supper. There is no specific reference to a person set apart for administering this sacrament either in this section or in the whole epistle. Church leadership was corporate during this time. That the sacrament were administered in the local churches by ministers set apart for the same was a necessary historical development as early as the beginning of the second century.

In the Pastorals we do see church office and church structure in a developed form. Nevertheless, the development is only in ecclesiastical structure, i.e., church government and personnel. This development is a development in the function of the church. There is no suggestion that this belongs to the Being of the church. G. E. Ladd writes, 'the

organizational structure of the church is no essential element in the theology of the church'.¹⁸ Again ordained ministry, like the administration of the sacraments, belongs to the function of the church and does not belong to the status of the church.

In saying that the sacraments and ordained ministry belong to the function of the church we are not minimizing their value. Indeed these are unique functions: sacraments were ordained by Jesus and as such they were distinctives of the Christian community over against the Jewish community. A proto-type for ordained ministry is seen in the book of Acts and the pastoral epistles. However, there is no suggestion that only the local churches were entitled to celebrate the Lord's Supper and administer Baptism. These were ordinances given to the universal Church and the local structure took care of them. Similarly in Acts and the Pastoral epistles we also see a proto-type for lay ministry and thus any superiority of the ordained ministry is ruled out. There is no evidence in the New Testament for dichotomising the office of ministry as 'ordained ministry' and 'lay ministry'.

In mission situations when para-church structures plant congregations usually they hand over these to local churches for shepherding. Does this mean that one structure is subservient to another? Not necessarily so. It must be pointed out that some such agencies have developed into separate local churches and denominations without handing over the planted congregations to already established local churches. Instead of viewing the situation as one superior to the other we ought to view that one structure complements the other. This will help build the kingdom of God. p. 206

There is a popular saying that para-church is an arm of the church. This is a cliché. Para-church is an arm of the universal church and not of the local church. It is alleged that the local churches can do all the ministries of the para-churches but the para-churches cannot do so since sacraments and ordained ministry belong only to the local churches. This is only a superficial assessment of the situation. Para-churches do become local churches and denominations if they choose to. So in the final analysis this difference does not mean superiority of one over the other. Thus while it appears that the para-church is an arm of the local church in reality it is not.

Conclusion

We can conclude that the Church is one and has two valid structures. These structures should complement each other. In practice the life of many local churches does not confirm with the definition of church as the people of God, the body of Christ, the fellowship of believers, or the eschatological community. Thus, theologically, while the local church expresses the universal church practically that expression is so negative that non-Christians shun becoming part of this community. The same can be said of the para-church agencies also. In structure and in the life of the members these too may lack vitality and Christian character. All the politics and motives of its members can be seen here as they are seen in the local churches. Both are in need of constant reformation. The challenge before the local churches and the para-church agencies is to make their members live under the authority of the word and in accordance with the word.

Dr. A.W. Swamidoss is Director of Post-Graduate Studies at the Union Biblical Seminary, Pune (formerly Yavatmal), India. p. 207

¹⁸ *A Theology of the New Testament*, p.534.