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# The Church: too big to be boxed in

by Samuel H. Moffett

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## *Tensions between church and parachurch—historic precedents, today's challenges*

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There is nothing new about tensions between church and parachurch agencies. The tug-of-war between institutional loyalties and functional freedom of action is as old as Paul's encounter with Peter in Antioch—and as contemporary as a 20th-century Protestant schism.

It can best be understood, therefore, in a context of history. For "the real essence of the real Church," as Hans Kung has written, "is expressed in historical form."

### **A history of tensions**

In the first century, a question came up concerning the relationship between recognized ecclesiastical authority (the Twelve) and a highly personalized, but amazingly effective, mission (Paul's), which brought forth an eloquent defense of his ministry to the Gentiles. Paul recognized the imperatives of (1) a church connection, (2) a commissioning from the congregation in Antioch, and later, (3) the approval of the leaders in Jerusalem.

But when Paul's own authority was questioned, he based the validity of his call and mission not on the mandate of any church in Antioch, or even on the sanction of the apostles in Jerusalem, but on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Only in the assurance of a commissioning beyond the power of any human organization to give, could he be so bold as to "oppose

[Peter] to his face."

In seventh-century England the tension between independent and church-centered outreach brought Celtic and Roman missions into head-on collision. The former were far more successful in converting Scotland and England, but the latter triumphed in organizing the church. It was the Irish monks, singularly unfettered by diocesan controls, who largely Christianized the British Isles. But it was a bishop from Rome, Wilfred of York, who outmaneuvered them at Whitby in 663-664.

A different, but not altogether dissimilar, conflict of functional urgencies and organizational connections in the ninth century kept Cyril and Methodius dangling in mid-orbit between Constantinople and Rome, as those two powerful churches fought for control of the brothers' successful mission to the Slavs. The missionaries, however, were more interested in keeping the project indigenously Slavic than in the issue of with what church it should have its connection.

After a thousand years of trial and error, Rome at last faced the fact that church structures and mission structures might need differing institutional forms and a flexible relationship. Beginning with the Franciscans and Dominicans in the 13th century, and the Jesuits in the 16th, the Pope began to grant autonomy from lesser ecclesiastical authority than his own to a whole

multitude of missionary orders (voluntary societies for mission).

Freed from jealous ecclesiastical controls, these missionary societies exploded in outreach across the world, far beyond the borders of Christendom. The pattern of the Roman Catholic orders had its own problems. At one unforgettable point in church history the Pope dissolved the entire Jesuit Society. But it has served admirably as a missionary model to this day.

Had Martin Luther not reacted against the missionary orders—especially the Dominicans and Franciscans, as in his preface to Alber's "The Fools' Mirror . . ."—the first 250 years of Protestantism might not have been so astonishingly sterile in missionary outreach. Without a structure for missionary ministry comparable to the orders, Protestantism turned in upon itself, as a church in mission among the churched, and left the world to the untiring friars and the Jesuits.

It is significant that when the Lutheran monarch Frederick IV of Denmark looked about for his first foreign missionaries in 1706, he went not to the organized church but to the independent Pietists, and official Lutheranism thundered against the folly of a mission to savages. The voluntary mission society, supported by no single church body, remained the dominant German pattern up into the 1950's.

Anglicans, less anti-Catholic and more pragmatic than Luther,

proved more flexible than the continental Lutheran and Reformed churches. They eventually allowed two different missionary societies within their one church—the older Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, for the more establishment-minded, and a new Church Missionary Society for the more independent “evangelicals.”

Max Warren’s article “Why Missionary Societies and Not Missionary Churches?” is a beautifully even-tempered defense of such plurality of mission structures within the unity of the Church:

“To imagine the religious societies of the eighteenth century as being in some way ‘in opposition’ to the Church, or even to envisage them in apposition, as being over against the Church, is to do despite to the Holy Spirit of God and to his working in history. It is a wrong interpretation of the facts . . . No, official leadership does not by itself constitute the Church. Nor is the central administration of a denomination *the Church*” (italics his).

Americans were even more innovative. Instead of one church with two missionary societies, they formed one missionary society for two still-separated churches—the Congregationalist and Presbyterian—and for any others which might wish to cooperate. The famous American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, organized in 1810 after the pattern of the London Missionary Society, became the missionary agency for both denominations. On both sides of the Atlantic, this type of parachurch structure of the voluntary mission societies turned out to be the dominant form of 19th-century Protestant overseas missions.

But as early as 1837, American Presbyterians began to have second thoughts about independence in mission. A year later, the Presbyterian General Assembly tore itself in half over the issue of whether Presbyterian missions could properly be entrusted to an

independent agency not under the direct control of the church. Its liberal wing remained loyal to the parachurch society and was drummed out of the church. The conservative wing, remaining in the assembly, separated itself from the highly successful voluntary society for missions, and formed an equally successful denominational Board of Foreign Missions. By the end of the century, mainline *church* agencies, denominationally controlled, became the ascendant organizational form of missions.

The 20th century brought an ironic switch. In the 1930’s—just as the denominationally controlled mainline mission boards were proving their ability to plant flourishing younger churches around the world—an abrupt reversal of the trend took place, particularly in North America.

Earlier, it had been the liberals who championed the parachurch approach to mission. About a century later, around the year 1937, it was the conservatives who broke away from the denominations in ever-increasing numbers to form independent societies and to swell the ranks of what by then were being called “faith missions.” A related development was the emergence of independent denominations with a strong focus on missions.

By 1960 the “center of gravity of Protestant mission-sending agencies” had shifted sharply away from the mainline agencies towards parachurch missions and independent denominations. Today the imbalance is overwhelming. It has been estimated that as much as 90% of the full-time North American missionary force operates outside of National Council of Churches denominations (though not all of these are with parachurch groups). It is no wonder that tensions have developed.

### Definitions without agreement

We turn now—somewhat reluctantly—from history to the harder task of groping for definitions.

Parallels from history must be

treated with caution. It is easy to jump too quickly from resemblances of form and function to assumptions of identity of being. In the New Testament, for example, the apostles in Jerusalem were not a National Council of Churches. Nor was St. Paul working for Campus Crusade.

The heart of our problem centers around the definition of the church, as Warren suggests in the paragraph quoted above. If no agreement can be reached on so basic a definition as that, discussion of relationships between church and parachurch will always end in frustration. Unfortunately, “church” is one of the most imprecise words in the Christian lexicon. And to add the prefix “para” to it, only makes it fuzzier.

What is a church? This is where the ambiguities begin. Witness the confusion—both legal and ecclesiastical—between a church, a confessional body, a denomination, a congregation, a sect and a cult. And what is a parachurch—a voluntary society, a service agency, an electronic television program, a

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seminary chapel, a denominational mission agency, a faith mission, a task force? The list could go on and on.

Not every true believer is content with John Calvin’s classic definition of the “marks” of the church: faithful *preaching* and hearing of the Gospel and the administration of the *sacraments* as instituted by Christ. However much one may be biased in Calvin’s favor, as is the present writer, it is difficult to stop

here. Once one starts to list the marks of the true church, to stop with two or to find agreement on their priority and indispensability, is next to impossible. Calvin himself often added a third mark, *discipline*, which refers not only to the church's authority, but to its moral, ethical and social dimensions.

The Salvation Army, which was originally parachurch, is now as much or more truly a church, albeit without the traditional sacraments, as some churches with sacraments but without Christian service to the poor, or others which celebrate the sacraments but have lost their moral and theological discipline.

Calvin at least was right in his willingness to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials, and in his emphatic warnings against both schismatic temper, on the one hand—which is the besetting sin of the parachurch—and ecclesiastical arrogance, on the other hand—which is an endemic fault in the churches. The latter he rejected as "monarchy among ministers," citing Paul's claim to equality with the Twelve.

Does this suggest that ultimately there is no difference between church and parachurch? Not quite, but it does raise questions. Is the church a worshipping fellowship of believers? So are many parachurch organizations. Is the parachurch a service agency? So are some churches. Is the church where the Word of God is faithfully preached? Independent missions do that. So do seminaries.

Perhaps the church of Jesus Christ is too big to be boxed in by Catholic orders or Protestant reformers. There are always new dimensions which we may have overlooked—the exercise of the Holy Spirit's gifts, the fulfillment of God's missionary purpose, the manifestation of his Kingdom, the fellowship of the saints, the school of discipleship, the place of prayer. Like his person and his work, the Body of Christ defies adequate description.

Long before Calvin's time, Ignatius of Antioch, bishop of the church which less than 60 years

before had sent Paul on his first missionary journey, left us a memorable one-line definition of the church. He was a strong defender of the power of bishops, but in a letter written on his way to martyrdom in Rome about 107 A.D., he returned to the basics. "Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Church," he said simply.

There is an echo of the same sentiment in Irenaeus a generation later. "Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every grace." It was an age closer to the apostles than ours, and perhaps truer to the apostolic concept of the church. Who will deny to parachurch agencies the presence and power of Christ and his Spirit?

Then what is the real difference between church and parachurch?

Some say that the difference lies in the fact that the church is the *whole* Body of Christ, whereas parachurch agencies are never more than incomplete parts. But what Church today claims to be the whole Body? There is only one Head—Christ. All the other parts are precisely that—parts—the parachurches no less parts of the one Body than the churches, and each member of the Body no less interdependent than all the other members. This puts church/parachurch tensions in a different, less pejorative perspective. It is unfortunately true that there is as much organizational tension between the churches themselves as between church and parachurch, and one is no more reprehensible than the other.

Others say that the difference is a matter of recognition and acceptance by some higher authority. If so, by what authority? The word "church" derives from the Greek *kuriakon* and simply means "that which belongs to the Lord." This could apply equally well to church or parachurch. Paul's favorite word for the church, *ekklesia*, from which the English language derives the word "ecclesiastic," means "a community" or "a called gathering," and Paul never tires of pointing out

that the calling is from God, not from any human source.

Were not the Protestant denominations themselves non-churches—or worse yet, anti-churches—to some Catholics before

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## The calling is from God, not from any human source

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Vatican II? But what Protestant denomination would accept the label "parachurch" as if its churchness were of an inferior order? To strict anabaptists, is not any church organization beyond the worshipping congregation a parachurch? But what presbytery considers itself to be a lower governing body than a congregation?

On a larger scale, is not the World Council of Churches a parachurch agency? Yet in a strange reversal of roles, membership in such a parachurch organization is considered by some to be the authentication of a church.

### Pathways to cooperation

Despite these ambiguities of definition, however, there does remain a feeling of difference between church and parachurch. But if history leaves us with tensions, and if our definitions—even with the guidance of Scripture—lead us to no Christian consensus, how do Christians deal with this difference?

One helpful approach is Ralph Winter's "warp-and-wool" analogy, exposed in a series of pathfinding articles on "The Two Structures of Mission." In them he borrows terms from the social sciences and describes a church as a *modality*, and a parachurch agency as a *sodality*. He uses *modality* to define the

general, formal, inclusive structure of a church, as embracing all the Christians within it—young or old, male or female, clergy or laity—irrespective of their differing functions. It is a “full community,” charged with declaring and doing the whole counsel of God.

*Sodalities*, however, are voluntary functional groups, organized for a special task or purpose. They “do not by themselves constitute a self-perpetuating community.” Since they do not pretend to be the “full community,” they can serve several communities, cutting across the lines of church modalities. Such would be a missionary order like the Jesuits—within the papal modality, but transcending diocesan episcopal modalities. A Protestant parallel would be the interdenominational missionary societies, such as the early American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, serving both Congregationalism and Presbyterianism, or the more modern “faith” missions.

Winter’s irenic thesis is that the Church needs both modalities and sodalities, as woven cloth needs both a warp and a woof. But he admits that even this analysis does not clear away the ambiguities. Sodalities merge into modalities, as specialized voluntary societies sometimes become denominations. And churches—particularly first-generation churches—often look and act like sodalities. In fact, humanly speaking, the whole Church on earth is a voluntary society.

Another extremely valuable survey of the problem is a handbook on church-parachurch relations prepared by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, entitled *Cooperating In World Evangelization*. Its identification and description of five major areas of friction is particularly helpful: (1) “dogmatism about non-essentials,” (2) “the threat of conflicting authorities,” (3) “strained relationships,” (4) “rivalry between ministries,” and (5) “suspicion about finances.” The

handbook analyzes each area of tension in some detail, with a careful balance of church and parachurch perspectives.

Better than that, it goes on to suggest approaches to mutual understanding and cooperation. “When two groups (one church, one parachurch) want the same people, the same programs, the same dollars and the same authority, a clash is inevitable and both ministries suffer.” No one organizational pattern of relationship will solve all the tensions, but cooperation is absolutely imperative, and on the parachurch side, the Committee was “largely in agreement with the statement by John Stott that ‘independence of the church is bad, cooperation with the church is better, service as an arm of the church is best.’”

A similar study of the issues should be undertaken by the churches. Much thinking remains to be done about the doctrine of the Church. A better definition of ecumenics is needed than inter-church relations. Until the churches take parachurch ministries more seriously, they will continue to spin in their own circles while growth passes them by.

There was a time when national Christian councils included delegated, voting representation from interdenominational and independent agencies. Then they became “national councils of churches,” and with the narrowing of the base came a limiting of vision and a diminishing of mission. Perhaps the churches need both Christian councils and councils of churches—with the two in constant conversation and interaction, one focused on outreach, the other on relationships.

None of the above ways of approaching the tensions between church and parachurch will bring in the millenium, when “the lion shall lie down with the lamb.” Lambs are not even lying down with lambs at present—they are all acting like lions. But there are ways of reducing the tension.

In the absence of a final solution, I suggest a few guidelines for con-

sideration. The Far East would call them proverbs. Like the laws of grace in the Bible—which are neither all grace nor entirely law—proverbs seek a balance of wisdom that is open to seemingly contradictory facts. These will not dispel the tensions, but they may help Christians to deal with them. Each law has two parts—one speaks to the church, the other to the parachurch.

*First:* “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” (That is for the church). But freedom also corrupts, and absolute freedom corrupts absolutely. (That is for the parachurch). This is the law of original sin.

*Second:* Churches don’t grow; their parts do. But only the relation of the parts to the whole prevents growth from becoming deformity. This is the law of the body and the cells.

*Third:* “Let the church be the church,” and the parachurch, parachurch. When the church thinks everything it does is “mission,” it is thinking like a parachurch. When a parachurch thinks it must do everything, it is acting like a church. This is the law of defined responsibility.

And *finally:* “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels . . . and . . . have all faith so that I can remove mountains . . . And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor . . . and have not love, it profits me nothing.”

This is the law of love. It cannot be divided into two parts. Like the Spirit who gives it, it holds the parts together. □

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Samuel H. Moffett, Ph.D., is the Henry Winters Luce professor of Ecumenics and Mission at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey, USA. Born in Korea of Presbyterian missionary parents, he served for many years as a missionary and educator in China and Korea. He is the author of a forthcoming comprehensive history of Christianity in Asia.

# Together

A Journal of World Vision International

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to be boxed in

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First the Gospel,  
then education

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*A CASE STUDY:*

'Returning home'

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**WORLD VISION INTERNATIONAL**

## En este número . . .

Ud. no puede comprender el papel de los "ministerios para-eclesiales" sin primero determinar lo que es la iglesia, dice Samuel H. Moffett en el presente número de *Together*. Como ha escrito Hans Kung, "la verdadera esencia de la verdadera iglesia se expresa en forma histórica." Desde la perspectiva de Moffett, en su calidad de historiador eclesiástico, nos ofrece un análisis brillante de uno de los problemas actuales más difíciles. Aunque Ud. no comparta su opinión, se verá obligado a reflexionárselo seriamente.

El editorial de Phil Hunt titulado "Transformación" busca armonizar otra tensión parecida—

la que existe entre las agencias que recaudan dinero y las que lo gastan.

Otros ensayos del presente número tratan la "Pobreza y las Riquezas en Proverbios." Gordon Chutter, Thomas Hanks, B. E. Fernando y nuestro director editorial someten criterios que procuran lograr un equilibrio entre la justicia y la opresión, y la prosperidad bíblica con la "opción preferencial para los pobres."

Le gustará la entrevista con el Rev. Juan Mpaayei. Es respetado entre cristianos como "hermano mayor" de la cultura de los Maasai (¿Recuerde Ud. el caso de estudio "Pokot" en *Together* No. 1?). De nuevo en este número, el caso de

estudio se ubica en el Africa oriental. "Retornando a Casa" representa el dilema de un profesor exilado de Uganda a quien le invitan a regresar de Nairobi a dirigir un proyecto de desarrollo en su tierra natal. No es una decisión facil, como indican claramente las respuestas de An Thien Tran (de Vietnam) y de Hilary de Alwis (de Sri Lanka).

Finalmente, el tercero de nuestra serie ilustrada sobre "participación comunitaria", completa el actual contenido. Pero no se olvide de las notas bibliográficas y el "Foro..." (cartas a la redacción).

Disfrútelo todo.

## In this issue . . .

You cannot understand the role of "parachurch ministries" without first deciding what the Church is, says Samuel H. Moffett in this issue. As Hans Kung has written, "the real essence of the real Church is expressed in historical form." From Moffett's perspective as a church historian, he gives us a brilliant analysis of one of today's most vexing problems. You may not agree with him, but he will make you think.

Phil Hunt's editorial on "Transformation" seeks to harmonize a similar tension—that

between "fund-raising" and "fund-spending" agencies.

Other essays in this issue focus on "Poverty and Riches in the Proverbs." Gordon Chutter, Thomas Hanks, B. E. Fernando and our editorial director get into the action with opinions which attempt to balance justice and oppression, godly prosperity and the "preferential option for the poor."

You will enjoy the interview with the Rev. John Mpaayei. He is the "grand old man" of the Maasai culture (Remember the "Pokot" case study in *TOGETHER* No. 1?).

Our teaching case study this time is also from East Africa. "Returning

Home" depicts the dilemma of an exiled Ugandan professor invited to return from Nairobi to a development job in his native country. It's not an easy decision, as the responses by Thien Tran An (Vietnam) and Hilary de Alwis (Sri Lanka) clearly show.

Finally, the third in our illustrated community participation series rounds out the table of contents. But don't forget the book reviews, booknotes and "Forum..." (letters).

Enjoy it all!



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TED W. ENGSTROM, PRESIDENT

# WORLD VISION INTERNATIONAL

January 31, 1984

Dr. Samuel H. Moffett  
31 Alexander Street  
Princeton, New Jersey 08540

Dear Sam:

Your article is tremendous, great! What a pleasure to edit something so well written and with so much to say.

Enclosed is a photocopy of the very slightly edited text. You will notice that I doctored up the vestibule a little bit, going in.

I also added a paragraph where you are trying to give definitions of the church. I hope you agree with it because it waters down Calvin just a bit more to my liking.

The way you handled the history is superb.

In fact, the whole article is just what we need. I trust it will make a real impact.

Just for your information, I read a book last weekend by Jerry White entitled, The Church and the Parachute. Interesting handbook of suggestions for those involved in the conflicts resulting from this tension. It is not a new book, published by Multnomah, but it has a lengthy bibliography at the back which might interest you.

Please let me know if you are in agreement with the minor changes we have wrought. The headline is a temporary label only. It will probably be changed when the pages are made up.

Gracie sends love -- give ours to Eileen.

Cordially and gratefully,

W. Dayton Roberts  
Editorial Director

WDR:pk

Enclosure

Original mss. with footnotes omitted in the printed version, and a letter of comment from George Swearingen<sup>1)</sup>

## CHURCH AND PARACHURCH

### An Ecumenical Dialogue with an Impact on MISSIONS

There is nothing new about tensions between church and parachurch agencies. Some prefer to phrase this as the difference between missionary churches (that is, the whole church as God's instrument for mission) and voluntary societies for particular missions, or between denominational sub-structures and independent Christian organizations. We will try to define the terms later, but first a quick look at history. For "The real essence of the real Church", as Hans Kung writes, "is expressed in historical form." (The Church, p.5).

#### A History of Tensions.

The tug-of-war between institutional loyalties and functional freedom of action is as old as Paul's encounter with Peter in Antioch, and as contemporary as a Protestant schism. In the first century the issue arose as a question of relationship between recognized ecclesiastical authority (the twelve) and a highly personalized but amazingly effective mission (Paul's) which brought forth the eloquent defense of his ministry to the Gentiles. He recognized the imperatives of a church connection, commissioning from the congregation in Antioch, and later, the approval of the leaders in Jerusalem. But when Paul's own authority was questioned, he based the validity of his call and mission not on the mandate of any church in Antioch, or even the sanction of the apostles in Jerusalem, but on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Only in the assurance of a commissioning beyond the power of any human organization to give could he be so bold as to "oppose [Peter] to his face". (Gal. 1 and 2).

In seventh century England the tension between independent and church-centered outreach brought Celtic and Roman missions into head-on collision. The former were far more successful in converting Scotland and

England, but the latter triumphed in organizing the church. It was the Irish monks, singularly unfettered by episcopal controls, who largely Christianized the English kingdoms, but it was a bishop from Rome, Wilfred of York, who outmaneuvered them at Whitby in 663/4. <sup>1</sup>

A different, but not altogether dissimilar conflict of functional urgencies and organizational connections in the ninth century kept Cyril and Methodius dangling in mid-orbit between Constantinople and Rome as those two powerful churches fought for control of the brothers' successful mission to the Slavs. The missionaries, however, were more interested in keeping the project indigenously Slavic than in the issue of with what church it should have its connection. <sup>2</sup>

After a thousand years of trial and error Rome at last faced the fact that church structures and mission structures might need differing institutional forms and a flexible relationship. Beginning with the Franciscans and Dominicans in the thirteenth century and the Jesuits in the sixteenth, the Pope began to grant autonomy from lesser ecclesiastical authority than his own to a whole multitude of missionary orders (voluntary societies for mission). Freed from jealous ecclesiastical controls, these missionary societies exploded in outreach across the world far beyond the borders of Christendom. The pattern of the Roman Catholic orders was not without its own problems. At one unforgettable point in church history the Pope dissolved the entire Jesuit Society. But it has served admirably as a missionary model to this day.

Had Luther not reacted against the missionary orders, especially the Dominicans and Franciscans, as in his preface to Alber's "The Fools' Mirror.." <sup>3</sup> the first two hundred and fifty years of Protestantism might not have been so astonishingly sterile in missionary outreach. Without a

structure for missionary outreach comparable to the orders, Protestantism turned in upon itself, as a church in mission among the churched, and left the world to the untiring friars, and the Jesuits. It is significant that when the Lutheran monarch Frederick IV of Denmark looked about for his first foreign missionaries in 1706, he went not to the organized church but to the independent Pietists, and official Lutheranism thundered against the folly of a mission to savages. The voluntary mission society, supported by no single church body, remained the dominant German pattern up into the 1950's.

Anglicans, less anti-Catholic and more pragmatic than Luther, proved more flexible than the Continental Lutheran and Reformed churches. They eventually allowed two different missionary societies within their one church, the older Society for the Propagation of the Gospel for the more establishment-minded and a new Church Missionary Society for the more independent "evangelicals".

Max Warren's article, "Why Missionary Societies and Not Missionary Churches?" <sup>4</sup> is a beautifully even-tempered defense of such plurality of mission structures within the unity of the church:

"To imagine the religious societies of the eighteenth century as being in some way 'in opposition' to the Church, or even to envisage them in apposition, as being over against the Church is to do despite to the Holy Spirit of God and to his working in history. It is a wrong interpretation of the facts...No, official leadership does not by itself constitute the Church. Nor is the central administration of a denomination the Church" (italics his).

Americans were even more innovative. Instead of one church with two missionary societies, they formed one missionary society for two still separated churches, Congregationalist and Presbyterian, and for any others which might wish to cooperate. The famous American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, organized in 1810 after the pattern of the London Missionary Society, became the missionary agency for both denominations. On

both sides of the Atlantic this type of parachurch structure of the voluntary mission societies became the dominant form of 19th century Protestant overseas missions. <sup>5</sup>

But as early as 1837 American Presbyterians began to have second thoughts about independency in mission. A year later the Presbyterian General Assembly tore itself in half over the issue of whether Presbyterian missions could properly be entrusted to an independent agency not under the direct control of the church. Its liberal wing remained loyal to the parachurch society and was drummed out of the church. The conservative wing, remaining in the church, separated itself from the highly successful voluntary society for missions, and formed an equally successful denominational Board of Foreign Missions. <sup>6</sup> By the end of the century mainline church agencies, denominationally controlled, became the ascendant organizational form of missions.

The twentieth century brought an ironic switch. Just as the denominationally controlled mainline mission boards were proving their ability to plant flourishing younger churches around the world, the 1930s saw an abrupt reversal of the trend, particularly in North America. In 1837 it had been the liberals who championed the parachurch approach to mission. Around the year 1937 in ever increasing numbers it was the conservatives who broke away from the denominations to form what by then were being called "faith missions". A related development was the emergence of independent denominations with a strong focus on missions. By 1960 the "center of gravity of Protestant mission-sending agencies" had shifted sharply away from the mainline agencies towards parachurch missions and independent denominations. Today the imbalance is overwhelming. <sup>7</sup> It has been estimated that as much as 90% of the full-time North American missionary force operates

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outside the ecumenical church orbit. <sup>8</sup> It is no wonder that tensions have developed.

Definitions Without Agreement.

But the time has come to turn reluctantly from history to the harder task of groping for definitions. Parallels from history must be treated with caution. It is easy to jump too quickly from resemblances of form and function to assumptions of identity of being. In the New Testament, for example, the apostles in Jerusalem were not a National Council of Churches, nor was Paul working for Campus Crusade.

The heart of the problem centers around the definition of the church, as Warren suggests in the paragraph quoted above. If no agreement can be reached on so basic a definition as that, discussion of relationships between church and parachurch will always end in frustration. Unfortunately, "church" is one of the most imprecise words in the Christian lexicon, and to add the prefix "para" to it only makes it fuzzier.

What is a church? Here is where the ambiguities begin. Witness the confusion, both legal and ecclesiastical, between a church, a confessional body, a denomination, a congregation, a sect and a cult. And what is a parachurch? A voluntary society, a service agency, an electronic television program, a seminary chapel, a denominational mission agency, a faith mission, a task force? The list could go on and on.

Not every true believer is content with Calvin's classic definition of the "marks" of the church: faithful preaching and hearing of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ. <sup>9</sup> However much one may be biased in Calvin's favor, as is the present writer, it is difficult, once one starts to list the marks of the true church, to stop with two or to find agreement that those two, as any particular church defines

them, are indispensable. The Salvation Army, which was originally parachurch, is now as much or more truly a church, though without the traditional sacraments, as some churches with sacraments but without Christian service to the poor, or others which have the sacraments but have lost their moral and theological discipline. Calvin, himself, often added a third "mark", discipline, which refers not only to the church's authority but to its moral, ethical and social dimensions. 10

Calvin at least was right in willingness to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials, and in his emphatic warnings against both schismatic temper on the one hand, which is the besetting sin of the para-church, and ecclesiastical arrogance on the other hand, which is an endemic fault in the churches. The latter he rejected as "monarchy among ministers", citing Paul's claim to equality with the twelve. 11

Does this suggest that ultimately there is no difference between church and parachurch? Not quite, but it does raise questions. Is the church a worshipping fellowship of believers? So are many parachurch organizations. Is the parachurch a service agency? So are some churches. Is the church where the Word of God is faithfully preached? Independent missions do that. So do seminaries.

Long before Calvin, Ignatius of Antioch, bishop of the church which less than sixty years earlier had sent Paul on his first missionary journey, left us a memorable one-line definition of the church. He was a strong defender of the power of bishops, but in a letter on his way to martyrdom in Rome about 107 A.D., he returned to basics. "Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Church", he said simply. (Ad Smyrn.,8) There is an echo of the same sentiment in Irenaeus a generation later. "Where the Church is, there also is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and

every grace." (Adv. Haer., iii, 24, 1) It was an age closer to the apostles than ours, and perhaps truer to the apostolic concept of the church. Who will deny to parachurch agencies the presence and power of Christ and His Spirit? Then what is the real difference between church and parachurch?

Some say that the difference lies in the fact that the church is the whole Body of Christ whereas parachurch agencies are never more than incomplete parts. But what Church today claims to be the whole Body? There is only one Head, Christ. All the other parts are precisely that--parts--the parachurches no less parts of the one Body than the churches, each member of the Body no less interdependent than all the other members. This puts church/parachurch tensions in a different, less pejorative perspective. It is unfortunately true that there is as much organizational tension between the churches themselves as between church and parachurch and one is no more reprehensible than the other.

Others say that the difference is a matter of recognition and acceptance by some higher authority. If so, by what authority? The word "church" derives from the Greek kuriakon and simply means "that which belongs to the Lord". This could apply equally well to church or parachurch. Paul's favorite word for the church, ekklesia, from which the English language derives the word "ecclesiastic", means "a community" or "a called gathering", and Paul is never tired of pointing out that the calling is from God, not from any human source. Were not the Protestant denominations themselves non-churches or worse yet, anti-churches to some Catholics before Vatican II? But what Protestant denomination would accept the label "parachurch" as if its churchness were of an inferior order? To strict anabaptists is not any church organization beyond the worshipping congregation a parachurch? But what presbytery considers itself to be a lower governing body than a

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congregation? On a larger scale, is not the W.C.C. a parachurch agency? Yet in a strange reversal of roles, membership in such a parachurch organization is considered by some to be the authentication of a church.

Pathways to Co-operation.

Despite all the ambiguities, however, there does remain a feeling of difference between church and parachurch. But if history leaves us with tensions, and if definitions, even with the guidance of Scripture, lead to no Christian concensus, how do Christians deal with the difference? One helpful approach to an analysis is Ralph Winter's "warp and woof" analogy in a series of pathfinding articles on "The Two Structures of Mission".<sup>12</sup> In them he borrows terms from the social sciences and describes a church as a modality and a parachurch agency as a sodality. He uses modality to define the general, formal, inclusive structure of a church as embracing all the Christians within it, young or old, male or female, clergy or laity, irrespective of their differing functions. It is a "full community", charged with declaring and doing the whole counsel of God. Sodalities, however, are voluntary functional groups, organized for a special task or purpose, which "do not by themselves constitute a self-perpetuating community". Since they do not pretend to be "the full community", they can serve several communities, cutting across the lines of church modalities. Such would be a missionary order like the Jesuits, within the papal modality but transcending diocesan episcopal modalities; or in Protestantism, like interdenominational missionary societies such as the early American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, serving both Congregationalism and Presbyterianism.

Winter's irenic thesis is that the church needs both modalities and sodalities, as woven cloth needs both a warp and a woof. But he admits that even this analysis does not clear away the ambiguities. Sodalities merge

into modalities as specialized voluntary societies sometimes become denominations. And churches, particularly first-generation churches look and act like sodalities. In fact, humanly speaking, the whole church on earth is a voluntary society.

Another extremely valuable survey of the problem is a handbook on church/parachurch relations prepared by the Lausanne Committee, Co-operating in World Evangelization. <sup>13</sup> Its identification and description of five major areas of friction is particularly helpful: 1) "dogmatism about non-essentials", 2) "the threat of conflicting authorities", 3) "strained relationships", 4) "rivalry between ministries", and 5) "suspicion about finances". The handbook analyzes each area of tension in some detail, with a careful balance of church and parachurch perspectives. Better than that, it goes on to suggest approaches to mutual understanding and cooperation. "When two groups (one church, one parachurch) want the same people, the same programmes, the same dollars and the same authority, a clash is inevitable and both ministries suffer." No one organizational pattern of relationship will solve all the tensions, but cooperation is absolutely imperative, and on the parachurch side, the Committee was "largely in agreement" with a statement by John Stott that "independence of the church is bad, cooperation with the church is better, service as an arm of the church is best".

A similar study of the issues should be undertaken by the churches. Much thinking remains to be done about the doctrine of the church. A better definition of ecumenics is needed than inter-church relations. Until the churches take parachurch ministries more seriously, they will continue to spin in their own circles while growth passes them by. There was a time when National Christian Councils included delegated, voting representation from interdenominational and independent agencies. Then they became National

Councils of Churches and with the narrowing of the base came a limiting of vision and a diminishing of mission. Perhaps the church needs both Christian Councils and Councils of Churches, with the two in constant conversation and interaction, one focussed on outreach, the other on relationships.

None of the above ways of approaching the tensions between church and parachurch will bring in the millennium when "the lion shall lie down with the lamb". Lambs are not even lying down with lambs at present; they are all acting like lions. But there are ways of reducing the tension.

In the absence of a final solution, may I close with a few guidelines for consideration. The Far East would call them proverbs. Like the laws of grace in the Bible which are neither all grace nor entirely law, proverbs seek a balance of wisdom open to seemingly contradictory facts. These will not dispel the tensions, but they may help Christians deal with them. Each law has two parts; one speaks to the church, the other to the parachurch.

First: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely". (That is for the church). But freedom also corrupts, and absolute freedom corrupts absolutely. (That is for the parachurch). This is the law of original sin.

Second: Churches don't grow; their parts grow. But only the relation of the parts to the whole prevents growth from becoming deformity. This is the law of the body and the cells.

Third: "Let the Church be the Church", and a parachurch a parachurch. When the church thinks everything it does is "mission" it is thinking like a parachurch. When a parachurch thinks it must do everything it is acting like a church. This is the law of defined responsibility.

And finally, "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of

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angels...; and..have all faith so that I can remove mountains..And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor...and have not love, it profits me nothing." This is the law of love. It cannot be divided into two parts. Like the Spirit who gives it, it holds the parts together.

--Samuel Hugh Moffett

Princeton, New Jersey

January 23, 1984

#### Footnotes

1. John T. McNeill, The Celtic Churches, (Chicago: U. of Chicago: 1974), pp. 102-115, 155-175.
- \* 2. Francis Dvornik, Byzantine Mission Among the Slavs, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U., 1970), pp. 131-193.
3. Erasmus Alber, Der Barfussermonche Eulenspiegel und Alcoran, (Wittenberg, 1542), a collection of 40 "conformities" between St. Francis and Christ, borrowed from Bartholomew of Pisa. I am indebted to my colleague Prof. K. Froehlich, for this citation.
4. Max Warren, in The Student World, vol. 53, no. 1-2 (1960), pp. 153 f.
5. K. S. Latourette, History of the Expansion of Christianity, vol. IV, (N.Y. & London: Harper, 1941), pp. 81-109. "It was by popular, voluntary movements and organizations that Christianity spread". (p. 109)
6. This was the Old School/New School schism. See "The United Presbyterian Church in Mission", in Journal of Presbyterian History, vol. 57, no 3 (Fall, 1979), pp. 191 ff.
7. David M. Stowe, in 12th Edition. Mission Handbook: North American Protestant Missionaries Overseas, ed. by S. Wilson, (Monrovia CA: MARC, 1979), p. 9ff.
8. S. Wilson, ed., ibid., p. 22

9. Calvin, Institutes, IV. i.9. Cf. Augsburg Confession, art. vii.
10. Bucer, the Scots Confession and the Belgic Confession make discipline the third "mark" more explicitly than Calvin. See F.L. Battle's translation of the Institutes, p. 1023, n. 18, in The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1941).
11. Calvin, IV. vi. 9.
12. Ralph Winter, as in Winter and S. Hawthorne, Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, (Pasadena: Wm. Carey, 1981), pp. 178-190; and in "Protestant Mission Societies: The American Experience", Missiology, vol. 7, no. 2 (April, 1979), pp. 139-178.
13. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Co-operating in World Evangelization: A Handbook on Church/Parachurch Relationships. Lausanne Occasional Papers, No. 24. (Wheaton and London: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1983). Quotations are from pp. 23, 49, 13, and 34.



PRINCETON  
THEOLOGICAL  
SEMINARY

April 17, 1984

Dear Sam:

I am sorry I have kept this very interesting paper so long. It is a very enlightening treatment of an important and difficult subject and I kept hoping I could have a chance to talk to you about it - but that chance seemed never to come.

The word "church" is tremendously important, but bewilderingly imprecise. It is so definite and central for theology that we think we know what it means, but what we see when we look around is a baffling profusion of great cathedrals and store-front meeting places, of wild sects and ancient hierarchies, of Bible based lodges and "we only" fanaticisms. Around Reno, marriage chapels hang out neon signs saying, Marriages Solemnized Here. Wart removers claim clergy discounts and dormitory prayer groups administer baptism and have what amounts to the Lord's picnic supper. About the only specific definition of the church is, "We are, and you aren't." A Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor answered my request for a letter of transfer for one of his members with one sentence, "We do not dismiss our members to heretical bodies."

The problems all this raises for missions you get into in a very helpful way, and that may be where the issue is most difficult. Is the charisma that makes a fellowship a Christian Church transmitted directly from heaven, or does it have to be validated through some tangible connection, such as an unbroken succession of palms on scalps, back to the hands of Christ? Lefferts Loetcher pointed out that the decisive issue in the long fundamentalist-modernist controversy in our Presbyterian Church was not a matter of belief but of church order, when Dr. Machen was suspended for organizing an unauthorized mission board.

The present criticisms of the National and World Councils of Churches may come from mistakenly supposing that they are to be churches at the highest level, whereas they are really nothing but service agencies that are organized to help real churches be more effective in a limited number of church functions.

Your comments on Calvin's attempt to locate the marks of the true church inspired me to look up your references. He does not seem to offer very satisfying help with very real problems. Ignatius' one-liner, "Where Jesus Christ is, there is the church," seems to beg the question. Your suggestion that parachurches are specialists while a church bravely undertakes the whole job is much more helpful. Ralph Winter's distinction of sodality and modality would seem useful only if everyone would adopt his words and his definitions, which does not seem likely.

Your suggestion that there is no hope until lambs are willing at

least to lie down with lambs is both ironic and irenic, and a good guide for progress in a difficult and important problem. I think you are a great deal more helpful than either Calvin or Ignatius of Antioch. Thank you.

George Sweazey