

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# AND NOW FOR THE BIG PICTURE

DAVE HARVEY

The silence was deafening.

Mark had just been pitched a compelling vision of his future by the next president of a Fortune 500 company. The “vision” involved a lucrative salary, some serious perks, and a position as his personal assistant. Yes sir, opportunity was certainly knocking...more power, more challenge, and plenty of income were only a handshake away.

Many men wait their whole lives for this. At that moment, though, Mark was just searching for a diplomatic way to say, “No thanks.”

Don’t get me wrong. Mark enjoyed his work and did it with excellence. But he knew that unspoken costs and compromises would accompany this new position. Evenings at the office, weekends away from home, a life preoccupied with business—he mentally reviewed the checklist as his boss waited for his response.

The issue was not just “family values” or time away from his wife. This “opportunity” posed a threat to something which had become part of the fabric of Mark’s Christianity and the reason for much of his spiritual growth. In a flash Mark realized this new position might compromise a higher vision God had given him for his life...*a vision to be committed to the local church.*

Mark said no. Four years later, he has no regrets.

### Raising Our Sights

What would cause a man to reject such a bright future? The answer is a simple one, but it is also spectacular: Mark was captivated by a biblical vision for the local church—a vision that translated into commitment, even when that commitment meant personal sacrifices. Mark’s own words may sum it up best: “God had convinced me

there was a higher priority in life. And that's where I wanted to be!"

That higher priority was the local church.

Our reaction to Mark's decision may reveal a lot about our own vision for the local church. Doubtless, some

“ Perhaps the greatest single weakness of the contemporary Christian church is that millions of supposed members are not really involved at all, and what is worse, do not think it strange that they are not.<sup>1</sup> ”

— Elton Trueblood

believers would have interpreted the promotion as God's blessing, despite the fact that Mark's church involvement would be seriously compromised by the weekend hours and extra responsibilities. Still others might feel Mark was too

“fanatical” in his convictions, that God is most glorified by our moderation toward his church. Some might actually think it more important for Mark to make career growth a higher priority than spiritual growth. (In other words, “Seek first your career and its bounty, and all God's blessings will be added unto you.”)

Not only is such a perspective unbiblical, it is foolishly shortsighted. The most important decision a person will ever make is whether he or she will be devoted to Jesus Christ. And devotion to Jesus cannot be effectively implemented without a devotion to the local church.

Throughout this book, you have heard that small groups are not an end in themselves; they are a means for maturing and serving together within a specific local church. For that reason, it seems appropriate that our final chapter look beyond small groups and focus on the church itself. Without a high view of the church, our understanding of small groups will be pitifully incomplete.

#### **Meditate on Matthew**

**6:33.** What are we really supposed to seek first? What are the benefits for those who do?

### **Supply and Demand**

A few years ago, *Newsweek* ran a cover story on Baby Boomers and religion that dropped a bombshell on the evangelical church. With startling clarity, the piece concluded that “some of the least demanding churches are now in the greatest demand.”<sup>2</sup>

That may be true, but it's not healthy, and it's certainly not scriptural. No such statement could ever be made about the church described in Acts. Here we find a “devoted” people willing to forsake the world in order to jump into the community of God's people:

With many other words [Peter] warned them; and

**For Further Study:**

Jesus minced no words in describing the cost of discipleship. Are you willing to forsake all as he describes in Luke 9:57-62?

he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They *devoted* themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Ac 2:40-42)

This passage shows a natural three-part progression which Christians in our day should imitate: 1) come out of the world, 2) come into the church, and 3) fix your

devotion on divine pursuits. These three critical steps—*forsaking*, *addition*, and *devotion*—encompass what it means to be genuinely committed to the local church.

The “least demanding churches” may successfully *gather* people who are ready to forsake the world, but they won’t *build* people into a committed community. To accomplish that, we need addition and devotion.

**1** What is one practice you clearly need-  
ed to forsake when you first became  
a Christian?

### Called Out, Added In

Addition is more than being *mystically* joined to the universal body of Christ. It also means being *practically* joined and committed to *one local church*. This is clearly expressed in the New Testament. How else could Peter urge pastors to shepherd those “under your care” and “entrusted to you” (1Pe 5:2-3)? Jesus expresses the same assumption about the church when explaining how to deal with someone who sins against you (Mt 18:17).

Historically, commitment to one church has always been a central feature of the faith—a non-negotiable for all believers. This commitment has been customarily expressed through the privilege of church membership. Throughout the centuries, membership has been the practical way for pastors to know the boundaries of their flock so they can protect and care for it.

In the early church, membership was often formalized through the “sponsor system,” in which each prospective member had to present a witness to act as surety for his commitment.<sup>4</sup> In fact, membership was so esteemed that instruction for new members could last up to three years!<sup>5</sup> Captivated by a high view of the church and a biblical vision for church life, these early believers transmitted to

“ Many churches have not learned the lessons that most parents stumble on sooner or later. Churches imagine that the less they ask or expect of believers, the more popular they will become and the more contented the worshipers will be. The reverse is true. Those who ask little find that the little they ask is resented or resisted; those who ask much find that they are given much and strengthened by the giving. For it is only as lives begin to intersect in sacrificial ways that the church starts to develop its own internal culture, and it is only in this context that the reality of God will both weigh heavily on the church and be preserved in its life.<sup>3</sup>

”

— David Wells

many generations after them a passion for the local church. But that passion never quite made it to our generation, as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes:

It is our failure as Christian people to understand what our church membership means—the dignity, the privilege, and the responsibility—that causes most of our troubles. Our greatest need is to recapture the New Testament teaching concerning the Church.<sup>6</sup>

God does not call us out from this “corrupt generation” so we can meander aimlessly over the Christian landscape—a meeting here, a teaching there, some occasional small group involvement just for variety. We have been *called out* to be *added in*! All believers should be committed to a local church that cares for their souls, equips them for ministry, and benefits from their service.

Church can't be a mere accessory. We must be added.

I like Eugene Peterson's translation of the passage we read in Acts: “That day about three thousand took him at his word, were baptized and were signed up” (Ac 2:41). “Signing up” is a great way to describe being added, and being added is absolutely vital—but it's only a start. According to Acts 2, God wants to move each of his children beyond addition to *devotion*.

## A Place and Purpose for Devotion

I love it when we have “Commitment Sundays”! These are the services where our church officially receives and honors those whom God is adding to our midst. Before this event, each prospective member has completed a 12-week New Members Course, made a commitment to a small group, and met with a pastor to discuss any questions or concerns. The services are inspiring because we often hear a testimony of how God rekindled a passion for

the local church. Recently, Stu and Lisa shared their own odyssey:

One of the things Lisa and I decided we would do when looking for a church was visit the small-group meetings first, rather than the Sunday-morning service. We knew that was where we would see what the church is really like. So we visited the nearest small group three times, and felt it was the closest thing to New Testament Christianity we had seen in years. So you see, we had already decided to be a part of this church before we ever visited on a Sunday morning!

Stu and Lisa were not looking to play church. They wanted to attach themselves to a “devoted” people—and they knew that devotion which is merely conceptual or theoretical isn’t devotion at all, it’s daydreaming. (There’s no such thing as “virtual” devotion.)

Realistically, devotion requires both a clear goal and a context in which to express itself. The New Testament church was not randomly devoted to every cause, passion, or structure; rather, they were strategically devoted. They expressed that devotion through Temple meetings, home meetings, prayer meetings, and hospitality times, just to name a few. Stu and Lisa discovered a similar dynamic. When they visited their small group, they knew they had found a strategy and a context where they could freely express their devotion to Jesus Christ and his church.

How about you? Where is your devotion being expressed? John Stott once said, “Small groups...are indispensable for our growth into spiritual maturity.”<sup>7</sup> Have they become indispensable in your life?

Before we leave Stu and Lisa, let me clarify one thing.

#### **Meditate on**

#### **Ephesians 2:19-22.**

Like a master bricklayer, God has built you into the church—and put you there to stay!

“ While a small group may be part of a church, it is not a substitute for the church.<sup>8</sup>

”

— Douglas Wilson

As much as they love their small group, their primary commitment is to the church. They are devoted to their group *because* it is a strategic extension of church life.

### **Here’s What Devotion Looks Like**

So much of the life of a healthy church takes place among its small groups. Where small groups are present, devotion is essential, and can be recognized by the following three ingredients:

**For Further Study:**

Where do you find churches meeting in Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, and Colossians 4:15?

**Meditate on Psalm**

**141:5.** If you had David's attitude, would you find it any easier to reveal yourself to others?

**2** Are there any "skeletons in your closet"—past sins or current habits—that you would be afraid to share with someone in your small group? Read James 5:16... then ask God how you should respond.

**Attendance.** It's hard to be devoted "in absentia." You'll find your devotion is much more meaningful, and much more recognizable, *if you're actually at the meeting!* Just a small thing—one of those detail items.

**Participation.** When it comes to small groups, the old adage remains true: "You get out of it what you put into it." Effective participation requires preparation. For example, it requires that you complete assignments and reflect on discussion topics. But more importantly, it means coming prayerfully prepared to apply the subject matter *to your life*. This involves open and honest sharing with the other members. It means taking the initiative to reveal yourself, rather than remaining isolated on the periphery. It means applying the example of Jesus.

As the following verse shows, Jesus revealed himself in a unique way: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, *has made him known*" (Jn 1:18, emphasis mine). The Greek verb for the italicized phrase is *exegeomai*, meaning "to expound or to reveal."<sup>9</sup> (This is where we get the word "exegesis," a term for interpreting—or revealing—the truth of Scripture.) Do you see John's point here? When it comes to self-revelation, God takes the initiative! He revealed himself by sending his Son into the world. Jesus "exegeted" God—he made him known—by sharing his heart, mission, and life.

Just as God made himself known through Jesus, so we must make ourselves known to one another. Yet pride tempts us to do the opposite—to cloak our true identity, to hide behind an image. Why? Because it's easy to look good in the dark.

I made that embarrassing discovery one morning at the office. I needed to be at work extra early, so rather than wake my sleeping family, I got dressed in the dark.

Congratulating myself for my stealth, I slipped out of the house and drove to my well-lit office—only to find that my shoes didn't match. To make things worse, no one else in the office was surprised! (Long ago they diagnosed me as "fashion-challenged"...some still believe my choice of footwear that day was intentional!)

Anyone can look sharp in the dark. Darkness makes us invisible, obscuring our heart and concealing our actions. But self-revelation illuminates. It exposes who we really are,

warts and all. Without such honesty and openness, we can never experience true fellowship.

The verse I quoted earlier (John 1:18) has serious implications for small groups. It helps us realize that our

“ Spiritual growth and maturity simply will not happen apart from relationships in the local church...In relationships we develop an accurate assessment of ourselves that is neither too favorable nor too critical. In relationships we experience a God-ordained channel of supply spiritually, intellectually, and emotionally.<sup>10</sup> ”

— C.J. Mahaney

success as groups depends on the depth of our self-revelation. To participate fully, we must be willing to open our hearts and become accountable for our actions.

I'm part of a small group where I get to experience this firsthand on a regular basis. At a recent meeting, we separated the men and women and answered this question: "What known sin

have you committed in the past week?" It was a glorious time of fellowship as we honestly "exegeted" ourselves. There's no doubt about it ...the quality of our fellowship depends upon our participation and self-disclosure, even when it's uncomfortable.

**Service.** Too often, groups spring up to meet a perceived (and often selfish or superficial) set of needs. "Support groups" are especially prone to this. But unless such groups address our *deepest* need—indwelling sin and its consequences—they won't be of much help to anyone.

Small groups are primarily a means of growth. That's not to say needs don't get met, because they regularly do. Small groups are a tremendous source of encouragement. Most often, however, participants find answers for their own problems as they serve one another. We should come to our small groups ready to give, not just to get.

Did you look carefully at the "one another" list in Chapter Two (page 23)? The list is impressive. But it can only be fulfilled as we are relationally connected within the church. Small groups allow us to develop those necessary relationships *and* help position us to obey the "one another's" in practical ways.

For example, in the church I serve, it is customary for small groups to provide new mothers with meals for a week or two after the arrival of a newborn. Financial needs are often met through a matching-funds program based in the small groups. Here, legitimate financial needs are identified and met through the gracious giving of the small-group members. The pastors may then approve an additional distribution from the church bud-

**Meditate on Galatians 5:13.** How are we to use the freedom we have in Christ?

## **TOO TIRED AND TOO LAZY**

### ***A Testimony***

When my wife and I visited Solid Rock Church four years ago, I saw immediately that their worship was different from anything I had experienced before. I thought, “These people are committed to what they’re doing!”

That struck me, but it didn’t change me. I didn’t feel any compulsion to integrate myself into the church. I believed in God but I didn’t have a relationship with him. A small-group leader in the church met with me many times and helped me come to a saving knowledge of Christ. (I don’t know where I’d be without his kind, gentle leadership.)

While I began attending church regularly, I still didn’t appreciate the importance of attending a small group. There were many Thursday nights I was “too tired” or “too busy.” My wife often went without me. For three years, I found reasons not to go. I knew I was being lazy, but I wasn’t ready to change.

This past year, though, I experienced a transforming work of the Holy Spirit. I became convinced I have a contribution to make in this church and to the Body of Christ, and that I wasn’t doing my part. It was an incredible experience for me to realize there’s a big picture—and I’m part of it!

— **Brian Schwatka (College Park, MD)**

get. This system replaces undiscerning “welfare style” distributions with a more biblical view of compassion by meeting needs from within a network of established relationships. More importantly, it provides a practical way to “carry each other’s burdens” (Gal 6:2).

In addition to serving those in your group, look for opportunities to serve your local community. To encourage you in this, let me share a remarkably unique strategy our church has fine-tuned through a decade of trial and error: Just serve!

Last fall, one of our small groups decided to display God’s love to their neighbors with a leaf-raking project. The strategy was straightforward: 1) knock on a neighbor’s door, 2) get permission to rake, and 3) rake. Simple, right? Well, one homeowner was so touched by this small act of kindness that she broke down weeping. Though God gets all the glory, this is just a glimpse of the impact a committed group of people can have when gripped with a vision

of serving Jesus, his people, and the world. One such group of twelve, known as the disciples—the Dream Team of small groups—permanently altered the course of human history.

## **Have You Been Infected?**

If every church member expressed such devotion within a small group, this book would be irrelevant. But some-

thing has happened in the past 1900 years. The church has moved a long way from that stirring picture we see in the Book of Acts. Those first Christians were completely committed. They enjoyed God and one another, while having a dramatic effect on the world around them. They were devoted, they were serving, they were evangelistic.

Yup. Today, things are a bit different.

Never one to shade the truth, Chuck Colson sees the contrast and makes this chilling observation. “While the church may seem to be experiencing a season of growth and prosperity, it is failing to move people to commitment and sacrifice.”<sup>11</sup> No greater indictment could be made of us. Commitment and sacrifice were at the heart of the New Testament church. When they are present, God’s people flourish. When they are absent, the church becomes distracted, disillusioned, and ultimately defiled.

What makes an entire generation of believers willing to tolerate such a dim reflection of our first-century counterparts? Could it be that our vision has been obscured? Have undetected influences gradually compromised and corrupted our expectations for the church?

To illustrate this point, I need to let you in on a little secret: computers hate me. Maybe they just feel used, because I spend a lot of time with them but have no inter-

est in knowing them personally. But I’m certain they hate me. I know this because they habitually lose critical files or freeze up while I’m trying to get work done. Then they sit there, lifeless, silently mocking me as my indwelling sin turns to “out-dwelling” sin.

Our church administrator recently tried to educate me on this issue. His opinion was that my computer didn’t hate me (he obviously lacks discernment) and that it probably didn’t have a

demon (a possibility I have briefly entertained during especially bad incidents). A virus seemed a more likely explanation. He explained how a virus can slip in undetected and conceal itself in the computer. From there it can wreak havoc as it erases memory, confuses programs, or even compromises an entire system.

“ It is scandalous that so many believers today have such a low view of the church. They see their Christian lives as a solitary exercise—Jesus and me—or they treat the church as a building or a social center. They flit from congregation to congregation—or they don’t associate with any church at all. That the church is held in such low esteem reflects not only the depths of our biblical ignorance, but the alarming extent to which we have succumbed to the obsessive individualism of modern culture.<sup>12</sup> ”

— Charles Colson

The analogy of a computer virus may help us understand why today's churches are so often "failing to move people to commitment and sacrifice." Let's look at five common "viruses" which can neutralize our devotion to the church and small groups.

### **The Church-Lite Virus**

Very few Christians have studied what Scripture says about the church. The results have been catastrophic. Instead of being gripped by the biblical picture of the first church and the final Church, we settle for a weak, culturally infected imitation...you know, church-lite: *tastes great, less filling!*

Where there is little theological conviction, the vision perishes. As biblical conviction grows, however, a sense of necessity grows with it. Are you a parent who finds yourself attending Sunday meetings sporadically? God's Word will help you recapture a passion for the church and transmit it to your children. Are you a single who rarely finds an evening to spend with the small group? Scripture offers a higher vision, one of commitment to biblical fellowship. Why should any of us settle for less when Scripture offers so much more?

### **The Feelings Virus**

Those infected with this virus depend heavily on subjective impressions. For any number of reasons, they just "don't sense" that God wants them to be involved in a certain local church at this time. More often than not, this reveals a sinful desire for independence rather than a higher form of spirituality.

The danger with the "feelings" virus is its subtlety. People may enjoy visiting a church, yet decide against involvement because the church "feels" wrong—too big or too small, too formal or too casual. Inhibited by such subjective impressions, many never find a church that "feels" just right.

Fortunately, we don't need a subjective "sense" for something that is objectively clear in Scripture. The New Testament repeatedly commands us to be functioning members in a local church. We don't become involved by "feeling" involved, but by obeying God. Once we get our actions in line with God's Word, the feelings often follow.

#### **For Further Study:**

The Book of Ephesians offers an excellent "crash course" on the church. For starters, read Ephesians 1:22, 3:20-21, and 5:25-32.

#### **Meditate on Hebrews**

**10:25.** Though stated in a gracious way, what is the clear meaning of this passage? Does it matter whether we *feel* like meeting together?

## The Ambition Virus

Chester was the man to call when a computer system crashed, and many companies did just that. At a moment's notice, he could be tapped to fly off somewhere to troubleshoot a technological catastrophe. These trips often netted him big bucks. We're talking BIG BUCKS!! Though his commitment to church life eroded, his bank account and business reputation soared. So he kept winging off to destinations around the country, easing his doubts and uncertainties by pondering the rewards.

Chester had fallen prey to a virus which afflicts many believers. Having established their citizenship in the king-

“ I'm convinced that if we were to gain God's perspective, even for a moment, and were to look at the way we go through life accumulating and hoarding and displaying things, we would have the same feelings of horror and pity that any sane person has when he views people in a mental asylum endlessly beating their heads against the wall.<sup>13</sup>

— Randy Alcorn

dom, they still define success by worldly standards. Income, education, and advancement take precedence over character, service, and commitment to church life. This often results in the wholesale exchange of the eternal for the temporal—the kingdom for the culture. In such a climate, naked ambition can even appear noble.

But God graciously pursued Chester. As he explains it, “I went under the blade of the Holy Spirit.” He began to see that his craving for riches actually caused him to be a poor investor. Sure, his *money* was invested wisely, but his life and time were being squandered. He was seeking security and significance from wealth rather than obeying God's command to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Mt 6:33). Things had to change. And they did.

It started with repentance. Chester identified the sinful root of his ambitious cravings and made thorough confession. Next, he realized his need to be committed to his church and small group. Making changes would not be easy, but he had served his ambitions long enough.

Chester had to believe God in new ways. His convictions were tested as his income shrank and his business underwent a transition. But as so often happens when we're called to walk by faith, the rewards far outweighed the costs.

Chester loves God more than ever. His relationship

### For Further Study:

Read Matthew 19:27-29. What does Jesus promise to those who sacrifice deeply to follow him?

**3** Look carefully at this list. Is there anything here you desire more than pleasing God? (Check any that apply.)

<input type="checkbox"/> Graduate degree	<input type="checkbox"/> A higher salary
<input type="checkbox"/> A fulfilling career	<input type="checkbox"/> Nobel Prize
<input type="checkbox"/> A spouse or children	<input type="checkbox"/> A new home
<input type="checkbox"/> Approval/respect from others	<input type="checkbox"/> A company of your own
<input type="checkbox"/> Godiva chocolate	<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____

with his wife has never been stronger or more satisfying. They even found time to have a child, something which didn't seem feasible before the change. Someday, that little girl will rejoice that her father found a passion for the local church.

**The Church-Alternative Virus**

In my part of the world—maybe in your part, too—we once had a phrase which, like all good phrases, got totally

overused. It has since been laid to rest, yet lives on in vocabulary heaven with other worn-out phrases such as “Feelin’ groovy” and “Keep on truckin’.” The phrase was, “Don’t hear what I’m not saying.” I resurrect this phrase now to appeal for *careful listening* as we turn our attention to the subject of parachurch ministries.

As I mentioned earlier, few Christians these days have a full and clear understanding of Scripture’s teaching on the church. Perhaps the most widespread and perplexing result of our ignorance has been the parachurch phenomenon: the rapid emergence of ministries, agencies, and other organizations which conduct Christian ministry *entirely dislocated from the local church*. Some of these groups actually believe they must remain separate from the church in order to be effective. Not only is this puzzling, but it is profoundly confusing for the Christian who wants to live biblically.

Today, new Christians are confronted with a priority crisis. In what context should they express their commitment to God? Who will provide care for their soul and direction for their zeal? Perhaps, they think, Christianity is like a department store. Emotional problems are handled by the Christian Therapy Department. The “missions itch” is scratched in the Evangelism Ministries Section. You can tune into Teaching Ministries in the Electronics Department (TV or radio...you choose!). And fellowship is found in any one of the dozens of specialized Fellowship Groups up on the third floor.

Is this really the New Testament pattern?  
 Now, please remember that phrase: “Don’t hear what I’m not saying!”  
 The work of a parachurch ministry is legitimate and

**Meditate on Ephesians 3:8-11.**  
 Through what institution is God displaying his manifold wisdom?

“ Meta- and Para-organizations often serve useful auxiliary roles, with a scope or specialized purpose different from what a particular local church is able to do. In my view, there are a number of valid roles for cooperative ministries operating in a wider sphere than parish or locale: education, publishing and other mass media, cooperative endeavors to meet particular needs (crisis pregnancy, marriage enrichment, prison, campus, military chaplaincy, etc.), hospitals, international and regional ministries, and carrying a banner for particular causes within the large scope of Christian concerns. *Such extramural Christian works need to remember that they are ‘barely legitimate,’ in the sense that they ought to exist only when they genuinely and intentionally serve the interests of the communities whose mature functioning will put them out of business.* For example, para-church and meta-church become illegitimate when they compete with or use local churches to their own ends: power, status, wealth, autonomy, etc.<sup>14</sup>

”  
— David Powlison

helpful when it focuses on areas of service that are clearly outside the capacity of local churches in a particular geographic area (Wycliffe Bible Translators is a good example). Indeed, Sovereign Grace Ministries benefits from and supports a number of parachurch ministries, and for this we thank God. Even where the activities of parachurch ministries are more “church-like” (and thus less biblical), there is no disputing the well-intentioned efforts of parachurch leaders or the fruit these ministries produce. (As a new believer, my first experience of fellowship was in a parachurch ministry which is still in operation today.) However, it is absolutely essential to realize that *these ministries exist largely because local churches have fallen short of their biblical mandate.*

Truly, parachurch ministries are evidence of the unpaid debt of the local church.

Unintentionally, many of these ministries have ignored the New Testament pattern and become an “alternative” to the local church. Where that is the case, a ministry has become a dangerous virus, regardless of intention—or even success. Our respect for these ministries should not keep us from holding them accountable to biblical criteria. Specifically, I see four areas in which parachurch ministries can, in effect, usurp the church’s God-given role.

**They can create an alternative authority.** When personal issues spring up in a believer’s life, there is no substitute for the anointed and discerning care of a pastor who has been entrusted with that soul (1Pe 5:2-3). However, in a world of television ministries, Christian counseling centers, and mission agencies, we can easily forget that God has called *pastors* to be our primary source of spiritual oversight.

If a parachurch organization fails to recognize the pri-

**For Further Study:**  
Read Ephesians 4:11-13. Whom has God equipped to lead Christians to unity and maturity?

**Meditate on Matthew  
16:18.** What is Jesus  
determined to build?

ority of the local church, it will minimize the importance of pastoral authority and care. One pastor I know was put in an awkward position after counseling a member of his church. Though he had encouraged this individual to accelerate her spiritual growth by getting involved in service opportunities, a Christian counselor ignored the pastor's advice and urged her not to serve. Such collisions are inevitable when the local church is deemphasized and its authority diminished by alternatives.

**They can create an alternative structure.** The local church is *the* New Testament structure for care, discipleship, and missions. Nothing can replace it. It is a mysterious institution, ordained by God as a means of grace for our growth. Where it is upheld and built, you will see a growing people capable of experiencing New Testament Christianity. Where it is overlooked or marginalized, you tend to find immature, unconnected believers with a shallow understanding of the Gospel.

I find no New Testament examples of ministries that operated independently of local churches. Conference ministries, radio programs, and on-line fellowship can certainly supplement the church, but they are most effective when operating under a church's direction and accountability.

In his seminal critique of contemporary evangelicalism, David Wells sees the parachurch explosion as another indication of how "the consumer culture has infiltrated today's evangelical church."<sup>15</sup> He notes that the most profound effect has been on the "*structure* of evangelicalism" and says it "represents a remarkable transformation and decentralization of the evangelical world since the immediate postwar years."<sup>16</sup>

What has the "consumer culture"—as reflected in many parachurch ministries—decentralized us *from*? Nothing less than the primacy of doctrine and the centrality of the local church. Where either of these fall, the other is sure to follow, creating many "good" alternatives which in fact wage war with God's best.

**They can create an alternative testimony.** The local church is an awesome concept. Confounding the pundits, it can unite people who are diametrically opposed in their passions, preferences, and cultures, creating a brilliant display of unity from diversity. Somehow, our "unified diversity" reflects God's unified diversity, becoming a testimony to our culture of the power of God.

Does parachurch work portray the same testimony? Usually not. The greatest strength of such ministries—their primary focus on specific needs—is likewise their

**For Further Study:**

Read 1 Corinthians 12:17-20. Does diversity benefit or harm your body? How about Christ's body?

greatest weakness. Specialization keeps them from experiencing the marvelous diversity that can characterize the local church.

To Paul, diversity was a strength. Be it gift or function, preference or passion, Paul taught that diversity created interdependence—a *need* for one another's differences (1Co 12:12-26). It would be unimaginable for Paul to encourage any group, whether businessmen or bikers, to establish an identity independent of the local church. Christianity was never meant to be split into "teaching ministries" or "soup kitchens" or "special-interest fellowships." We are the local church, beautifully diverse and powerfully effective.

**They can create an alternative storehouse.** If you have ever attended a Billy Graham crusade, you have probably heard a statement like this when the offering was collected: "Please don't give any of your tithe to this ministry. That belongs to the local church!" What motivates this commendable and all-too-rare practice? An awareness that the local church—not a parachurch ministry—is God's designated "storehouse" (Mal 3:10).

I don't object to sponsoring a needy child or contributing to hunger relief. However, parachurch programs frequently divert resources (both tithe and time) from the local church. Such appeals lack biblical support. In fact, it is interesting to note that when the Jerusalem church became needy, Paul rallied local churches to give sacrificially. He didn't establish an independent Christian relief agency. Resonating throughout the New Testament is this

principle of resources "flowing through" the local church.

Over the years, parachurch ministries have served many useful purposes. Our church has learned and benefitted from them. But their effectiveness should not keep us from asking some questions.

Should we enthusiastically

support organizations that have no precedent in Scripture? Is the New Testament pattern, with its emphasis on the church, no longer sufficient? Should we assume that the past effectiveness of parachurch ministries validates their future existence? If we will answer these questions biblically rather than sentimentally or pragmat-

“ If the church is central to God's purpose, as seen in both history and the gospel, it must surely also be central to our lives. How can we take lightly what God takes so seriously? How dare we push to the circumference what God has placed at the center?<sup>17</sup>

”

— John Stott

**Meditate on 1**  
**Timothy 3:15.** What a powerful description of the church!

ly, the conclusions we reach may surprise us.

Where capable churches exist or emerge, parachurch ministries should recognize the scriptural legitimacy and primacy of the church. After seeking to equip the local church from their expertise, they should gradually reposition themselves to function under church leadership. To many, this will be a radical suggestion. *But when the simple pattern of Scripture seems radical, we may be certain the church has drifted.*

What could happen if God married the heroic zeal of parachurch visionaries to a theological conviction for the local church? The church would be revolutionized...and the world might never be the same!

### The Leisure Virus

Sasha loves the church—as long as it doesn't interrupt her leisure pursuits. Although she just turned 40, her appetite for fun has grown in proportion to her income and rivals that of a woman half her age. Travel, sports, theater, movies, 500 cable channels...so much to do, so little time. With her high-pressure job, she believes she "needs" these distractions to refresh her weary soul.

Not surprisingly, Sasha's pursuits leave little time for God or his church. At Sunday meetings (when she makes it) she stays on the fringe, often criticizing the service while carefully avoiding anyone who might challenge her lifestyle decisions. Her small-group attendance is erratic. With all her pressures, the last thing she needs is one of

“ The decline of the church is more due to laziness than wickedness.<sup>18</sup> ”

— John Calvin

those "legalistic" talks about commitment. After all, she became a member, didn't she? And why would God bless her with all these opportunities if he didn't want her to enjoy them?

Sasha has the "leisure" virus. (The Bible would call it an idol.) It entices Christians to feast at its table and then rewards their gluttony with years of spiritual barrenness. Leisure tempts us to trade our experience of God for the entertainment of men. It makes us mere spectators rather than participants in God's purposes. Leisure subtly persuades us to invest our time, not necessarily in evil, but in *irrelevance*.

Leisure's snare is not so much in its essence as in its indulgence. It's a little like one of those "Magic Fingers"

**For Further Study:** If we love the world and its pleasures, how do we feel toward God? (See 1 John 2:15)

vibrating beds you find in some old motels. It swallows our money and makes us feel good for a short time. But soon that time and money are gone and we're still in the same place.

Where leisure is uncritically enjoyed, the church will transition steadily from prophetic to passive, all the while eloquently justifying its decline. Just ask Sasha.

### **What Will You Leave Behind?**

In his classic message, "Drum Major Instinct," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described his hopes for life and death:

I won't have any money to leave behind  
I won't have the fine and luxurious things of life to  
leave behind

*I just want to leave a committed life behind*

And that's all I want to say...

As you finish this book, we trust you come away with practical insights and suggestions that will make your small group even better. Our goal in writing it, however, penetrates much deeper. We have tried pointing beyond small groups to the purpose for which they exist—Christ's glorious Bride, the church.

Love your church. Lay down your life for your church. Pour out your passions and energies to accomplish God's plan for the church. Your small group has enormous potential—harness it for the benefit of your church. For this is where God has called you. This is where he is changing you. This is where he wants you to leave a committed life behind.

And that's all I have to say. ■

### **GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. What is one thing you feel so strongly about that you would "pound the table" in a conversation? (Examples: politics, the environment, guinea pig breeding....)
2. Is it really essential that a Christian be part of a church?
3. What expectations does your church have of you?
4. How well does your small group serve each other? ...

the local church? ... the community? Any need for change?

5. Read Ephesians 3:10-11 aloud. What do these verses tell you about the importance of the church?

6. Are you currently pursuing any career goals or hobbies that compromise your commitment and contribution to the church?

7. What is the author's main reason for questioning parachurch ministries?

8. Are you submitted to your pastor's spiritual authority? Would others agree with your assessment?

9. Are you pouring time and energy into anything which, on an eternal scale, is irrelevant?

10. Is the church at the center—or at the circumference—of your affections?

**RECOMMENDED  
READING**

*The Body* by Charles Colson and Ellen Santilli Vaughn (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1992)

*The Church* by Edmund Clowney (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995)

*Life in the Father's House* by Wayne Mack and David Swavely (Phillipsburg, PA: P&R Publishing, 1996)

*Spiritual Disciplines Within the Church* by Donald Whitney (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996)

## NOTES

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14. David Powlison, "Counseling in the Church" *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* Winter 2002, Vol. 20, No. 2, p. 3, footnote 2. (emphasis added)
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18. John Calvin, *The Crossway Classic Commentaries: Acts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1995), p. 50.