

ECCLESIOLOGY—SEEKING ALTERNATIVE BIBLICAL AND PRACTICAL EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH: REFLECTING OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS

By Bob Young

One who has worked with the church for fifty years should have some idea about the why and what of that work. What is a biblical vision of the church? How does one develop a local church that is a healthy Christ-centered community? How does one plant Christ-centered communities? What shifts have occurred in the church's self-understanding? Those of us in the churches of Christ, with our focus on the church described in the New Testament, should be able to explain the biblical concept of church. What is often lacking in our study is how the reality of church is to be lived out in today's world.

Alternative expressions of church in the 1980s and 1990s

After 25 years of pulpit ministry with local churches, I began working in Christian higher education in 1995. Based on my experience in ministry and in the university, in the mid- to late-1980s and during the 1990s, there was a resurgence of interest in new expressions of church (cell churches, small group programs, and house churches are three examples) and various newer models of church that could possibly escape the institutional paradigm that had developed and that characterized a majority of churches. In my church work, in my work with college students, and as I visited small churches and newly established churches, I observed firsthand this interest in developing fresh ways of living out and expressing church. At the same time, many older, more established churches were open to developing different ways of doing church, primarily through small groups. In those years, the hope that the church could escape institutionalism was especially strong among college students and young families (ages 18-39).

With the passing of time and the coming of age of another generation (the Millennials), interest in new forms of church has subsided. The college students and young adult families I was working with 20+ years ago are now ages 40-60+. There are still some younger people who are interested in simpler expressions of church, but most of the group that propelled the interest I saw 20-30 years ago are now parents of teens or empty nesters. The dream that was present in the 1980s-1990s for a simpler, more relational expression of church did not find a foothold. Today such churches are rare, at least in my tribe.

What is the situation regarding relational, non-institutionalized church models today?

Several observations will help answer the question. First, while the idea of a small, relational, Christ-centered community is appealing to many Christians, the commitments required to develop and live in such a community are high.

Second, when such communities exist, and reach out to bring new people to Christ, they struggle with the need to divide and begin new groups, wanting to maintain the status quo of the original group. This inertia makes future growth difficult due to the usual space limitations of meeting in homes or other smaller venues.

Third, the idea of smaller, informal Christian communities that function as a church is foreign to the thought-patterns of many who want to affiliate with a church. Therefore, such communities sometimes find it difficult to attract new members and often they do not appeal to persons with limited experience in Christianity.

Fourth, Christians today have a tendency to seek numbers, and the majority of Christians prefer more convenient places with more options, more services, and more offerings to be "consumed." The most popular options—in general order of preference—are (1) mainstream churches that have developed programs to touch multiple generations, (2) new community churches, (3) mega churches, and (4) "high church" assemblies with ritual, mysticism, and liturgy.

Fifth, another growing group in society today has opted for "no church." Those in this group are not the atheists or unbelievers that are frequently mentioned in surveys and polls. These are mostly the "dones" who have for the most part washed their hands of regular church gatherings and shared community life.

Sixth, those Christians who had the greatest interest in Christ-centered relational communities that transcended institutionalism are now older—in their late 40s, 50s, 60s, and some in their early 70s. The energy is waning, especially considering the first point above.

Seventh, various ideas about how to develop Christ-centered communities have been developed so that today there are various competing theories about methods. Some groups claim to be striving toward the goal, but many of those churches are more accurately a “small-is-beautiful” version of the institutional church. The truth is that there are not many genuinely relational, non-institutionalized groups around.

Eighth, some of the groups that verbalize the dream well are highly-legalistic, highly-toxic groups. Bickering over doctrines and practices—with a few personality conflicts sprinkled in—is common. Such groups cannot attract many new members, and therefore they do not grow numerically.

Finally, because there are fewer and fewer people who understand the concept of biblical Christian community, there is less and less interest. Where would I begin, where would I go, and with whom would I talk if I wanted to explore the possibility of a meaningful expression of the biblical community described in the New Testament?

What Is the future of relational, non-institutionalized church models?

Since we are now living in a time where there is not a strong interest in restoring God’s plan for the ekklesia, what is happening now with regard to smaller, relational Christian communities. I see several things as I write from the perspective of my fellowship in churches of Christ.

- First, relational groups and communities do exist. Fellowship is desired but absent in quantity and quality for many Christians. Small clusters of people are gathering together informally and periodically for fellowship. By small, I mean small—2, 3, 4, no more than 6 or 7. Spiritual interests bind these small groups together. Generally, these are not recognized as churches and do not function as churches. (An exception is the cell church movement, but that concept for the most part has not found a place among churches of Christ.)
- Second, such relational groups are rare. While these informal groups do not reflect completely the idea of ekklesia that one finds in the New Testament, they do reflect an essential dimension of ekklesia. If you can find one or two people to gather with periodically but informally for encouragement and fellowship, you are blessed. Many Christians cannot find one person who is interested in talking about such possibilities.
- Third, there is an increasing focus on personal involvement and service. There is a growing interest in personal participation, as is evidenced in short-term mission trips, and in projects designed to help the poor and the oppressed. It is relatively easy to assemble small, informal groups that will work together in such projects. In most of these groups, the focus is on the activity more than on the biblical purpose of ekklesia that brings people under the Lordship of Jesus.
- Finally, I encounter a hunger among God’s people for the deeper things of God. There is a desire for deep Bible study and more serious commitments to restore and live out the supremacy and centrality of Jesus Christ.

Throughout history God has worked in cycles of renewal and revival. Some spiritual awakenings and revivals have been very brief, the revivals that are better known in church history lasted longer and had a greater impact on more people. Today, periodically in the U.S. I encounter a church with the spirit of revival, but such churches are rare and due to the increasing independence (isolation, often in the name of autonomy) of individual congregations, the impact of such renewals is limited. Movement toward widespread spiritual awakening and revival is virtually non-existent in the U.S. right now. I see no significant awakening or desire to rethink the nature of the church.

I spend a lot of time in Latin America and I see a different context and focus there. I see hope that the Spirit of God is moving among His people to restore the ekklesia as He intended, committed to His eternal purpose. This hope is based on a strong focus on evangelism and church planting, a strong focus on the need to experience community together, and on the healthy leadership models that are being developed in the churches. This is the subject of a second essay on ecclesiology.