

**Reality and structure in  
Christian ministry**

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## **The issues to be considered**

**(a)** The prophet Isaiah described the people of God as he saw them: ‘...this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by rote’ (Isaiah 29: 13). He showed that there was a difference between what was happening externally and what was really happening. We are well accustomed to this distinction being made, but the question involved for those in Christian minis try is: ‘What is the relationship between reality and the expression of that reality in structures?’

A lot of attention has been given to the question of structures in recent years and this has been necessary and illuminating. A new freshness has come in some places because unnecessary restraints have been removed. But the problem is deeper than finding the proper activities and relationships for the people of God. There are true structures and false structures, both of which are false if they do not express reality. This paper will suggest that the major problem we face is insufficient exposure to reality and affirm the primacy of reality over structure as an ongoing dynamic. Our major task is to find ways in which reality may express itself, and how it can guard against the constant human tendency to retreat into the ‘security’ of structures and the maintenance of them (cf. Romans 9:8, Col. 2:8-23).

Isaiah also said to his people: ‘This is a people without discernment’. They were so enmeshed in their religious culture, that they were unable to observe the true situation concerning themselves. Nor were they

able to appreciate or respond to the promise of God concerning their well being (Isaiah 1: 10-17, 5: 1-4, 13, 27: 11). It is clear that God is not prepared to relate to people on the basis of their involvement in religious practice but calls his people to be discerning, i.e. to look deeper than appearance. There must be more to religious structures than remembering and repeating other people's 'fear of God'.

**(b)** A second matter concerns what the people of God are to be about in the time when they want to express what they know of the truth in a way that is not yet allowed for in the existing structures. Clearly, those who encounter the truth must express that in ministry, using the gifts of the Spirit with which they have been endowed for that purpose. What does it mean that the Lord has taken captivity captive and given gifts to man, i.e. for ministry to the church, if existing structures seek to keep those ministries in captivity? What attempts at reformation or innovation are valid? What validity do new structures have when they appear to endlessly fragment the body of Christ? This treatment will not suggest a model for change so much as show how the reality of hearing 'what the Spirit says to the churches' can be responded to with simple obedience and so maintain rather than work against the unity of the Spirit. We need to rediscover Christ's headship over his church and to believe in his building of it.

**(c)** Behind all the discussion in this paper must lie the truth itself and the reality to which this gives rise in the human scene. There is no simple way to describe this truth and this reality other than to say that the church is built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone. So the apostolic witness which we have in the New Testament, its witness to Christ as the mediator, and his witness to the Father, together with the Spirit poured out so that God's people might know him, are the truth. People knowing God is the reality which should characterise the church and be the goal of its ministry.

In particular, the Son of God has revealed to us the 'grace and truth' of the Father. The truth cannot be known apart from grace because it is only by grace that all humanity can come to God. Even so, truth is evaded, and the unreality of living only for structures takes over. Each person, and each generation of Christians, need to rediscover what it was that Jesus Christ came to show us. Each congregation or community or society needs to be reasoned with to seek the food which endures (as in John 6:25-35) and for the things which will not pass away (I John 2:15-17), i.e. to look for the reality which alone can give life to structures.

Such an exposure is not simply a matter of preaching the right sermons, any more than it is arranging the right structures. It is by the initiative of the Holy Spirit that reality is maintained, and by the church's humble dependence on his ministry (eg. Zech. 4:6).

A Christian leader who works other than by grace and by the Spirit will attempt to build structures by law: 'This and that ought to be done' Such leaders may have lost sight of the fact that they were saved by grace, and are driving themselves into a harsh performance of what they think God requires. They may become resentful because others don't meet their expectations. None of this is necessary under grace, and is in fact a furtherance of the Galatian heresy. Churches built under these conditions enslave people to structures through guilt, rather than release people to minister by love. Only grace can give rise to reality and true ministry. The same principle also relates to the matter of communication. A true witness to the truth (whether spoken or structured) is one which arises from within a person rather than one which is only constructed because it is thought to be Biblical or relevant. Some presentations of the gospel appear to arise from a knowledge about the faith, i.e. that it is good and true, and that it is what we need, but the presentation portrays that the communicator is longing to describe it rather than eager to experience it. We

surely need a variety of expressions of the gospel, but they need to arise from a hunger for truth, satisfied by an experience of its reality. It is this reality which Christian ministry must witness to, and which should, ideally, totally regulate the shape of structures it generates, and wholly empower them.

*(d)* A fourth matter relevant to our discussion is that the general drift of Western institutions is away from the Biblical and Christian roots which in many cases have inspired them. There is a resultant inevitable lack of agreement about what is important for our countries.

Harold Berman, a Harvard law school professor, has said 'It is supposed by some, especially intellectuals, that fundamental legal principles...can survive without any religious or quasi-religious founds on the basis of the proper political and economic controls and philosophy of humanism. History, how ever, including current history, testifies otherwise. People will not give their allegiance to a political and economic system, and even less to a philosophy, unless it represents for them a higher, sacred truth' (*Christianity Today*, 4/9/81, p.28).

P.T. Forsyth, earlier this century, said, 'I do not doubt — that the dullness to spiritual issues — is in part connected with our absorption in political and social issues not our interest, not our devotion to these momentous issues, but our absorption in them' (*The principle of authority*, p. 320).

Similar sentiments are reflected in remarks by Albert Einstein and Martin Buber. The first said, 'that we live in a day of perfect means and confused goals; the second, that 'we are strong on means and weak on ends'.

If the need of our society is to discover the reason for its life and the meaning of its institutions, it is tragic when the church joins the preoccupation with externals and has therefore little to contribute.

## Jesus—reality amidst the structures

In the encounter Jesus had with a woman outside of Sychar (John 4: 7-26), he showed how reality related to the various structures of his day. There was the false structure of Samaritan worship, the true structure of Jerusalem worship, the false convention of Jewish insularity towards Samaritans, the presence of Messiah with no official to announce him or to formally recognise his ministry.

In this situation, Jesus did not despise any of the structures present, although he did not conform to them or agree with them. If he wanted to relate to the woman, he had to relate to the structures of which she was a part, and communicate his truth with regard to them. He showed what was true in the ministry of the Jerusalem worship, but also made it plain that there was a limit to that. It appears, not just in this incident but in his ministry generally, that Jesus confronted people with reality by the shortest route possible and with a minimum of argument about structural matters. It was inadequate to simply attack the structures familiar to the woman. She needed the truth. By going to the heart of the matter, Jesus went to the heart of the woman.

In saying that a new time had come, he was cancelling the validity of any structure purporting to serve God apart from those which expressed the 'wells of water springing up to eternal life' from within persons. All worship and, so, all ministry would be in spirit (or Spirit) and truth (in particular, the truth of Christ himself).

## Reality and the church

The letters to churches recorded in the Apocalypse (Rev. 2-3), show that the Lord counsels his churches so as to maintain their identity and character and zeal.

All of the letters to churches in the New Testament have fundamentally the same purpose. Where a church is open to the apostolic teaching and correction, and to the Spirit who brings that word with directness to the church, one could expect that reality would be truly pressed in the structures formed by its people. Proclamation would be effective, worship would be full of wonder, learning and mutual upbuilding would be constant, and community care would be natural.

However, because the people who are known as the church seem so frequently to be other than what they should be, the question must arise as to how one can express reality when existing structures do not provide the opportunity to do so. Lovelace, in his *Dynamics of spiritual life* shows that the evangelical movement within the present church has a history of reforming from within the existing structures and maintains that this the most likely path towards thorough renewal of the church (pp.294, 303, 305f). This has involved the concept of a church within the church, and particularly, the formation of what are called para-church groups in order to facilitate prophetic ministry to the churches and express genuine service in the name of Christ. This brief treatment cannot document all the possible structure relationships but seeks to clarify some of the principles involved for those who are concerned for truth when adequate expression of that truth is not being given in the churches.

**(a)** At many times, God's people have been called on to express the truth in other structures than those they would have chosen. Jonathan, under his father's kingship is one example. The freshness of his trust in God flowed out despite the falseness of Saul's management. If a people still bear the name of God, then he may call some of his people to bear testimony to them from within those structures as to what he is about.

Whatever the form takes, it will always be necessary to relate to existing churches because of God's continuing call to them to be renewed. We remember Paul's call to Jews in their synagogue to acknowledge the

truth for which they existed, and his continued longing for them even though his major calling was to the Gentiles. God always takes people and their actions seriously, and therefore one part of the church can never treat another part of the church with contempt.

One may ask whether the church remains truly the church when all expression of reality seems to be absent. Obviously the matter of judgement here remains with Christ. For practical purposes, it would seem necessary to treat as church those who claim to be apostolic and to call them to be what they claim to be. The case of Paul with the Jews may not be a true parallel, but provides a useful model of ministry to those who are not living true to the creed they profess.

No church that a Christian will ever find will have all the qualities he feels are adequate. (If he does, he may be remarkably lacking in discernment!) So for the most part, he will always be expressing the truth in structures which seem inadequate. Part of our problem in Western society at present is that people believe structures (government, economic systems, etc.) are what is real and that they alone are responsible for our well being or otherwise. The church has the opportunity to demonstrate that truth liberates, that it cannot finally be repressed, and that it knows the truth which gives structures their reason and drive.

In broad terms, churches should minister to their members in one or a number of ways, and allow them opportunity to serve the fellowship or serve others through it. A person can do without being ministered to in his church if he can find help elsewhere, or do without an opportunity to use his gifts if these can be employed elsewhere, but he cannot accomplish much if he is denied both. He would probably be better going to another church if that is practical. For any healthy church involvement, both giving and receiving should be involved.

**(b)** What is the status of groups of Christians who meet as a group within a church, or to fulfil one or more of the functions of the whole body of Christ?

Certainly, Christians meeting together cannot be other than the church in its operation, but the question is, are they a church? The answer to this is difficult to give simply, but it must relate to whether the group is able to fulfil all the duties expected of churches in the New Testament epistles. Are there elders to teach and care for the flock? Can practical care be offered? Can the group build itself up in love and discipline its members? The breadth of its functioning rather than its numerical size is to be considered. No local church will be able to do the task of the whole church of course, but some threshold of viability should be reached.

If a group can only fulfil part of the essential task of the church, then its members need to relate to the wider church for a greater exposure to ministry and responsibility within the body of Christ.

It is worth noting that most churches in the first two centuries met in homes and were therefore fairly intimate groups. There was also obviously a network of communication and, in particular, itinerant ministries which met many of the church's needs. A good argument could be made to show that a proliferation of small and non institutional churches, which recognised their dependence on ministries other than their own, would make for a more united church than the self consciously large and sometimes insular institutions that are more common today. The principle remains that the shape of a church should be directed by the facility it provides for obeying apostolic (i.e. New Testament) directives. Groups who feel they do not function as churches must none the less ensure that they are truly the church in one of its functions in a particular place, and work with a view to the building up of the whole body. They should certainly not be gathering places for discontents opting out of their responsibility to love the church.

(c) It is a very real question as to how any group can continue to experience and share the truth of God without its members developing a level of community and ministry to one another. Indeed, it is also a question as to whether such ministries can ever truly

arise unless it is from a group of people who have some level of shared life together. In the New Testament, the pattern seems relatively simple. Churches spawned ministries which in turn developed new churches. This was not without its periods of conflict however, where individuals acted outside of official boundaries, but generally, ministry arose from and produced communities called churches. But in our own day, many groups do not want to further structurally fragment the church yet feel impelled, none the less, to exercise ministries not provided for within the church and they must decide how much like a church they should become.

The question is, can groups remain purely functional or must they share and practise and promote a fellowship which is consistent with the truth they are about? If they are to know the will of God for their ministry, must they not wait on God together, learn together, support one another in the risks that are involved as well as proclaim the truth together? And is not the validating of any ministry the love which communities of Christians have for one another? How much can any group convey the reality they know apart from certain basic functions which express fellowship? And can fellowship be maintained apart from authority?

Clearly, the answer which some groups have given to these questions have raised conflicts with the established churches as to who should do what. An important question for some is the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist.

The answers given to such questions are going to vary according to circumstances, but the guiding principle in each case must surely be, not what will happen to the structures, but what will happen to the truth? Jesus came as a peacemaker, but knew also that he had come to bring a sword. The truth was going to divide families and cultures but must be allowed to do its whole work.

This seems to have been the practice of the early church in relation to the temple, and later, the synagogues. They longed that there would be continuity

between the structures in which God's covenant people expressed their life and the truth they brought through the gospel. But it was unthinkable to them that any structure should inhibit the truth (Acts 3: 18-20).

### **Authority for ministry structures**

Who should be able to say what each Christian group can do? Attempts have been made to show from Scripture that there is an apostolic succession whereby church authority is vested in its duly appointed leaders. Anyone familiar with the church's history and polity must be aware that the true situation is more complex than can be provided by any one church or conference of churches. The question of ecclesiastical authority for the whole church is, from a human point of view, unwieldy. The whole church together needs to acknowledge the actual headship of Christ over his church and, by the Spirit, recognise a true unity in the diversity of its operations.

To be more specific, the church's true opportunity to recognise a common authority lies not so much in its administrative (in the sense of structural) leaders as in its prophetic leaders. The church's prophets keep its eyes on the truth; its administrators, on its function. Many church leaders have become enigmatic about the truth and try to find unity in combined operations. These attempts eventually come to approximate any other humanist social programme. But where the church's leaders hear the truth together, they will have a basis for trust that will support many diverse functions.

The early church had its apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11 cf. 2:20). The apostolic witness is still the basic authority for all ministry, not legalistically conceived, but as enabled and led by the Lord and the Spirit. Very much of the day to day leadership and authority in the early church would have come from the pastors or elders in various locations.

Eldership finally has responsibility for seeing that truth is expressed in word and in function in each locality. They were, and are, to be men who are accustomed to translating the truth of God and his gospel into the day to day running of their own homes. They should be well experienced in knowing how gospel and law interrelate in the treatment of other family members so as to bring this expertise to pastoral care. The structure they create for their children should have arisen from their knowledge of the Father and the fellowship they have with their wives. When the church then finds truth in the Father, Son and Spirit, structure should be given to the life which emerges by those accustomed to shaping form out of reality.

This task is an ongoing one. Elders need to ensure that the forms used for fellowship and ministry keep expressing reality, and that they are not used by people for hiding from reality. Apart from remaining fresh in the knowledge of God's grace, humans avoid truth and reality, and in the case of churches, turn to the task of creating structures which maintain a status quo. All have responsibility for this task of course, but particular responsibility lies with the shepherds.

The whole church's prophetic task is to live in the truth, to keep that as the matter to which people must relate (e.g. Gal. 2: 14), and from which many expressions of ministry (structures) can flow. Even the church's proclamation must be, not the defending of forms of theology, but a living exposure to the truth, lest the church use the occasion as an excuse to be diverted.