



New Times, New Structures

Book Review on "The Second Reformation" and "Changing Church"

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Introduction

In recent years, evangelical theologians, church pastors, and missionaries have been reflecting on possibilities of new church structures. The basic conviction and experience is that the usual denominational and congregational structure simply does not meet the needs of the day. The traditional structures are cumbersome, expensive, self-absorbed, and enervating. They neither provide useful nurture to believers nor provide ready access to non-believers.

Two significant books have been published highlighting these structural issues and making significant proposals for change. The most recent one is "Changing Church: How God Is Leading His Church into the Future" by C. Peter Wagner (Regal Books, Ventura, CA, 2004, 196 pp). An earlier publication is "The Second Reformation; Reshaping the Church for the 21st Century" by William A. Beckham (TOUCH Publications, Houston, TX, 1995, 253 pp).

These two books address the same crisis in the church. Dr. Wagner comes to the issues as a highly respected mission scholar and professor at Fuller Seminary, Pasadena, CA. In recent years, Dr. Wagner has become a chief advocate for the charismatic renewal of the church, and these convictions guide many of his suggestions in the book. Rev. Beckham is a highly experienced parish pastor and former missionary to Thailand who has been a leading advocate of the cell group approach to church ministry.

Crisis of Church Structures

Though coming from very different theological and professional backgrounds, Beckham and Wagner present very similar diagnoses and prescriptions for the illness of the church today. They agree on the following seven points:

1. The need for structures that rely on lay leadership
2. The need for structures that provide intentional nurture and spiritual growth
3. The need for structures that enable the whole church to be involved in ministry
4. The need for structures that focus on outreach to the world and not just on protection of the truth
5. The need for structures that move beyond denominational lines
6. The need for structures that make training for ministry much more practical and less academic
7. The need for structures that enable the church to be a “light to the world.”

The authors analyze that the structures of church that we have inherited were developed in a different historical context to address different church needs. The idea of organized congregations and weekly gatherings for worship is rooted in the Jewish synagogue from which earliest Christianity grew. During the days of persecution in the early church, Christians had to meet more informally and secretly, often in homes. Once the Roman Empire authorities endorsed Christianity, the structures returned to the synagogue pattern, with the added dimension of prestigious clergy and elaborate buildings. (cf. Beckham, pp. 42-44)

The pattern continued as whole communities embraced the faith, and church life became part of the fabric of society. The structures of congregational activity (rules, discipline, and leadership) expressed its place as the center of community life. Where the church still is at the center of community life, these structures still are useful. However, where Christianity is a vulnerable minority, whether in the 10-40 window or in Western cities, these structures are no longer helpful.

Beckham summarizes:

When church leaders accept the fact that the church system creates the majority of problems, they will understand the futility in trying to change themselves or their members until the system is changed. (Beckham, p. 144)

Again:

“How tragic is the picture of the church today! It still possesses the precious message and values but is too often ignored because the message and values are covered up in irrelevant forms and archaic language. Church values are not the problem, neither is theology. The problem is lack of a viable design through which the values and theology can be lived out. This is where the cell church movement steps in. (Beckham, pp. 60-61)

Wagner cites Ed Silvoso (“Anointed for Business,” p. 23) to summarize the issues that he thinks need to be addressed:

1. There is a God-ordained division between clergy and laity.
2. The Church is called to operate primarily inside a building others referred to as the temple.
3. People involved in business cannot be as spiritual as those serving in traditional Church ministry.
4. The primary role of marketplace Christians is to make money to support the vision of those “in the ministry.” (Wagner, p. 61)

I will briefly summarize the proposals that Beckham and Wagner make to address these systemic problems in the church.

Structures of Lay Leadership

Beckham draws upon his experience as a parish pastor to reflect on how frustrated he was in trying to carry out all of the expectations and functions of the established parish. He laments how the 20% of the congregation that are involved, along with the fulltime church staff, are forced to focus all of their time and energies just on keeping the system going. He observes: “Modern churches are full of frustrated men and women who have an unfulfilled ministry ‘call’ upon their lives.” (Beckham, p. 74)

The solution is to create church structures that enable the Holy Spirit to build up and use the spiritual gifts and zeal that He has worked in their hearts through the Word and Sacraments. As we have seen above, Beckham sees this scripturally mandated structure in the cell movement. This structure enables lay people to exercise the spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit has granted them.

Wagner goes beyond the role of lay leadership in the nurturing and evangelistic functions of the church. He builds his view of lay leadership on Kingdom theology. He wants us to see the call of the church to renew all of society:

Preaching and living in the kingdom of God certainly includes Church growth, but it goes considerably beyond that to extension of the Kingdom in all of its multiple manifestations, which includes righteousness, economic sufficiency, freedom, morality, health and peaceful living. (Wagner, p. 92)

Obviously, if such is the mission and purpose of the church, it can only be carried out by lay leaders as they live out their faith in society.

Structures of Spiritual Growth

Our inherited structures are oriented toward “Sunday morning” Christianity. Even if this Sunday morning experience includes a Bible Study hour for adults and a Sunday School hour for children, the ability to facilitate real spiritual growth is severely limited. These structures are aimed toward large groups and toward the lowest common denominator. The Sunday morning experience cannot address each individual’s immediate personal concerns and needs.

However, real spiritual growth takes place only in the context of a person’s immediate situation. The woman or man needs to know how God’s will address his/her own spiritual life.

A church is more than what happens inside a building on one day a week. Basic Christian community is a way for the flock to be “fed” and “tended” out in the world. It is a “delivery system” by which Christians are nurtured and unbelievers are reached with the gospel. A major benefit of the cell church is the presence of groups out on the “front lines.” The flock has ready access to fellow believers who know them, care for them and pray for them. Every member has a spiritual family that loves them out in the real world. (Beckham, p. 72)

Wagner critiques the failure of the Reformation movement to provide practical structures for growth in holiness. He observes that the movement reacted against Roman Catholic work righteousness and advocated man’s total depravity so radically that sincere efforts toward spiritual growth were, in fact, almost discouraged. Wagner quotes the researcher George Barna (“The Second Coming of the Church, pp. 120-21):

The Bible clearly states that true believers should be readily distinguished from nonbelievers by the way they live. Yet, the evidence undeniably suggests that most American Christians today do not live in a way that is quantifiably different from their non-Christian peers, in spite of the fact that they profess to believe in a set of principles that should clearly set them apart. (Wagner, p. 175)

People come to church with the hope of growing spiritually. But the church has failed to provide them structures to enable that growth to happen in an intentional and programmatic way. Many in recent generations have gone to other spiritual traditions that to provide such disciplines and mentorships.

Mere church growth, therefore, cannot be the goal of the church. The structures must facilitate members to mature spiritually. Beckham quotes an account of Juan Carlos Ortiz, a missionary pastor in Buenos Aires whose congregation tripled within two years. However, he felt God’s dissatisfaction with his ministry:

“You are not growing,” He said. “You think you are, because you’ve gone from 200 to 600. But you are not growing – you’re just getting fat.” What did that mean? “All you have is more people of the same quality as before. No one is maturing; the level remains the same. Before, you had 200 spiritual babies; now you have 600 spiritual babies.” (Beckham, p. 39)

Both Wagner and Beckham, therefore, advocate that the church must focus its nurture structures on adults. These are the people struggling with all the issues of life and society. They deeply desire spiritual strength and direction in their lives. They are the ones who, in turn, provide the models and guidance for their children in their homes and for their friends and colleagues in the world. As has often been quoted, “Jesus played with the children and taught the adults; we teach the children and play with the adults.” If the church is to be the church, it must have new structures of spiritual nurture, especially for adults, both members and seekers.

Beckham believes the church has dummed down its structures of nurture because leaders have focused on getting numbers of people into corporate church worship. He laments:

Why has the church allowed its most immature members to dictate the ministry focuses of the church...? No matter how many spiritual-sounding phrases we use, success in the traditional church is tied to the number of warm bodies present in a two hour span of time on Sunday morning. And Eddie (the typical marginal member) will not come if we do not minister to him and give him what he wants. (Beckham, p. 45)

Instead, church structures should be focused on providing the means for truly deep and effective spiritual growth. Beckham advocates the cell group approach to accomplish this, both for the sincere members and for the “Eddies.”

Structures of Outreach Training

Both Wagner and Beckham analyze that a major difficulty after the Reformation was that the reformers never went beyond their restoration of biblical truth to the issue of church structures that facilitate outreach. Therefore, our seminaries are oriented toward training pastors to know and defend the truth. Pastors can recognize heresies, but they cannot facilitate outreach.

Beckham quotes Luther (also on the cover page) advocating that people should set up home churches to carry out churchly duties including baptism and the Eucharist. He then discusses how Luther and the other Reformers backed off from this more biblical approach to church life. Beckham laments, “Luther continued to use the Catholic Cathedral design as the wineskin for his new doctrines, but it leaked.” (Beckham, p. 117)

Dr. Wagner has become personally involved in developing a different kind of seminary training. These seminaries do not have academic entrance requirements or examinations. Their goal is to produce church leaders who meet the biblical criteria set forth by St. Paul in I Timothy 3 and Titus 2. Similarly, large congregations that have cell groups train their own leaders and staff for the skills and character that they need for effective ministry and outreach.

These new approaches to training pastoral leaders teach doctrine for the sake of outreach. They teach practical skills, and they are generally non-residential. The students carry their classroom teaching out into the world to test its worth. They are authorized for ordination on the basis of their character and productivity in ministry.

Wagner addresses the criticism that such training waters down theology and puts the church into danger of heresy. He uses the “onion” image set forth by Ted Haggard in which there is a core of absolutes that cannot be changed or compromised. Haggard illustrates these as God’s existence, the integrity of Scripture, the death and resurrection of Christ, and the existence of heaven and hell. Wagner adds that these new apostolic ministries also maintain the three core Reformation principles of the authority of Scripture, justification by faith, and the priesthood of all believers. (Wagner, pp. 147-48)

Beyond that core, Wagner endorses Haggard’s identification of the next layer as biblical interpretations and then deductions from those interpretations. Outside the “onion” are personal feelings, personal preferences, subjective opinions and cultural norms, the bottom line, however, is that these new church leaders are focused on mission, not on theology. “A whole new generation of believers in the Second Apostolic Age is not nearly as interested in the fine points and details of theology as past generations have been.” (Wagner, p. 161)

The new church leaders that Beckham and Wagner represent want a theology that gets the job done. They want a theological training that motivates and enables for outreach, for that is the crucial job of the church. Any structures of training that divert people’s energies and attention from this primary, God-mandated task is not of God, but of Satan.

Structures of Unity in Mission

With the de-emphasis on traditional theology, comes a de-emphasis on traditional denominational wranglings and identities. Wagner dismisses most of the historic theological conflicts with Protestantism as areas of deductions rather than absolutes. He can see legitimate arguments on all sides of these controversies. Once we accept there these are areas of legitimate disagreement, we can remove them as obstacles to our cooperating with each other in mission.

With congregations and like-minded mission congregations developing their own training programs, there is less identification with a denomination and a historical tradition. With the Second Apostolic Age pastors focusing on winning certain geographical areas for Christ, there is the desire to join hands with any and all like-minded Christians of the region. Likewise, Christians today want to involve in mission-minded churches, and they will go wherever they find such opportunities for growth and service. It need not be in the denomination in which they grew up or in which they had been the previous years.

Both Wagner and Beckham see the clergy as typically the inheritors and protectors of denominational identities. Lay people are typically more practical. Lay people involved

in mission look for partners in the tasks at hand, irrespective of their denominational background. When the priority is mission outreach in a hostile environment, the focus is on practical support and direction.

Wagner advocates spiritual warfare in all areas of society (political, economic, business, arts, education, etc.). This is where lay people live and work. This is where they can find and where they need strong Christian support. Where they worship on Sunday morning and what they believe on fine points of doctrine do not matter.

Wagner summarizes the mentality of these mission-minded church leaders which leads them to unite beyond denominational lines:

1. Rather than try to reform decaying denominational structures, we must “take the bold step of moving and establishing separate apostolic networks.”
2. “The people of God in the workplace constitute a legitimate segment of the true Church.”
3. “Many church leaders perceive that affiliating with churches of other denominations in a given city can produce more effective ministry than restricting their contacts to those with their same heritage.”
4. These church leaders are “now looking beyond enlarging their congregations... to penetrating all levels of society with the values and principles of the kingdom of God.”
5. They have a common foe in every established denomination, people whom Wagner calls “a Christian antiwar movement” that tries to dissuade Christians from engaging in serious spiritual warfare with the principalities of darkness in society.
6. They agree that traditional denominational seminary education and ordination do not qualify one for effective mission work.
7. They see the unity of the Church in its mission efforts and recognize that “differences in doctrine have contributed to a great deal of division.”
8. They agree that we must work toward enabling each other to grow in holiness for the sake of our mission calling. (Wagner, pp. 185-86)

When the task is so great and so pressing, we need reliable partners. We don't look for denominational badges; we look for sincere hearts and ready hands. The twenty percent in each denomination looks for the twenty percent in the others.

Structures to be a “Light to the World”

Wagner and Beckham are striving to enable the church to be the church. The church is called to be the “light to the world,” the “leaven,” the “salt,” the “aroma of Christ,” the “ambassador of Christ” in the world. What human obstacles have been hindering the Spirit's work to build us up and move us into this mission? What new structures might we find that would better express God's intention for His Church?

As we have seen, the Apostolic Age movement that Wagner describes has its focus on the world, not the church. Its goal is not to purify the church but to purify society. Wagner teaches that there are territorial demons that need to be confronted by an apostolic representative to lead God's people in spiritual warfare. Not everyone will be convinced of these dynamics neither of spiritual warfare, nor of a biblical mandate for apostolic authority in individuals today. This is the structure that Wagner and those with him advocate, distinct from our current structures. We can all certainly affirm their goal that the church be an effective tool of God against the forces of Satan and in establishing His Kingdom of love and peace on earth.

Beckham, on the other hand, finds this alternative structure expressed in the cell group. He has seen how this approach not only provides nurture for believers but powerful witness to non-believers. "The qualities and characteristics of spiritual community are best expressed today as in the first century through small home groups." (Beckham, p. 61)

Beckham speaks of the church as a "two-winged" institution. It needs both the corporate gatherings such in Sunday worship. But more importantly, it needs the small group gatherings for its nurture and witness:

The reason? This is where love, community, relationships, ministry, and evangelism spring up naturally and powerfully. Therefore, the life of the church is in the Cells not in a building. The church is a dynamic, organic, spiritual being that can only be lived out in the lives of believers in community. (Beckham, p. 27)

In addition, such small groups are the best way for non-believers to see the gospel in action. Only then can they grasp the significance of living in God's love and realize how it can apply to their own lives.

Unbelievers who come into the cell group should be exposed to the presence of Christ.... They should be allowed to sit and watch God at work in His people. That is the greatest witness on the face of the earth. (Beckham, p. 170)

With such a huge task and calling before the Church, Beckham advocates that we develop a form that is manageable in every local context by ordinary Christians. Through cell groups, Beckham says we have a "light to the world" in microcosm. It has a manageable size in manageable facilities with simple leadership training and a clear function. (Beckham, p. 71) Why can't we just let the church become the church, just as Jesus did with His small group of disciples? By the power of the Holy Spirit, it worked, and it works.

Conclusion

Beckham goes on in his book to describe how a cell group ministry should be gradually established in a congregation. He also sets forth many theological and biblical arguments to support his position that this is the God-ordained form of church life. One may not agree with his all of his arguments and his absolute convictions, but one certainly can appreciate his critique of current church structures and his advocacy of cell groups as a much more effective structure.

Similarly, one may not accept all of Wagner's positions on demonology and apostolicity. However, that should not detract us from his analysis of the crisis in church structures and the need to think more profoundly in Kingdom terms. For Lutherans, the idea of Christians affecting their baptismal calling in their daily, professional lives expresses well the whole concept of Christian vocation.

Both books leave us with a disturbing challenge. If we accept their critique that our current church structures are failing and our outreach effectiveness is deteriorating because of it, what are we going to do about it? Beckham and Wagner have made some bold and creative attempts to present viable and Spirit-enabled alternatives. If we reject their alternatives, we are duly obligated to come up with our own proposals and efforts. At the very least, we will encourage those who are taking the risk of developing more effective, more relevant structures for our day, both in our own land and in other lands around the world.

Jesus said, "While I am in the world, I am the light of the world." (Jn 9:5) Now, "You are the light of the world." (Mt 5:14) The call and responsibility are in our lap. What are we going to do about it?

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Dec. 21, 2004