

## **Para-Church Organizations: Are They Biblical? A Pastor's Perspective By Martin Murphy**

For several years I've tried to warn the church of the church growth movement. The church growth movement, to my mind, is the most subtle and most dangerous threat to the church, yet it is the most widely accepted monster in the twentieth century church. Uncritical acceptance of the church growth movement feeds the monster. Rather than feeding the monster, we must expose her and all her allies. Another monster closely associated to the church growth movement is the parachurch movement. My experience indicates that the parachurch movement easily persuades most church growth movement people.

Both of the movements find common ground in pragmatism. Let's face it, the Arminian gospel so often associated with the church growth movement makes it sound as if God is in heaven just worried sick about who will be saved and who will not be saved. Their programs make it sound as if God is not only worried about their salvation, He is worried about their spiritual growth.

The article that follows is about the parachurch movement. I hope you will read it critically and carefully. Again, your comments will be welcome and in fact I need to hear your comments about this very important issue. If I'm right, please confirm the verity of the argument. If I'm wrong please point that out. Some of you may ask, and I hope you do, what should we do? If you're interested, let me know and I'll consider devoting an issue to the solution to this difficult problem.

## **Return to Your Roots By Martin Murphy**

A few years ago I wrote an article that was published in the Christian Observer under the title "Return to your Roots: Like-minded Presbyterianism." The root I had in mind for Presbyterians was the Westminster Assembly of the 17th century, because unity was the objective of the assembly. The goal was noble and biblical to be sure, but dissension and division has been the plight of Presbyterianism. It seems as if Presbyterians can say "yes, I subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms", but putting that vow into practice becomes exceedingly difficult. The vow is frequently broken, but no aspect of the vow is broken more often than that portion that deals with the visible particular church. The monster that most often intrudes upon the authority and ministry of the church is called the parachurch movement.

The parachurch movement is a mixture of organizations and agencies that claim some relationship to some aspect of the work of the church. Practically speaking I do not believe that most of the parachurch organizations, of which is reported that there are more than 10,000 such organizations and agencies in the United States, actually understand the parachurch concept. I expect most of them are satisfied if they qualify for tax exempt status. The Dictionary of Christianity in America defines a parachurch

organization as a "voluntary, not-for-profit association of Christians working outside denominational control to achieve some specific ministry or social service." The theologian, Millard Erickson, has defined a parachurch organization as a "religious organization created for particular tasks, such as evangelism or the reaching of young people. These organizations do not meet for regular Sunday services, administer the ordinances, or display other of the organized church." Neither of these definitions adequately describes the parachurch concept. The latter is internally contradictory (many theologians are contradictory) "evangelism and reaching of young people" is the responsibility of the church, but more about that later. The definition that best fits the concept of parachurch is an organization that assumes to itself the "ministry, oracles, and ordinances of" but is not under the government and discipline of the church. The word "parachurch" suggests that some body has come along side the church to help with the responsibilities given to the church. The popularity of the parachurch movement has increased among Presbyterian and Reformed churches because the theological concept of the church has been misunderstood.

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland approved "The Form of Presbyterian Church Government" on February 10, 1645. Although the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church (ARPC) does not require subscription to its original form, "The Standards of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church" contain the essence of the original prescribed by the Westminster Assembly. The preface to "Form of Presbyterian Church Government" says that Christ "gave officers necessary for the edification of his church, and perfecting of his saints." Then we find that "The ministry, oracles, and ordinances of the New Testament" were also to the general church, but particular churches have the particular responsibility to carry out the "ministry, oracles, and ordinances of the New Testament." Those Presbyterians of old (and the writer of this article believes we should return to our roots) subscribed to the idea that the "public reading of the scriptures belongeth to the pastor's office. To feed the flock, by preaching of the word, according to which he is to teach, convince, reprove, exhort, and comfort. To catechize, which is a plain laying down the first principles of the oracles of God, or of the doctrine of Christ, and is a part of preaching. To other divine mysteries. To administer the sacraments. To bless the people from God..." The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms say essentially the same thing. The ARPC has a Form of Government that defines the church and explains the work, ministry, and mission of the church. In the Form of Government we find that the "ministry, laws, worship and sacraments" are part of the nature of the church. The Form of Government goes on to say that the "mission of the Church is a mission of witness and ministry." Then we find the primary purpose of church government is to promote order within the Church so that the Church may best fulfill its divinely appointed responsibilities." As you should be able to plainly see, historic Presbyterianism and even our contemporary Presbyterian standards agree with the Bible that Christ has given the church the distinct responsibility to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I [Christ] have commanded..."(Matthew 28:19,20). A systematic study of Scripture, including the Old Testament, will affirm that Christ has authorized His church to carry on the "ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God" but that responsibility has never been given to a parachurch organization or agency.

It is absolutely necessary for God's elect to carry out the mandates in Scripture according to the kind of order and structure that is consistent with God's nature. The only prescription to insure that kind of order has been given to the church, and not any parachurch organization. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of

two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (Matthew 18:15-17). The ultimate authority given to maintain order and harmony among God's elect is the church. It doesn't take a doctorate of theology to figure out that authority to discipline is what maintains order and allows the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God to be dispensed with integrity and power.

The distinguishing marks of the church devolved from our 16th Reformation forefathers and Presbyterians have confessionally adopted three of the distinguishing marks: preaching, sacraments, and discipline. We've already seen how the parachurch movement kills church discipline, a distinguishing mark of the church. The preaching of the whole counsel of God is quickly becoming a thing of the past, yet it is necessary to abide in the doctrine (Matthew 28:20) of Christ, the whole counsel of God, and to have the privilege of calling God your Father (2 John 2:9). The Scripture never authorizes another institution to guard the oracles of God, except the church. The sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are to be dispensed only by "a minister of the word, lawfully ordained" (WCF 27.4). The church and no other institution has the power of ordination. The covenant theologian understands how New Testament baptism is related to Old Testament circumcision just as the Lord's Supper is related to the Passover. Those sacraments have always been administered through the covenant community which we call the church and not through any para-covenant organization. The three marks of the church have been given to the church alone belong to no other organization or gathering.

The indisputable fact remains that the visible church is the guardian of the word of God. The visible universal church consists of those particular local churches. Presbyterian churches believe that those visible churches have been given the "ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God." Therefore no parachurch organization may assume to itself the "ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God." We have come to a sad place in the history of the church. The parachurch movement is very large and very powerful. In fact, the parachurch movement is completely out of hand. As one minister said "its just a monster you will have to live with." How sad! If the parachurch concept is not consistent with our confessions and Scripture militates against it, then the church must declare it unbiblical. If adultery was as rampant among Christians as the church growth movement, would we say, "it's just out of hand." We can't control it." Would we as a church just simply say we can't do anything about this monster called adultery? I would hope not, but with the parachurch movement that seems to be the attitude among some Presbyterians.

The parachurch organizations I'm familiar with seem to be sincere their desire to help the visible church. However, God does not command us to break his commandments for the sake of sincerity. It appears that parachurch organizations want to help the church, because the church has failed to do its job. Perhaps parachurch organizations don't like the orderly operation of the church working in church courts, boards, committees, and other aspects of the traditional church that seems to bottleneck the work. For instance, when the church fails to engage in evangelism, a charismatic personality emerges with a few supporters to form a board of directors, apply for 501(c)(3) tax exemption status, secures money for the operation and finally the organization is up and going. Parachurch organizations thrive on men of talent and skill outside of the authority of the church. They test their people, not for their theological and biblical knowledge, but from the pragmatism of success and need. Parachurch organizations thrive on man centered ministry rather than God

centered ministry. Since they are exempt from church discipline, they may depart from the clear teaching of Scripture if their way produces results (generally numbers, big numbers in people and money). Dr. Edmund Clowney explains that "parachurch groups, for their part, because they do not regard themselves as churches, organize and conduct their operations in any way they see fit, borrowing structures from business corporations, or even from the military. The founder of the organization then becomes the chief executive officer or the commander-in-chief. So common has business organization become in American parachurch organizations that the church itself has taken up the same model" (The Church, Edmund Clowney, p.24). If these assertions are true, then parachurch organizations are not only unbiblical, they are a disgrace to the Christian ministry. Can we sacrifice truth for sincerity?

What gave the parachurch movement its momentum? I believe it can be traced back to the voluntary societies and revivalism of the 19th century and the liberal theology and Charismatic movement of the 20th century. Although voluntary societies have existed for a major part of the history of the church, it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that those societies began operating independently, apart from the authority of the church. The Southern Presbyterian theologian in the 19th century, James H. Thornwell, said "The first enormous and commanding evil of the voluntary societies, which arrested attention and aroused opposition, was their absolute independence of the authority and jurisdiction of the Church" (Works, vol. 4, p. 146). Obviously the parachurch concept was present in the voluntary societies. The most obvious voluntary societies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were missionary societies. The revivalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century resulted in a church overwhelmingly given to Arminianism. From the Arminian population came a greater push for missions both at home and abroad. The fundamentalist-liberal controversies in the early part of the 20th century created even more parachurch organizations to meet the needs of independent minded fundamentalists. The charismatic movement needed the parachurch movement to create the religious enterprises that were important to their growth. The ambitious spirit of these men centered ministries finds in the parachurch movement the tools necessary to accomplish their purpose. The parachurch movement provided the necessary for the cause among the Arminians, fundamentalists, liberals, and charismatics. This brief historical review simply reminds us that we have a monster on our hands.

Dr. Bruce Shelly points out that "many of today's evangelical parachurch agencies dwarf the parallel ministries in the major denominations." At the risk of being called some name or the other, I will still publicly decry parachurch organizations that assume to themselves the marks of the church. I will mention a couple of these parachurch agencies by name to show you the extent of the problem. I just visited to the Campus Crusade for Christ International (CCC) web site. They have 14,000 staff members and 101,000 volunteers. Just stop and think how many members we have in the ARPC and you will discover that CCC has nearly half as many staff workers as we have members in the entire ARPC denomination. That does not include over 100,000 volunteers. The CCC advertises on that same web site that "an estimated 65 million people heard the gospel in the past 12 months." Do you realize that CCC propagates the Arminian gospel? Did you know that the Arminian gospel is contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms? Campus Crusade for Christ is just the tip of the iceberg so I hope you can see why I call the parachurch movement a monster. No one dares challenge a parachurch agency like CCC because it is so massive and so powerful and in fact nothing can be done anyway because they are not under the authority and discipline of the church. I'm not speaking pejoratively when I use the word monster to describe the parachurch movement, I'm using figurative language to describe the extent of the problem. Another one of the little monsters among the

big monster is The Promise Keepers. They encourage men to act like responsible husbands and fathers. A called meeting of this group produced hundreds of thousands of men who met in Washington D. C. for a six-hour meeting.

The football coach that organized The Promise Keepers charged \$60.00 per person (so I am told) for this brief pep rally on how to be a Christian man. If they had 200,000 present that is \$12,000,000 in collections. If they had 500,000 in attendance that is \$30,000,000 in collections. I wonder why they charge so much for a service that is available at the local church? An article in The Tuscaloosa News reports that the Promise Keepers "would lay off its entire 345 person staff on March 31 because of financial problems" (The Tuscaloosa News, Feb. 20, 1998. The article further states that the expenses for the organization in 1996 were "\$87 million." Obviously parachurch organizations are taking billions of dollars out of the church each year. Did you hear that pastor and elder? Wouldn't it be nice if that money was given to the church so it could carry out its diaconal responsibilities? I don't understand why pastors are so anxious to send the souls whom they have been charged to care for, to a parachurch organization. I would be ashamed to send a man from my congregation to listen to a football coach talk about family life whose theological background consist of Roman Catholicism and the Vineyard Movement. I believe The Promise Keepers will prove to be one of the worst and most dangerous of all parachurch agencies to invade the church, because they have the evil intention of convincing men that doctrine is unimportant. The liberals love that kind of ecumenical spirit. The list of these uncontrollable and undisciplined agencies is itself massive. World Vision International, The Billy Graham Association, James Dobson Ministries, and hundreds others like them are slowly but surely digging the grave for the church. Will the Presbyterian church give over to the parachurch movement? Or will we return to our roots?

I can hear all the condemnation that will come my way for exposing and speaking against the parachurch movement, which we have argued is unbiblical. I can hear all the good people saying things like "look at all the good they do" or "they want to help the church." I expect some will say "the church is not doing its job." If because of sinfulness the professing Christians in the church are not doing what they are supposed to do, should we abandon the church. There are dozens of excuses people will use to defend the monster, but that does not make it right. Does the end justify the means? If parachurch agencies are unbiblical, then why are we afraid to expose them. Jesus said "Let not your heart be troubled" (John 14:1) Later Jesus said would have trouble, "but be of good cheer" (John 16:33). John Calvin has rightly said: "A right judgment cannot be formed of the happiness of the Church, except when we estimate it according to the standard of God's word." John Calvin also said: "If we do not prefer the Church to all the other objects of our solicitude, we are unworthy of being accounted among her members." Presbyterians, return to your roots!

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