Models of the Church

Barry D. Oliver

Some years ago my wife and I were asked to conduct evangelistic programs in a provincial town. I well remember one of the senior church members approaching me soon after we arrived in the town.

"Barry," he said, "We are going to be in trouble if we try to run another evangelistic campaign in this town just now."

"What do you mean Ed?" I replied.[379] "The conference is particularly keen that we go ahead this year. They have invested a considerable amount of money in the campaign."

Ed was not satisfied.

"I know all that," he said, "but what we need is time to consider who we are as a church before we attempt to reach out to the community. It seems to me that we have become so preoccupied with witnessing and sharing our faith that I am not so sure that we know any longer what it is that we are supposed to be sharing."

He was a very loyal Seventh-day Adventist; a leader in the local church. We did conduct the evangelistic campaign and he did support it, but I have never been able to forget his sincere concern.



FIVE MODELS OF THE CHURCH.

My friend believed that it is essential that we share our faith. Yet he was equally concerned that any witnessing must be a witness to our authenticity as the people of God, the Church. There is no point in encouraging the members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to share their faith and invite others to join the Church if we have not had a long hard look at the nature of the Church itself and asked ourselves the question, "what is the Church?"

In other parts of this section of the textbook which talk about the Church we have pointed out that the New Testament is saturated with references to the Church. Some of those references are most obvious.[380] Other references to the Church are somewhat disguised in images and word pictures.[381] But when you put all of these references together, it is unlikely that you can read the New Testament with an open mind without being convinced that it was God's intention that his people were to be gathered together in groups or communities for mutual support, encouragement, and at times, correction. The Church was created by Christ, and he intended that it remain to the end.

But even if most Christians accept the necessity of the Church, it does not follow that they all understand the nature and reason for the Church in the same way. How would you respond to the question, "what is the Church supposed to be?" How would you have responded to the church leader referred to above who obviously had given the question some careful thought? If you are like most of us, you would probably respond with some vague notions about a place of worship or the like, but not be able to give a well-thought-out, systematic answer.

In this chapter we want to invite you to dig a little deeper into the biblical perspectives on the nature of the Church. Our discussion will require careful thought and

reflection. If you are prepared for that you will gain considerable insight into the reason why the Church—including the Adventist Church—acts and reacts the way it does.

Five Models of the Church

In 1978 a book was written which has helped us to understand the different ways in which Christians of different denominations understand the nature of the Church. That book was called *Models of the Church*.[382] The author used the word 'model' to denote a particular way of understanding the nature and function of the Church. His point was that some of the distinctive characteristics of different denominations result from their own self image. For example, while the traditional Roman Catholic self image has been largely concerned with the strength of the institutional Church, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has seen itself primarily as a medium for the spread of the gospel. Dulles has called the former the 'institutional model' and the latter the 'herald model' of the Church. Below are brief descriptions of some of these models of the Church.

1. The Institutional Model

This model of the Church was the classic Roman Catholic self image until the twentieth century. The visible institution with its pope, bishops and priests comprised the Church.[383] Their authority was understood to be an extension of God's authority. Authority always passed from the top to the bottom. Church policies and doctrines were 'handed down.' There was no room for any concept of participative decision-making or democracy.

> The institutional model understood the authority of the Church to be the authority of God and the authority of God to be the authority of the Church.

In a sense the Church operated under a theocratic model.[384] The authority of the Church was the authority of God and the authority of God was the authority of the Church. When the Church engaged in its worldwide missionary enterprise, particularly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the motivation was to incorporate the pagan nations under the rule of God in the Church. The pope, the cardinals, and the bishops were considered to have executive authority as vice-regents of Christ. They functioned as rulers in the kingdom.

2. The Sacramental Model[385]

The self-perception of the Roman Catholic Church in the later twentieth century has been described as the 'sacramental model.' This model retains many of the characteristics of the institutional model. The difference is that now the Church perceives of itself more as the means by which God dispenses his grace to the nations. The ruling function of the Church is not as strongly stressed.

Most Protestants would argue that this is simply a change in emphasis, rather than a change in the nature of Catholic doctrine itself. The Roman Catholic Church has always maintained both an institutional and sacramental understanding of itself. But while the institutional characteristics may have been emphasised previously, the sacramental characteristics of the Church predominate today.

> The sacramental model of the Church understands the Church to be the means of salvation.

In most Protestant theologies the Church is the gathering point for those who have personally accepted Christ as saviour. For Protestants, salvation is prior to membership in the

Church. However, the sacramental model of the Church as held in Roman Catholic theology understands membership in the Church as an integral part of the scheme of salvation. Identification with the Church is the **means** by which salvation is received. Joining the Church is prior to salvation.

That being the case, the motive for mission is not so much the evangelisation of people groups and the individuals who comprise them. Rather, the establishment of the Church becomes the primary missionary method.[386] Roman Catholics do not generally conduct evangelistic crusades. They establish the Church and gather people under the umbrella of the Church. The sacramental model of the Church understands the Church to be the means of salvation.

3. The Mystical Communion Model

It is difficult to identify this particular model with any specific denomination. There is very good reason for that as we will notice in just a moment. Perhaps the closest approximation would be the view of the Church held by High Anglicans or Episcopalians. Certainly this is a Protestant model of the Church. In Protestant theology all believers—clergy and laity alike—comprise the Church. The Church is a gathering of all who believe in Jesus Christ. Roman Catholic models of the Church, on the other hand, emphasise that only the ordained clergy really comprise the Church.

The reason why it is so difficult to identify this model with any particular denomination is found in the definition of the word "mystical." When something is mystical it implies a certain "unknown" quality. When applied to the Church, this means that those who authentically comprise the Church communion are known only to God. This view of the Church is in sharp contrast with the institutional model which says that the human institution—the Church or denomination—is what defines the Church. The "mystical communion" model proposes that no denomination or human structure can possibly define the Church.

The mystical communion model states that Church community has a very intimate connection with God – a connection which cannot be described only in terms of human institutions.

That being the case, it is extremely difficult for any denomination to hold this view as its primary model of the Church, and continue to maintain validity for its own existence, or to hold membership lists and conduct baptisms which initiate people into a very human structure. The problem is that the Church must have structure if it is to exist and function in the world we live in.

Having said all this, however, it must be recognised that there is a considerable biblical basis for the mystical communion model. All of the discussion in the writings of the apostle Paul in which he describes the Church as "the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12) or "the people of God" (Ephesians 1-6) clearly indicates that he understands that the Church community has a very intimate connection with the divine; a connection which cannot be described only in terms of institutions or sacrament. The human institution—the Church—signifies this intimate relationship. Those who join themselves to the Church do so because they recognise that an intimate personal relationship exists between themselves and God. They regard the Church as a communion of those who wish to maintain this mystical union with God.

4. The Herald Model

This model of the Church has generally been adopted by people and Churches who are described as "evangelical." They are described that way because when they think about the Church they think of the task of the Church to tell the good news of the gospel to the world. The term "evangelical" is derived from the Greek word for good news.

The herald model understands that the *function* of the Church—to prepare the world for the coming of Christ—very much takes precedence over the *nature* of the Church. Its function as a herald defines its natures

When evangelical Churches reflect on the nature of the Church, they think about passages such as Matt 28:19,20 in which Christ commissioned his followers to make disciples of all nations in anticipation of his return.[387] Indeed, the process of making disciples is understood to be the pre-condition of his return. An often-quoted text of Scripture is Matt 24:24: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come." For those who understand the Church in terms of this model, the *function* of the Church—to prepare the world for the coming of Christ—very much takes precedence over the *nature* of the Church. The function of the Church as a herald defines its nature.

5. The Servant Model

Whereas those who have adopted a herald model of the Church generally see the coming kingdom of God as the focus and motivation for their preaching (getting people ready for the coming kingdom), those who hold a servant model of the Church generally think of the kingdom of God as something being established in the world today rather than something future. Programs of social service, community involvement, and justice are high on the agenda of those who have adopted this model. They see their service in the present world as the means of the continuing establishment of the present kingdom of God.

An example of a Christian group who have largely adopted this model is the World Councid of Churches. Theological and doctrinal differences are downplayed. The function of the Church is to be a mediating and redemptive presence in the face of poverty, loss, hunger, injustice, conflict, etc.

Programs of social service, community involvement, and justice are high on the agenda of those who have adopted the servant model. They see their service in the present world as the means of the continuing establishment of the present kingdom of God.

Of recent times this model has become a very attractive model to many Christians. There are many reasons for this. One reason is that there is very good biblical support for this model. Christians are called to relieve those in need. Christ did come as a servant. In the context of many cultures, Christians who are prepared to roll up their sleeves and **do** something are perceived as authentic over against those so-called Christians who preach moralistic condemnation on all who listen.

The danger is that the perspective on the kingdom which looks at its future reality will be lost and that in consequence, the task of the Church will become unbalanced with too much attention given to the present and not enough to the future. Salvation has its present and future reality.

A Model for the Seventh-day Adventist Church?

Which model best describes the Seventh-day Adventist Church? That is a difficult question to answer for two reasons. First, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has not generally entered into very much discussion about its perception of itself. There seems to be an unwritten understanding of the nature of the Church and its task which has not attracted a great deal of analysis. The problem is that the "unwritten understanding" may be unclear to the majority of members at best, and downright naive at worst.

Second, it does not take a great deal of intelligence to realise that there are aspects of most of these models which do help us to describe the nature of the Adventist Church. It is difficult to pick one particular model because it is apparent that no one model may be desirable without adaptation, or sufficient without being supplemented by aspects of another model or models.

For example, does the Seventh-day Adventist Church believe that it is important for the Church to have a visible presence in the world, to be organised for efficiency, to baptise people into Christ and into the Church, and to keep lists of members? It certainly does. There is a very strong institutional consciousness in this Church. However, it is based on very different presuppositions from those that underlie the Roman Catholic institutional model. There is no theological basis for a hierarchy, or for the separation of clergy and laity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church as there is in the Roman Catholic Church.

Does the Seventh-day Adventist Church believe it is called to be a servant to the world and to follow the example of Christ himself (the servant model)? It certainly does.

Does the Church believe that it is to be the body of Christ and maintain that intimate connection with Christ himself (the mystical communion model)? Is there a sense in which the Church is God's representative on earth, and that the Church, in a sense, must act on God's behalf in the world (the sacramental model)? The answer to all these questions is "yes."

Questions For Reflection

1. Based on the models outlined in this article, how would you describe the nature and function of the Seventh-day Adventist Church?
2. Is the kingdom of God something future or something present in the world? How does our answer influence our understanding of the Church?

What we are saying is that our understanding of what the Church is and does is formed as we consider a wide range of images and models of the Church in the world. The first three models are more concerned with what the Church **is**. The last two models are more concerned with what the Church **does**.

Seventh-day Adventists have tend-ed to confine their understanding of the Church too often to the herald model; the task of the Church "to take the gospel to the world;" to "finish the work." But if we want to understand ourselves better, we must consider models of the Church which don't only describe what we **do**, but which also describe what we **are**. Unless we are the authentic people of God, the body of Christ, God's representatives in the world, etc., all our talk about the functions of the Church—as vital as they may be—will be futile. What we are saying is that it is helpful to take all these models of the Church and, based on the pictures of the Church that we have in the New Testament, construct a model of the Church which adequately describes our understanding of the nature of the Church and its function in the world. While it is entirely appropriate and necessary that the Seventh-day Adventist Church should encourage its

members to **witness** to the world, it is just as important that it calls them to **be** an authentic Christian community.

Conclusions

Remember my friend, the church elder. My respect for him has grown over the years as I have become more aware of what he was saying. He may not have had an extensive theological education. But common sense told him that there is no point in encouraging the members of the Church to share their faith and invite others to join the Church if we have not given a lot of thought to what the Church is and what we want it to be. I hope the generation that will lead the Church into the new millennium does some careful thinking about the Church and comes up with some good ways of understanding its nature and function.

Do We Need an Organised Church?

Barry D. Oliver

I was watching the broadcast of the Lillehammer Winter Olympics on television. The long anticipated return of Jane Torvill and Christopher Dean to the Olympic ice was about to take place. But first, there had to be "a commercial break." I was somewhat peeved by this interruption. One of the commercials was for "Coca Cola," one for "Pringles," one for an upcoming program on that channel, one for "Mitsubishi" cars, and one for "The Greater" building society. I was not really listening.

But the next advertisement immediately caught my attention. I heard the familiar tones of "Aussie kids are Weet-Bix kids." I listened with considerable interest and felt a bit of a warm glow somewhere inside. I thought "Hm, not bad. In fact, that was pretty good." I felt just a smidgen of pride in my Church and its Sanitarium Health Food Company.

Without a system of organisation the Church would not be able to operate a Sanitarium Health Food Company. There would be no Sydney Adventist Hospital, no Pacific Adventist University, no Signs Publishing Company, no Adventist Media Centre, Avondale High School, etc., etc. I could not have viewed that TV commercial and felt good about what my Church was trying to do. Sometime, you may care to do a little exercise and consider how many things the Church now does that it would not be able to do if there was no system of organisation.

> The Seventh-day Adventist Church is a multi-national organisation, more widespread than any other Protestant Church.

Fundamental to the need for organisation in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the commitment of the Church to a global mission. The Church has taken seriously the words of Christ which have commissioned it to "go and make disciples of all peoples, baptising them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). Because the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a multi-national organisation, more widespread than any other Protestant Church it needs to be organised for effectiveness and efficiency. Although the necessity of such organisation should be obvious to all who pause to think about it, let me stimulate your thinking by suggesting some reasons why the Church must be organised.