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Kingdom Ecology

A Model for the Church in the World

by Howard A. Snyder

I am convinced that a biblical theology is impossible without a biblical ecclesiology. This article explores that premise, looking at the church in the broader framework of the whole Kingdom and economy of God. The argument reflects my conviction that questions of ecology, economics and international justice are essential, not secondary, to the biblical picture of the church and the new order for which we yearn and to which biblically faithful churches point.

Perhaps the greatest text for the church today is Matthew 6:33: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." In the Sermon on the Mount, "these things" were food and clothing—the material things the world runs after. You, Jesus says, are to seek higher things: the Kingdom of God and its justice.

Making the Kingdom our goal means deciding for justice. God told his unfaithful people in Isaiah's day, "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Is. 1:17). According to Proverbs 29:7, "the righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern." Righteousness and justice are the very foundation of God's rule (Ps. 89:14; 97:2). Righteousness before God and justice in society are not secondary or peripheral issues but the central truths of God's Kingdom—and therefore the central issues for the church.

Like the nation, America's churches breathe the atmosphere of self-protection and self-aggrandizement. They run after the same things the world does. The church is not free for the Kingdom. Its sickness is symbolized by the average church budget: eighty or ninety percent spent on itself, a pittance for the rest of the world.

If there is one charge to be made against the church today, it is the charge of worldliness. Evangelical churches protest the world's values at some points (sexual morality, family life, abortion) but have been seduced by the world at others (materialism; personal and institutionalized self-interest; styles of leadership, motivation and organization; the uses of power). Many Christians are convinced that technology changes things, even if they are unsure that prayer does. Technology works better than grace in the technological society.

Today much of the church moves with a massive misunderstanding of its own nature and mission. Especially in North America, the church shows little perception of the economy of God and therefore of the ecology of the church in God's plan. Many believers still operate with a static, institutional understanding, seeing the church as buildings, meetings, programs, professional clergy and special techniques of communication, evangelism and church growth. Worse, in the United States this whole mentality is often wed to a political and economic perspective which clashes directly with God's economy. Most Christians in our land are so tied to a perspective of unlimited economic growth, continued exploitation of resources, militarism, extravagant gadget-fed lifestyles and patriotic narcissism that they instinctively repel a more biblical view of the church and God's plan before they really understand it.

We need a massive awakening to the church's cultural accommodations and a fundamental rethinking of the church itself. By and large, North American Christians are so enamored with the American dream that they have become immune to several fundamental biblical themes. We have picked and chosen—spiritualizing here, literalizing there—in the process conforming the gospel to a comfortable, materialistic lifestyle. Where Scripture speaks of preaching the gospel to the poor, maintaining justice, caring for the widow and orphan, or preaching liberty to the captives, we have said, "Oh, that must be understood spiritually. Everyone is spiritually poor without Christ." But where the Scriptures speak of getting blessings from God or receiving "the desires of our heart," we have said, "Oh, that is literal

America's churches breathe the atmosphere of self-protection and self-aggrandizement. They run after the same things the world does.

and material. God helps those who help themselves. God wants us to be prosperous. We are children of the King." To many, this is gospel. But in reality this inversion of material and spiritual values is hypocrisy and heresy. It is a biblically unfaithful splitting up of the wholeness of God's house.

The Ecology of the Church

The human family and the world we live in constitute one ecological system. The very word *ecology*, based on *oikos*, the Greek word for house, tells us that the world is our habitation and that everything within it is tied to everything else. *Ecology* describes the essential interdependence of all aspects of life on this planet; *economy* (from the Greek *oikonomia*) describes the ordering or managing of these interrelationships. The more closely we look at economic and ecological concerns, the more we see that the two concerns merge. I want to explore what it means practically to view the life of the church ecologically and then to propose an ecological model for the internal life of the church.

God's house, his *oikos*, has a dual sense: the *oikoumenē*, or whole habitable world, and the church as the prototypical community of the Kingdom of God. God has an economy for his entire creation and, because of this dual sense of "house," we have been given a stewardship in the church and in the physical environment to care for and build God's household. For this task God has given us the resources of his grace. We need then to understand *the real ecology of the church* and what it means to be servants, stewards and earthkeepers for God. We need to grasp both the *internal ecology* of the church (how it functions as a spiritual-social organism) and its *extended ecology* (how it interacts with and affects the whole ecosphere of God's world).

We must learn to think ecologically at all levels in the church. Ecological thinking reminds us that everything is related to everything

Howard Snyder, who has served as a pastor, missionary and educator, is the author of several books, including The Problem of Wine-skins. This article is excerpted from his new book to be released this month, Liberating the Church (©1983 InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, reprinted by permission of InterVarsity Press).

else, and it emphasizes the need to trace and comprehend these inter-relationships. A few examples will illustrate the point. Within the church, Christians need to see how their lives really do touch the lives of other believers. In the neighborhood, Christians should ask how their lifestyles affect the environment. This ecology includes the kind of housing and transportation used, relationships with neighbors, and many other strands in the physical, social and spiritual environment. In their work, Christians should ask how the products and services they design, manufacture or distribute touch the overall environment—including, especially, their impact on the world's poor. For those who have investments, a critical question is where funds are invested and how those investments are used. Generally, invested capital operates either for or against the environment and the poor, for it is impossible for investments to be environmentally (and therefore morally) neutral. Ecological stewardship means concern as much with the impact of investments themselves as with how investment earnings are spent. And if this is true of individual investments, it is true even more of the investments of church-related institutions.

What, then, is the real ecology of the church? Here we face two immediate problems: identifying all the factors which constitute this ecology, and distinguishing between what the church's ecology ought to be and what it is in fact. The real ecology of the church encompasses an extremely large number of variables. The church, in fact, may be the most complex ecosystem in existence since it includes the total human environment and experience—physical, social and spiritual. Although these three categories are not totally satisfactory or mutually exclusive, we may use them to probe further into the church's actual ecology.

Physical Ecology. The church's physical ecology consists of the physical bodies of believers and all the material aspects of their lives. It includes the food and clothing Christians use, the products they use or help produce, and the physical energy they consume. It includes their houses and church buildings. Transportation, land use and the treatment of other life on earth are also part of the actual ecology of the church. *We cannot speak of the real ecology of the church without taking into account the combined impact Christians have in all these areas.* The key question, then, becomes whether the church's use of money, buildings, food supplies, energy and other physical resources is in harmony with God's economy or works against it. If Christians claim to be worshiping and serving God in the spiritual realm while furthering injustice through extravagant consumption of the earth's resources, then they are giving mixed signals. They are in fact working against God's economy in fundamental ways. From an ecological perspective there are no such things as *adiaphora*, "things indifferent."

Social Ecology. The social ecology of the church concerns the church as a social organism, a community. It includes the social impact of each believer, but it especially concerns the social reality and impact of Christian families and homes, Christian congregations, and the influence of Christians in their neighborhoods and in the larger human community.

The social ecology of the church thus includes the total social impact of the church and of individual Christians, as well as how the church is shaped by society. Part of this impact involves the moral and ethical values which Christians hold. These values are shown and transmitted by Christians' actual behavior. This is one reason the economic and social behavior of Christians is so important. Whether or not Christians are really cooperating with the economy of God will be revealed in the way they behave in the economic realm.

The real ecology of the church, then, includes every aspect of the social behavior of Christians. It includes the social and economic impact of the jobs Christians hold, and not just Christians' dependability at work or how they spend their off-the-job hours. And it includes the social impact of how Christians treat the physical world—for instance, whether they care for the earth and work for equitable distribution of food and clothing or are concerned only with their own accumulation and comfort.

Spiritual Ecology. The spiritual ecology of the church is even more complex than its physical and social ecology and is less available to our understanding and analysis. But Christians insist, on the basis of both Scripture and personal experience, that the spiritual dimension is the most fundamental in the church's ecology, the reality which gives ultimate meaning to all the rest.

The spiritual ecology of the church incorporates the moral and spir-

itual values by which Christians live, but it includes much more. It incorporates the reality of the spirit world—the actual presence of the Spirit of God in the world and the reality of angels, demons and whatever other unseen principalities and powers the universe contains. It is profoundly unecological to overlook this dimension. The church's spiritual ecology includes its battle with the kingdom of darkness, "the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient" (Eph. 2:2).

The spiritual impact of the church is tied especially to the influence Christians have on one another, the impact of righteous living on society and the power of prayer. Since prayer is the primary channel of communication between believers and God, it is a key means through which God's energy is released into the world. Here faith and hope are crucial, for through these, Christians are enabled to work constructively for the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the present order. The key dynamic in the church's spiritual ecology is faith working by love (Gal. 5:6).

The Church's Environmental Impact. Only when we take into account the physical, social and spiritual ecology of the church can

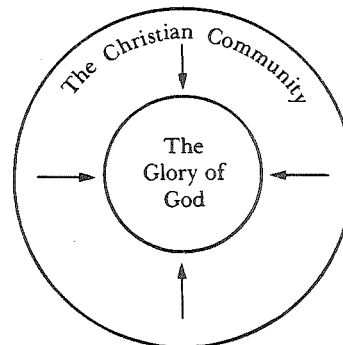
Questions of ecology, economics and international justice are essential to the biblical picture of the church.

we begin to gauge her true environmental impact. Some of a local congregation's impact could actually be measured through sociological, economic or ecological analysis. One could determine, for instance, the combined effect of the energy consumed by Christians or gauge their impact on the community's social fabric. It is true, of course, that much of the church's impact could not be measured or quantified. But since the social, physical and economic life of a group of people reflects their spiritual values, some judgment could be made about the total environmental impact of a congregation and its fundamental fidelity or infidelity to the economy of God.

An Ecological Model for Church Life

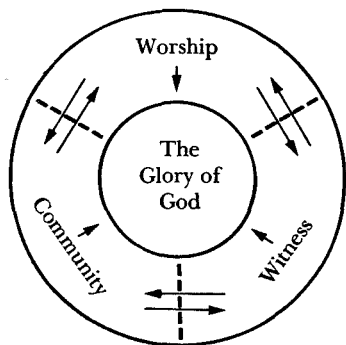
The following model is a synthesis of the New Testament teachings on the ecology of the church. I emphasize that this is a model. That is, it is not a complete description of the church's life, nor is it the only valid way to view the local church. It is a fairly comprehensive model, however, and it is consistent with Scripture and particularly apt for church life in today's world.

The Purpose of the Church. The model begins with the church's purpose. It is easier to understand the church's ecology when we know why the church exists. The church is to be sign, symbol and forerunner of the Kingdom of God. The church exists for the Kingdom. More basically, the purpose of the church is to glorify God. An ecological model for the church, then, orients church life toward God's glory.



Functions of the Church. The church glorifies God in many ways. In order to avoid the pitfall of justifying anything and everything the church does simply by saying it is “done for the glory of God,” however, we need to identify the most basic functions of the church. What are the essential components of the church’s life?

We find the New Testament church living a life of worship, community and witness. These functions are indicated to some extent by the New Testament words *leitourgia* (“service” or “worship,” from which comes the English word *liturgy*), *koinōnia* (“fellowship” or “sharing”), and *martyria* (“witness” or “testimony,” from which comes the word *martyr*). The church is a community or fellowship of shared life, a *koinōnia*. The church witnesses to what God has done in Jesus Christ and in its own experience, even when its *martyria* leads to martyrdom. Above all, the church performs the service of worship (*leitourgia*) to God, not just through acts of worship but by living a life of praise to God.



In this figure, the church is seen as glorifying God through its worship, its life together in community and its witness in the world. Recalling that this is an ecological model, we must stress not only that these functions are oriented toward the glory of God but also that each one interacts with and influences the others.

These functions stood out clearly in the early days of the Christian church. In Acts 2:42 we read that the first Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Further, we read that they shared their goods and homes with each other so that no one had need and all had a house fellowship in which to worship God and be strengthened for witness in the world.

1. *Worship.* Paul tells the Ephesians: “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 5:19–20). We are to “teach and admonish one another with all wisdom,” singing “psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude . . . to God” (Col. 3:16).

Worship—praising God and hearing him speak through the Word—is the heart of being God’s people. Often in the Old Testament we read of the special festivals of the children of Israel. These, as well as the whole sacrificial system, focused on worshipping God.

Worship means more, however, than worship services. We are to live a life of worship. Everything we do is to glorify God. But this life of worship comes to special focus and intensity in the regular weekly worship celebration of God’s people.

Each week is a journey through time. The journey brings us face to face with the values, pressures and seductions of an idolatrous age. Getting through the week means turning a deaf ear to countless advertisements for clothes, cars, magazines, video recorders and other items, even while we listen for the cries of human need. Unless we plan otherwise, the week will be programmed for us by job or school commitments, errands, TV schedules, our acquaintances and many other demands. The world closes in on us.

Worship is the opening in an enclosed world. The world tries to make us like itself. It draws a circle around us, blocking out the higher, brighter world of the Spirit. We are not to deny the present world nor to flee from it. Rather we are to learn how to live like Jesus within society. We are to be lights in the world (Mt. 5:15–16; Phil. 2:15).

Here is the key. In worship the curtains of time and space are thrown back, and we see anew the realm of the Spirit. Worshipping

God in spirit and truth gives us a window on eternity. It changes our lives as we see again that we really do live in two worlds. We begin to see from God’s perspective: “I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood” (Ps. 73:17).

2. *Community.* One of the things the first Christians devoted themselves to was “the fellowship” (Acts 2:42). The word *koinōnia* here denotes communion, community or fellowship—a group of people bound closely together by what they share. As sharers in God’s grace, the believers devoted themselves to being and becoming the *community* of God’s people.

God has made us a community and wants us to grow continually as a fellowship of believers, being “built up [*oikodomēn*] until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12–13). As W. A. Visser’t Hooft has noted, “In the New Testament edification is not used in the subjective sense of intensification and nurture of personal piety. It means the action of the Holy Spirit by which he creates the people of God and gives shape to its life.” (*The Renewal of the Church* [London: SCM Press, 1956], p. 97). Edification is community building with the person and character of Jesus as the goal.

Biblically, community means shared life based on our new being in Jesus Christ. To be born again is to be born into God’s family and community. While forms and styles of community may vary widely, any group of believers which fails to experience intimate life together has failed to experience the real meaning of Christ’s body. To be the Christian community means to take seriously that believers are members of each other, and therefore to take responsibility for the welfare of Christian brothers and sisters in their social, material and spiritual needs.

3. *Witness.* In the life of the church, worship and community spark the church’s witness. This was so in Acts. The praise and fellowship described in Acts 2:42–47 brought an interesting result: “The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). Later when the Jerusalem church was persecuted and many believers fled to other areas, “those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:4). Jesus told his followers before his ascension, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The book of Acts is the history of the church’s witness throughout the Roman world in response to Jesus’ words.

Worship is the opening in an enclosed world. A church weak in worship has little will for witness, nor does it have much to witness about.

A church weak in worship has little will for witness, nor does it have much to witness about. Similarly, a church with no vital community life has little witness because believers are not growing to maturity and learning to function as healthy disciples. Where community is weak, witness is often further compromised by an exaggerated individualism. Witness may degenerate into inviting people to God without involving them in Christian community. A living Christian community has both the inclination and the power to witness. It witnesses both from concern for human need and for the sake of the coming Kingdom of God. In God’s economy, the church’s witness has Kingdom significance.

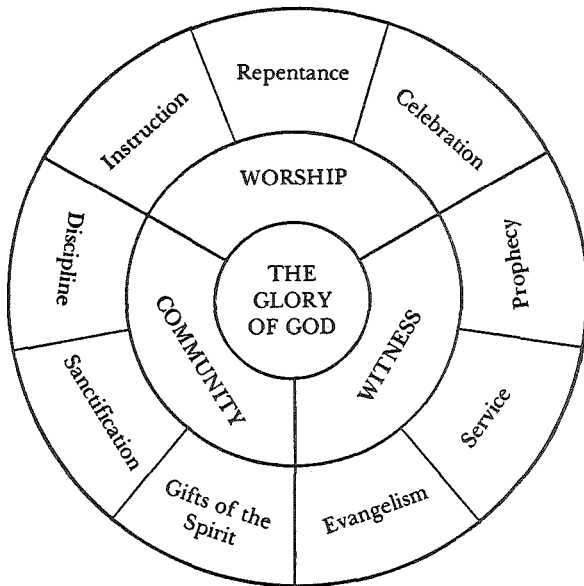
Exploring the Model

The basic elements of worship, community and witness may be expanded to clarify their function in the ecology of the church. Just as these parts combine to shape the life of the church, so each in turn depends on the proper functioning of its component parts.

Worship, community and witness may be analyzed in several ways. One way, which seems to possess a certain internal logic and balance, is to view worship as the interplay of instruction, repentance and

celebration; community as consisting of discipline, sanctification and the gifts of the Spirit; and witness as a combination of evangelism, service and prophecy. Thus the church's ecology may be more fully pictured by our final figure.

Celebration, Instruction, Repentance. Celebration is the church in the act of praising God. In worship, the church celebrates God's person and works through music, liturgy, spontaneous praise and other



means. Special joy comes to believers in celebrating the coming new age. *Worship liberates the church for the Kingdom.* We praise God not only for what he has done but for what he will do. Already in faith we anticipate and celebrate the day when we will sing, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ."

Instruction as part of worship involves the church in hearing God's voice through the Word read, taught or otherwise spoken. In worship, the movements of celebration and instruction are the movements of the Spirit and the Word. Particularly important in worship is the public proclamation of the Word through teaching and preaching (1 Tim. 4:13; 5:17). God has chosen through the "foolishness" of preaching "to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). Preaching means both public proclamation of the Word to unbelievers and teaching the Word to believers as part of regular worship.

Repentance is perhaps seldom seen as part of worship, but it really fits into the rhythm of Word and response. To celebrate God when our lives contradict the gospel and we remain unrepentant is false worship. Yet this is true of much of the church in North America. Worship is closely linked with God's Kingdom and justice in the ecology of the church, and therefore with repentance.

Discipline, Sanctification and Spiritual Gifts. Discipline means discipleship, building a community of people who are truly Jesus' disciples. The church is a covenant people. In fidelity to God as revealed in Scripture and in Jesus Christ, Christians accept responsibility for each other and agree to exercise discipline as needed in order to keep

faith with God's covenant. In this way the church takes seriously the many scriptural injunctions to warn, rebuke, exhort, encourage, build and disciple one another in love.

Sanctification is closely related to discipline and to the edification (*oikodomē*) of the church. Sanctification is the Spirit's work of restoring the image of God in believers and in the believing community. It is having the mind of Christ and displaying the fruit of the Spirit. It is the manifestation of Christ's character in his body.

Spiritual gifts are a particularly important part of the community life of the church. The gifts of the Spirit become vital and practical when they are awakened, identified and exercised in the context of shared Christian life. In God's ecology, the fruit of the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit go together, and to stress one over the other is to distort God's plan for the church, crippling the body.

Evangelism, Service and Prophecy. Historically, the church has found it difficult to hold evangelism, service and prophetic witness together. But where the church's evangelistic witness has been buttressed by loving service in the spirit of Jesus and an authentic prophetic thrust, the church has been at its best and has made its greatest impact for the Kingdom.

Evangelism—sharing the good news of Jesus and the Kingdom—is always important in a biblically faithful church. From an ecological perspective evangelism strongly affects the other areas of the church's life. A church which is not evangelizing runs the risk of becoming ingrown and self-centered. Adding new converts to a church fellowship is like the birth of a baby into a family.

Service means the church's servant role in the world, following the example of Christ. Like evangelism, service is part of the overflow of the life of the Spirit in the church. It is rooted in the church's community life because Christian service means both serving one another in the household of faith and reaching out in service to the world. Service is grounded also in worship, for in worship we are reminded of what God has done for us and we hear his Word calling us to follow Jesus to the poor, the suffering and the oppressed.

Prophecy is part of the church's witness to the world. Prophecy here means not primarily the charismatic gift of prophecy as it may be exercised in Christian worship, but rather the church's corporate prophetic witness in the world. This, of course, may include the exercise of the gifts of particular believers. The church's evangelism and service, in fact, are part of the church's prophetic witness when they grow out of healthy church life and genuinely point ahead to the Kingdom.

Such an ecological model for church life can be strategically useful. In addition to being a tool for understanding church life, it is helpful in diagnosing the condition of a church. When the church is weak in *worship*, its life becomes humanistic and subjective and the impulse for evangelism is often lost. When *community* life is anemic, believers remain spiritual babes, failing to grow up in Christ. Worship may become cold and formal, and witness weak or overly individualistic. If the church's *witness* is the problem, the fellowship may become ingrown and self-centered. The church may drift into legalism in order to guard its life, and it will have little growth or impact. Investigating these various areas can be very revealing to a church which is seeking to be free for the Kingdom but senses something is wrong.

If the church has one great need, it is this: To be set free for the Kingdom of God, to be liberated from itself as it has become in order to be itself as God intends. The church must be freed to participate fully in the economy of God.

BREAD FOR THE WORLD SPRING SEMINARS

The Bread for the World Educational Fund plans six spring "Outreach on Hunger" seminars across the country to train more than 850 local leaders so that they, in turn, can teach their communities about effective, long-term solutions to the problem of world hunger.

Locations for these weekend seminars include Orlando, FL (March 18-20), Milwaukee, WI (April 15-17), San Francisco, CA (April 29-May 1), Worcester, MA (May 6-8), Rochester, MN (May 13-15), and Chattanooga, TN (May 20-22). These weekend seminars offer both education on hunger issues and training in outreach skills for both current anti-hunger leaders and those individuals newly interested in hunger concerns. For further information, contact Alden Lancaster, Project Director, Bread for the World Educational Fund, 6411 Chillum Place N.W., Washington, D.C., 20012, (202) 722-4100.

BREAD FOR THE WORLD ORGANIZING PROJECT

Bread for the World, a national Christian citizens' movement, is seeking individuals to participate in the 1983 Summer Organizing Project from June 8 through August 17. Individuals will participate in a ten-day orientation in Washington, D.C., on current anti-hunger legislation, how government works, public speaking and group organizing skills. Each will then be placed in a particular part of the country to work with a local BFW group for eight weeks in organizing Christians to be involved in public policies on hunger. Follow-up and evaluation in Washington conclude the project. For more information contact Sharon Pauling, intern coordinator, Bread for the World, 6411 Chillum Place, N.W., Washington, DC 20021; (202) 722-4100.