

September 2004, On Church Forms

One of the things I have been thinking about lately is “church forms.” You know, all this discussion of seeker church, cell church, house church, river church, traditional church, postmodern church and so on. Some of the discussion gets pretty heated at times, with one group claiming that another is not “really” Church. Well, I got an insight about this subject one night while lecturing to Terese (nice to have a daughter who puts up with dad’s random lectures). I was trying to explain to her that the selection of churches she had available to her was not available to us when we were young (you know those lectures: “It wasn’t like this when I was a kid. Why when I was a kid . . .”).

So I gave her a tour of recent American Church history.

1955/56 - Mom and Dad are born into standard traditional Mainline churches (though “**evangelicalism**” takes a jump from 1948 with the foundation of the National Association of Evangelicals, Fuller seminary, Campus Crusade for Christ, Billy Graham Association, Christianity Today magazine and such).

1971 - Mom and Dad become Christians right in the middle of the Jesus movement and the charismatic renewal (a movement which sparked the **Calvary Chapel** association and the contemporary worship form). Cheri and I continued to attend our mainline churches all through high school.

1975 - Mom and Dad take a year of “exploring church” our first year of college, visiting many house groups. This was during the influence of folks like Gene Edwards, Howard Snyder and the Church renewal movement. Many early **house churches**, “**renewal churches**” and research (influencing what became “**Church Growth**” studies) developed from these seeds.

1978 - Mom and Dad marry and make commitments to “simple living” during the growth of many influential “evangelical left” **intentional communities** (Sojourners, Church of the Redeemer, Other Side and the like).

1981 - We experience our “contemplative conversion” as spirituality begins to impact the evangelical community’s thought and practice, while attending LaSalle Street Church, a model inner-city evangelical renewal church in Chicago.

1983 - We move back to Spokane, Washington and end up helping to plant one of the first “Willow Creek” clones (**seeker-sensitive church**) in the area. This form developed a few years earlier from a youth group in suburban Chicago.

1984 - We begin to explore the “Vineyard,” a movement which was destined to powerfully influence both the worship and the experience of spiritual gifts in many churches. Indeed, the

“**Vineyard**” form of church (relaxed charismatic) became a model for many churches both within and without the formal Vineyard Association.

1988 - We begin to use the *Book of Common Prayer* for family devotions with our two young girls and begin a practical recovery of traditional forms for ourselves.

1994 - Now in California, we experience all the dynamics of the “Toronto Blessing,” a revival which was to shape the formation of “**river churches**” all over the world. River churches emphasize the value of the spontaneous work of the Spirit. At the same time a great deal of interest regarding cell and house church forms are also stirring.

1996 - We move to Montrose and begin to hear about the new “**postmodern churches**.” We explore a number of good church options and end up at St. Paul’s, a mildly charismatic Episcopal community.

2000 and beyond - While in Montrose, friends leave our local congregation both to join the Roman Catholic Church and to associate with the house church movement. Evangelicals looking for more strictly traditional forms. Evangelicals disillusioned with traditional forms.

That’s a wide range of forms of church, all starting within my life as a believer. Terese was familiar with much of this history, having lived with us since 1985 and having heard our reflections on earlier years. She just never had it systematically presented.

At this point in my lecture (just when she thought I was done), the lights went on in my brain. With all due respect to traditional forms of church, when Cheri and I first became Christians, the picture looked rather bleak. Many (within and without) spoke of the deadness of church. And now here we were, thirty years later, and the landscape was *entirely* different. There was, now, a spectrum of forms of church, each full of life in its own way. While, in 1971, I would not have been sure the Church could have survived late modernism/postmodernism solely with the forms existent at the time, now, thirty years later, I was confident that the Church can survive all kinds of trauma. And what’s more, I was confident it would prevail *because* of the diversity of church forms.

Bingo! The very features that divide us as groups of believers (style of worship, relationship to culture, doctrinal flexibility, sense of community, experience of the Spirit, and such) become, in the sovereign hands of God, the means of multiplying the community of the King throughout every segment of society. Our fragmentation--the very fragmentation which we often interpret as a cause of the collapse of the Church (and rightly so)--is used by God to ensure the stability of the Church. And I cannot even begin to describe the ways in which a still wider variety of forms are expressed in the current explosion of Christianity in Africa, South America, and Asia!

So what does this mean for us? For Terese it means that she can rejoice at the prospects that lie

ahead of her as she leaves home and associates with a community of believers in her new place. While she will experience the late modern anxiety of “shopping” for church (perhaps this is how we all find our identities these days: by making shopping choices), she can be glad that there are a number of good options from which to choose. And for others of us, perhaps seeing something of God’s hand in the various forms of church will help us to give one another space to live, to grow, to stay, or to change. These are unusual times we live in. But our God is more unusual still.

May God the Father bless you with the riches in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.