

Current Thoughts

from Dwight's corner

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e-Current 040109

January of 2003 was the first of my intended series on the question "Just what *is* a church?" A year later and we are still working on it!

Last year I proposed the definition: *Individuals committed to life together under the lordship of Jesus Christ.* The first "node" of this network of meaning is: **No Christ, no church.** The second "node" is: **No community, no church.** Today I offer another installment on the relationship of community (*koinonia*) and church.

In November I said: "The church as community is the basis for congregationalism." Congregationalism presumes "autonomy" balanced with "associationalism." This awkward place is paradoxically the home of New Testament freedom. Either extreme is prone to oppression (slavery), all the while projecting an illusion that this is "freedom." As Bonhoeffer said, freedom is "freedom for the other," not freedom from the other.

Congregational churches are "autonomous," in that they are free from political and hierarchical ecclesiastical authority. They are autonomous in that they are self-supporting and self-defining when it comes to membership. Obviously, this has implications for organization and self-government.

At the same time, churches are called to be "associational," because believers make up the body of Christ. With this in mind, church membership is not merely a legalistic gate we must get through so we can jump into the pool, it becomes a mutual agreement to live together in fellowship. And life together means serving one another (Galatians 5:13), and carrying one another's burdens (*even sins!* Galatians 6:2).

This associationalism extends beyond a single congregation into the larger world. That is the true basis for denominations. In the same way that individuals profess a mutual agreement to live together in fellowship, forming a church; churches profess a mutual agreement to live together in fellowship forming a denomination. While I have some very definite opinions about both the expansiveness and limits of that fellowship, I also know that not every one (not even every Baptist) shares my interpretation. However, I will argue that living as a total independent (either personally or congregationally) is contrary to being "in Christ."

Which brings us to my concluding thought for **no community, no church**. Community is not just a way of "doing," it is a way of "being."

Growing up (and even into seminary) I often heard a simplistic utilitarian ("doing") justification for associationalism. It sounded like: "We associate with others because we can do more together than we can do apart."

While it is true that we can do more in concert than we can alone, that is not an adequate theological basis for associationalism. We are associational first and foremost because Christ called us to be that way!

[My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ... You did not choose me, but I chose you.... John 15] There is no way that I can "be in Christ," and you can "be in Christ" and for us to remain unrelated at the same time.

While we may debate the nature of that "association" and how it is expressed; while we may wonder about the impact of my sin (and yours) on that association; the reality of association is rooted in God's being. As we are together, we allow God's being to shine through us. *We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.* (II Cor 4:7)

You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling place in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22)

This time every year your regional staff spends time reviewing and evaluating the last year and planning for the new year. Part of that review includes holding one another accountable for the last year. One aspect of my accountability is reporting what I have read. From that list of 48 books, I recommend the following five as books you should consider reading in the coming year:

Paul Chafee

Accountable Leadership: A Resource Guide for Sustaining Legal, Financial, and Ethical Integrity in Today's Congregations

Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, 1997.

Stephen Compton

Rekindling the Mainline: New Life through New Churches

Alban: Bethesda, 2003.

Carl Eeman

Generations of Faith: A Congregational Atlas

Alban: Bethesda, 2002.

Erwin McManus

Uprising: A Revolution of the Soul

Nelson: Nashville, 2003.

Ben Witherington III

The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth

InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, 1995.



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