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“I WILL BUILD MY PARACHURCH”?

MATTHEW 16:19

THOU ART PETER, AND UPON THIS ROCK I WILL build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. We explored this text back in TOTT issue 79 (“Upon This Rock,” Sept./Oct. 2012), the main purpose of which was to demonstrate through both Scripture and history that Peter was not “the Rock” on which the Church was built, as is claimed by Roman Catholicism.

We revisit verse 19, however, for another purpose: to re-emphasize exactly how our Lord intended to do this building. Did He intend to do this exclusively through the local church or did He intend for those churches to be aided by other separate entities commonly called “parachurch organizations” (PCO) or “parachurch ministries” (PCM). Let us first quickly review what the Church is and then define the parachurch and examine both its pros and cons.

What is the Church?

As noted in TOTT #79, the evangelical view of the Church is based upon an understanding of three Greek words.

First, there is the unique word *ekklēsia* (*ek*, “out,” and *kaleō*, “to call”) and therefore means “a called-out assembly.” It is found in Classical Greek from the 5th-century BC onward and was used for the assembling of citizens of the city (*polis*) for legislation and other public business.

Second, while *ekklēsia* occurs about 100 times in the Septuagint for the gathering of Israel for some definite purpose, the usual word is *sunagōgē* (“synagogue”), which appears about 225 times to translate various Hebrew words. It is amazing that Jesus’ followers didn’t describe their meetings using *sunagōgē*, since this would have been the natural word for Jews to use. When it *is* used, it refers to the meeting place of the local Jewish community or assembly.

So again, *ekklēsia* is, indeed, unique, appearing some 116 times. As our Lord declares, **Upon this rock I will build my church**. He truly transformed this word, using it to refer to *His* assembly, making it distinct from Judaism.

Third, our English word **church** actually comes from *kuriakos*, which is derived from *kurios* (Lord), and literally means “belonging to the Lord” (translated “Lord’s” in 1 Cor. 11:20 and Rev. 1:10). Combining all that, the Church can be defined simply as: *the called-out assembly of NT believers that belongs*

to the Lord. The Universal Church (the church as an *organism*) is comprised of all believers everywhere. Our Lord’s words in our text, for example, emphasize His **church**, not *churches* (cf. 1 Cor. 15:9; Col. 1:18, 24; Eph. 5: 23–27).

The local church (the church as an *organization*), then, is a local assembly of believers organized according to Scriptural guidelines (e.g., Jerusalem, Acts 8:1; Antioch, 13:1; Ephesus, 20:17; Galatia, Gal. 1:2; Judea, 1 Thess. 2:14; and Asia Minor, Rev. 2–3). Why did our Lord create the local church? He created a physical *entity* to address a physical *world*. How critical it is that we recognize that *the Local Church is the functioning organization of the Universal Church*. In fact, the Universal Church cannot even function properly without the Local Church, for the Local Church has been ordained of God to carry on earthly ministry. That is why the Apostle Paul founded local churches throughout the known world of his day. To deny the primacy of the Local Church is to deny the very foundation of NT ministry.

All this, then, is built not upon Peter, but **the Rock** (*petra*, a large rock, such as a boulder, cliff, bedrock, or even a mountain chain) of Jesus Christ alone. As Ephesians 2:20 unambiguously proclaims, the Church is built upon “the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone” (i.e., **the Rock**).

What is the Parachurch?

Simply defined, a Christian PCO is “a Christian organization that carries out its mission independently from the oversight of a local church.” The Greek prefix *para*, of course, means “beside” or “alongside.” Our English word “parallel” well illustrates; it’s actually the Greek *parallēlos*, side by side, equivalent to *par-* and *allēlos*, one another. So, a PCO claims to come alongside the local church to aid it in a ministry that the church itself supposedly cannot carry on by itself.

Most PCOs focus on and specialize in one specific area of ministry, such as: family, education, missionary support, prison outreach, counseling, medical, communications, transportation, and many others. While some are small with volunteer workers (or those on “missions support”), others are more like a business, with paid employees and large budgets. In any case, these more times than not rely on donations from churches and individual Christians.

What are the Positives of the Parachurch?

As has often been argued, PCOs fill a void because either the local church is not doing its whole job or it simply cannot accomplish certain things. PCOs, therefore, feed the hungry, focus on families, evangelize youth, send out missionaries, publish literature, lobby, educate, broadcast, clothe, and heal. In so doing, it is concluded, they serve the Christian community around the world.

One example of the necessity of a PCM, it is argued, is book publishing. Since the average local church has 100 or less members, such a church can't possibly accomplish this task. With today's technology (on demand publishing, Internet marketing, etc.), however, that is no longer true. But more basic than that, I find it a stretch to use the term *ministry* to refer to a for-profit *business*, which is what virtually all publishing companies are to one extent or another.

Another example that is offered is the advanced education of colleges and seminaries. "The local church simply cannot do this," it is insisted. Well, Charles Spurgeon did. As we detailed back in TOTT #65 ("A Model for Teaching Faithful Men," Dec. 2010), Spurgeon trained 845 men for the Gospel ministry in his Pastor's College, a ministry that was based firmly in the local church.

While this is rare nowadays, there are some examples. Led by their pastor, Dr. John MacArthur, the leadership of Grace Community Church "envisioned a seminary program that would train men for ministry in the context of a local church. In 1977, Talbot Theological Seminary helped bring partial fruition to that goal by initiating an extension center on the campus of Grace Church." The Seminary opened its doors in 1986. "Its purpose was to train men of God, thoroughly equipped for Bible exposition and local church ministry."¹ Much the same can be said of Shepherd's Seminary in Cary, North Carolina. While it does, of course, like Master's, have a separate board of directors that provides oversight, it "began under the guidance of Colonial Baptist Church"² and is still closely tied to it.

Now, while some insist that these are PCOs, I must disagree. Their *foundation* is in the local church, their *function* is to train men for the local church, and much of their *faculty* comes from pastors of local churches (and if not, it should).

As for the other examples of PCOs listed earlier, are these commendable? Absolutely! And neither do we for a moment doubt anyone's sincerity, passion, or commitment. Nor do we deny that PCOs have been effective in each of these areas. But we would submit that in the final analysis, PCOs *hinder* more than they *help*. Why? Because they hinder what God originally designed. Each of those needs can be met by the local church. Instead of starting a new organization, God's people should labor in the local church to fulfill needs. If someone has a burden for a particular ministry (one that is, of course, biblical), they should approach a local church to see if it will sponsor it, or they could (if qualified) start a church that will use that ministry in its outreach.

Now, has the church failed at times to do what it should be doing? Absolutely! And it should stop disobeying God and fulfill its mission! Many local churches are poor examples of what God designed, but instead of changing the *paradigm*, let's fix the *problem*, not add new problems with more PCOs.

What Are the Negatives of the Parachurch?

While most proponents of PCOs just shrug off this observation as irrelevant, out of date, or whatever else, the fact remains that the concept of the PCO was unknown to the 1st-century church and is nowhere either stated or even implied in Scripture. As our article title indicates, our Lord did not say, **Upon this rock I will build my [parachurch]**. The unmistakable fact is that the local church (the Church as an *organization*) is what God has chosen to use for ministry.

In my research, I read one PCO defender who submits that while it is admittedly "not a biblical *basis*," Acts 6 is still "a good biblical *model* for [PCOs], in which the Greek widows were being left out of the church's daily distribution of food." The same writer also noted others who insist that 3 John 5-8 is John's encouragement to believers to support traveling evangelists who are "proto-parachurch workers."³ But if we may lovingly ask, where in the world do they get that? Are not such ideas obvious examples of eisegesis, that is, forcing one's subjective presuppositions upon the text to make it say what one wants it to say?

Another such example comes from the recent (and heart wrenching) book, *Beyond the Local Church: How Apostolic Movements Can Change the World*.⁴ (Frankly, I have not been this burdened since my research for TOTT #95; "The Critical Doctrine of Imputation"; May/June 2015.) The author argues that PCOs of all kinds are not only legitimate but essential to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. As most proponents of PCOs have said for decades, he insists that the church is just not getting the job done, but he goes much further to add that the local church is simply not a good fit for every Christian's ministry and that some with certain spiritual gifting can only be fulfilled in a PCO. As a result of flawed hermeneutics and faulty theology (mixed with a plethora of anecdotes), he goes so far as to say (in a chapter titled, of all things, "Mother Teresa Wasn't a 'Para-Catholic!'"):

I get weary of hearing the oft-repeated mantra that "the local church is the hope of the world." It's simply not true. The church in its local form is not all that there is. . . . As the Bible and history so clearly show us, if we depend solely on the church in its local form, there is no hope—and there never has been (p. 77).

This book is a shocking example of those today who simply wish to tear down the local church. While the author insists, "I am not anti-local church" (p. 20), such statements as the following seem to say something quite different:

Throughout the Protestant world, too many of us continue to plow ahead with a self-inflicted handicap. . . . Out of a sense of loyalty to the local church, we blindly limp along as ecclesiastical cripples (p. 16).

"Even some large [PCMs] that communicate with tens of millions of people, raise hundreds of millions of dollars, and impacts lives all over the world are cast as second fiddle to the local church" (p. 66, quoting George Barna).

Leaders, particularly pastoral leaders, genuinely believe the supremacy of the church local (p. 70).

The local church will never be the primary structure that pioneers new ground, particularly when barriers must be crossed for the sake of the good news of Jesus (p. 73).

If that is not bad enough, the author displays his faulty theology and hermeneutics by majoring on what he calls “apostolic movements” (part of the book’s subtitle) and “apostolic calling.” This displays an abysmal understanding of the NT. We live in the *post*-apostolic age. There are *no* apostles, *no* apostolic calling, and *no* apostolic movements. The author’s history is equally faulty; he views such movements as occurring in Celtic and Orthodox monks of the Middle Ages, as well as Protestant missionary societies after the 18th-century.

Further still, the author doesn’t even like the term “parachurch.” He thinks those who use it should have their mouths washed out with soap (p. 63). He prefers to use the term “sodalities”—a “sodality” is an organized society or fellowship (and which, by the way, is rooted in Roman Catholicism!). He prefers this term because sodalities, in his opinion, are just as legitimate as local churches and equal with them.

I am very careful about using the following term because of how loosely it is often used, but if that is not *heresy*, it is certainly flirting with it. The NT usage of *haireisis* (seizure, taking, acquisition, choice, desire for something, and purposeful decision) follows that of Hellenism and the Septuagint. Heresy is a choice, a deliberate decision to “seize” upon a particular teaching that is not orthodox. It’s difficult not to conclude that this author’s teaching is, in fact, very unorthodox. He clearly minimizes God’s ordained institution. The centrality of the local church as the training ground for Christians (Eph. 4:11–2) and as the launching pad for Gospel outreach (Acts 13:1–3; Phil 1:5; 1 Thes 1:8;) is so *unmistakable* that it must be deliberately ignored (or “reevaluated,” as the popular term is used today) to come to this author’s conclusions.

So, please prayerfully consider six negatives of PCOs.

First, we humbly submit, PCOs are the result of pragmatic thinking, pure and simple. Pragmatism, of course, evaluates theories or beliefs based upon their success in their practical application. In short, whatever gets the desired result is good, or more to the point: the end justifies (and validates) the means. We see a need and think up what, in our learned opinion, is the best method to address it and, therefore conclude: this is what works, so this is what we will do.

This is not just my opinion. It’s readily admitted by defenders of PCOs. One writes, for example: “There are many pragmatic reasons for a [PCM] to exist. [PCMs] are effective.” Now, in all fairness, the writer goes on to admit that “the danger of pragmatism is that we can begin to trust in skill, techniques, or programs more than we trust in the Spirit’s work or in the clear commands of Scripture.” He then concludes: “Healthy [PCMs] avoid resorting to pragmatic programs (those things that often seem like gimmicks and fads with hindsight) and instead have a strong confidence in the gospel and in the Scriptures.”⁵ We respectfully repeat, however, that while somewhat discerning, such a view nonetheless ignores that pragmatism creates the PCM in the first place.

“Oh, but there is a need!” it is insisted. “We must address it!” Granted, and we certainly applaud the burden and desire. But if we may submit, if the need is genuine, are we to think that God cannot provide a way for the local church to address it? The local church was designed by and belongs to our Lord. Are we saying that He created something that is not fully effective, something that needs help from human thinking and problem solving? To say “yes” is to deny biblical sufficiency.

Again, am I saying PCOs are not effective? Am I saying they do not accomplish a good work? Absolutely not. *But what exactly is being blessed?* As God prompted Isaiah to declare, “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Is. 55:11). Let us not equate God’s blessing on His *Word* with some supposed blessing on a PCO. Is it possible that God is bringing results not *because* of the PCO but *in spite* of it?

Second, PCOs are elevated over the local church. Frankly, as noted in our earlier discussion of the book *Beyond the Local Church*, this is a given simply because the thinking that spawns a PCM is that the local church is not doing it or “we can do it better.” For example, in an article in their bi-monthly publication, a well-known PCM stated some 30 years ago: “Most [PCOs] are specialists. [Ours] specializes in training disciples, disciplers, and leaders.”⁶ But wait a minute, does this not plainly imply that the local church is not a specialist, that it and its leaders are inadequate to the task of training disciples, disciplers, and leaders? Does this not again contradict Scripture outright (Eph. 4:11–12)?

The history of that PCO is also very telling. After seeing the benefits of basic discipleship principles in his own life, a young fellow back in the 1930s wanted to teach them to others. Supposedly based on the 2 Timothy 2:2 model, he began teaching others so they could teach others. As the years went by, this spread to colleges, the military, and businesses. While the passion is certainly commendable, and it is equally wonderful that many came to Christ, what seems totally ignored is that *the 2 Timothy 2:2 model was written to a pastor and is based upon the local church*. The one and only mention of “churches” in the history of this PCO, in fact, is “the contributions of individuals and churches” to the organization. Further, as addressed in our last TOTT on missions, “Field staff—those directly involved in grassroots ministry—raise their own financial support,”⁷ and these are not church-planters.

Now, to be fair, this PCO developed a “Church Ministries” program that is “faithfully serving pastors, church leaders, and laborers for the Kingdom within their communities.”⁸ But why is this necessary? The biblical, godly, committed local church can accomplish exactly what God desires it to do. Further, how effective would each of these workers be if they were committed exclusively to the local church God put them in? And how much stronger would each church be?

Still another example of this elevating of the PCO over the local church is the “mission board,” which claims to want to help the local church but often fails to do so biblically. To illustrate, a pastor friend of mine was speaking to the director of a particular mission board who told him, “We as a mission board want to help the local church.” My friend said, “Well, great. Here’s what we want to do. We believe in the biblical model that the local church should send out missionaries. So, what we would like you as a mission board to do is serve as the business manager. We’ll pay you to handle all the financial and legal matters, but the missionary will ultimately be responsible solely to our Church.” The mission director turned a little pale and replied, “No, we can’t do that. The missionary must be ultimately responsible to the mission board.” My friend politely responded, “Then please don’t tell me you want to help the local church.” I’ve also heard Christian pas-

tors and mission board representatives say that this approach simply won't work, but we submit again that they are, therefore, saying that Scripture won't work. Clearly, today's mission boards have usurped the authority of the local church. There has been, if you will, an "ecclesiastical *coup d'état*," an illegal seizing of power they have no right to have.

If I may be so bold to ask, then: biblically speaking, should so-called mission organizations exist? As noted in our last TOTT, the mission organization William Carey founded was likely the first PCO, but while Carey did *much* that was wonderful, we are compelled to say that he (as did J. Hudson Taylor with his organization) erred here, as many have since. "Missions" (church-planting) must be grounded in and supported by local churches.

One other way the PCM is elevated over the local church is that it often becomes the priority of its members over the local church. Some such ministries, for example, have activities that actually prevent attendance in the church. Also, their members are often far better known as leaders in their PCM than in their church. Further, as we will see in a moment, many give money to the PCM that should go to the church.

Third, PCOs are often weak doctrinally. One well-known PCO, for example, has only two points in its doctrinal statement: "The Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God; The Lord Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God." While those are certainly good, of course, such a doctrinal statement leaves everything else "up for grabs." Is it not obvious, for example, that most PCOs are weak on Ecclesiology (the doctrine of the Church)? This translates still further to practical theology. Many PCMs are advocates of lay-preachers and other leadership that is biblically unqualified. This has actually become so serious that many (if not most) PCOs are ecumenical. *Doctrine* is not the foundation rather *commonality* is the foundation, which leads to another point.

Fourth, PCOs more times than not compromise on issues, or even beliefs, for the sake of the "unity" of its membership. One writer, who oddly still defends PCOs, rightly observes: "Coalition movements [i.e., PCMs] almost by definition sideline the issues that divide their members in order to find common ground on what unites their members."⁹ Why is this troubling? Simply because we must then decide which issues, doctrines, methods, etcetera are "primary" and which are "secondary." And who decides? And on what authority?

We addressed this very point in TOTT #96 (July/Aug. 2015), "Are Genesis 1-3 Really Important?" As noted there, an enormous number of both Christian colleges and PCOs have decided that one's view of the Creation account in Genesis 1-3 "falls under the category of 'secondary doctrines,' just as [are] such things as spiritual gifts, eternal security, the rapture, etc."¹⁰ But the fact of the matter is, as we noted then, there is no other issue that is *more primary* than Genesis 1-3 (actually 1-11) because Creation is the first issue you are confronted with when you open your Bible. But for the sake of "unity," PCOs are setting such things aside. Now consider this: *that was in 1988!* Where does that leave us in 2016? PCOs are now bandying back and forth such "secondary issues" as "gay Christians" and same sex marriage.

While we are on this point, how many PCOs nowadays take a biblical, historical position on the crucial issue of spiritual gifts? How many are jumping onto the "continuationist"

band wagon (or taking no position at all) so not to ostracize a vast number of supporters? (See TOTT #89, "The Historical Importance of Cessationism," May/June 2014.)

Fifth, we would also propose that like unbiblical "missions" we noted in our last TOTT, PCOs are a staggering drain of money on local churches and individual Christians, even more so, in fact, simply because there are so many more of them. While I could not verify the following with the National Center for Charitable Statistics after hours of searching their databases, one writer found the following:

According to the [NCCS], 91,272 non-profit Protestant organizations filed a 990 tax form for Christian work last year [2010]. These organizations reported total revenues of \$1.8 billion a year, with total assets of over \$4 billion. And these billions did not include churches, Christian non-profits which reported less than \$25,000 a year, or any of the country's 106,000 Christian educational institutions.¹¹

Even if all those numbers were halved, it would still boggle the mind. As one pastor I talked to put it with loving frankness, "I don't want to sound cruel, but [PCOs] often suck the life blood out of the local church. Christians have bought into the idea that PCOs are actually 'missions,' and the local church is responsible to support the parachurch." We humbly submit that this burdened pastor is right. Let's stop and really consider this: What if that kind of time, talent, effort, and money were being channeled into local churches instead of other organizations? How much stronger and more effective would our churches be if we were committed *totally* to them instead of something that has an obvious "conflict of interest"?

We all should appreciate an incident told by Warren Wiersbe. He recounts a free-lance missionary who visited a pastor friend of his asking for financial support. He asked the missionary what group he was associated with. His answer was, "I belong to the invisible church." The pastor then asked, "Well, what church are you a member of." He again received the answer, "I belong to the invisible church!" By this time the pastor was getting somewhat suspicious and asked, "When does this invisible church meet? Who pastors it?" At this point the missionary became incensed and said, "Well, your church isn't the true church. I belong to the invisible church." The pastor's biblical response was, "Well, here's some invisible money to help you minister to the invisible church."¹²

Sixth and finally, we would submit that PCOs inherently lack accountability. The NT could not be clearer on who is qualified to lead in spiritual matters. The qualifications are spelled out in minute detail and are extremely high (1 Tim. 3:1-6; Titus 1:5-9). The typical PCO, however, has no such structure and virtually no accountability. They are often run by the one who has the "greatest vision," "the most experience," "a charismatic personality," or whatever else. Worse, they are usually run by someone who is self-appointed.

As with our earlier doctrinal point, ecumenism also raises its head here. A PCO board is often such a hodgepodge of denominations, doctrinal distinctives, and methodology that it becomes a ship with a faulty rudder.

Closing Thoughts

It is tragic, indeed, that the local church is not only increasingly belittled—often being relegated to the past and

viewed as outdated, narrow, limited, and old fashioned—but it also is openly scorned. I encountered a Youth for Christ worker some 35 years ago who vocally wanted nothing to do with any local church, maintaining that his ministry could do a better job of reaching teenagers in that city than could any local church. It was also significant that he rebuked me for my expository preaching to those young people, in spite of the fact that many of them came to me and said how much they were learning and appreciating the preaching. What can be said of such open hostility to what our Lord instituted?

In his typical straight-forward manner (something else sorely needed in our day), A. W. Tozer addressed this issue more than 50 years ago:

The highest expression of the will of God in this age is the church which He purchased with His own blood. To be scripturally valid any religious activity must be part of the church. Let it be clearly stated that there can be no service acceptable to God in this age that does not center in and spring out of the church. Bible schools, tract societies, Christian business men's committees, seminaries, and the many independent groups working at one or another phase of religion need to check them-selves reverently and courageously, for they have no true spiritual significance outside of or apart from the church.

According to the Scriptures the church is the habitation of God through the Spirit, and as such is the most important organism beneath the sun. She is not one more good institution along with the home, the state, and the school; she is the most vital of all institutions—the only one that can claim a heavenly origin. . . .

It is in and through [local churches] that the Spirit does His work on earth. Whoever scorns the local church scorns the Body of Christ.¹³

My Dear Reader, as in our examination of “missions,” my deepest burden here again is that we have drifted so far from the biblical model that those who point it out are considered the abnormality. With each passing day, Christianity continues its steady and deliberate departure from biblical authority and sufficiency. But, please, what if we just did things God's way? Why not just do everything through the institu-

tion He founded? Instead of manufacturing a way to meet a need or someone's “burden,” why not address it—however difficult it will be—through what God has ordained? What kind of results would we see? How much more would God bless our labors? Let us, therefore, obey God by doing what the local church should be doing.

I close with a principle I have cherished for most of my 42 years of ministry: If God's *people* will do God's *work* in God's *way*, they will receive God's *results* in God's *time*.

Dr. J. D. Watson

Pastor-Teacher, Grace Bible Church
Director, Sola Scriptura Publications, a ministry of GBC

NOTES

¹ www.tms.edu/about-the-seminary/history-of-tms/

² <https://shepherds.edu/about/governance/>

³ J. Mack Stiles, “Nine Marks of a Healthy Parachurch Ministry,” 9 *Marks Journal* (March–April 2011).

⁴ Sam Metcalf (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2015).

⁵ Stiles, “Nine Marks of a Healthy Parachurch Ministry.”

⁶ “The Disciple's Place in the Local Church,” *Discipleship Journal*, #35 (The Navigators).

⁷ <http://www.navigators.org/About-Us/History>

⁸ <http://www.navigatorchurchministries.org/About/Who-We-Are>

⁹ Carl Trueman, “How Parachurch Ministries Go Off the Rails,” 9 *Marks Journal* (March–April 2011).

¹⁰ Bill McCartney of Promise Keepers, as reported in a 1988 *Answers in Genesis* newsletter (emphasis added).

¹¹ J. Mack Stiles, “Nine Marks of a Healthy Parachurch Ministry.”

¹² *Be Rich* (Ephesians), comment on 4:12–16.

¹³ *God Tells the Man Who Cares* (Christian Publications, 1992), 26, 27. The material in that book appeared in *The Alliance Witness*, which Tozer edited, from 1950 to 1963.

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Meeker, CO 81641
[www.TheScriptureAlone.com](#)
dwatson@thescripturealone.com
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