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**New Wineskins: With What Materials?
A Theology of New Wineskins for the 21st Century**

Howard A. Snyder

My assigned topic, “A Theology of New Wineskins for the 21st Century Church,” seems to imply several things: We are discussing theology, not just methods or strategy. We are talking particularly about *church structure*—the forms and patterns by which the church carries out its mission in the world. Finally, the topic implies that the church needs *new* structures as we enter the 21st Century.

How shall we address the issue? I find that I need to raise a basic question. It should in fact be the most obvious question when we ask about “new wineskins for the 21st century”: *With what materials can “new wineskins” be constructed? Where do we go to find resources for new wineskins?*

Answering this question provides the structure for my remarks. I will show that this is a highly theological question. If we claim to be biblical Christians, we can’t answer the wineskins question without delving into issues that are at heart theological.

So, where do we find materials for new wineskins? I will suggest three sources that are *not primarily* helpful, though they may be helpful in a secondary sense. Then I will lift up three sources that *are* primarily helpful—the most important sources for relevant church structures today. Finally, I will suggest a few theological and operational principles.

It will soon become clear why I make the distinction between *primary* and *secondary* sources for new wineskins. A faithful response to any question about church structure depends on a cogent, biblically faithful answer first of all to the question of the

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church itself. Too often questions of church structure are seen as merely pragmatic organizational questions, not theological ones. I want to challenge that. I will argue that unless we are clear, biblically and theologically, about what we mean by “church,” we will end up doing what the church has always done at its worst: Putting new wine into old wineskins. A wineskin doesn’t become new or helpful or faithful merely by slapping the label NEW on it.

The Wrong Materials for New Wineskins

When it comes to the church, the most obvious thing is not always the right thing. The obvious thing when we ask about new wineskins is to ask: Where is the church growing? Growing churches must be doing things right. So let us find out what they are doing, and do the same things.

As Christians, we appeal to sources that are not always so obvious. But they may be much more powerful.

Before outlining the three most important sources for new wineskins, I will suggest three wrong paths—sources for church structure that are not helpful in a *primary* sense, though they may be secondarily.

I. Megachurches

We can learn much from the experience of megachurches, both in the United States and around the world. This is particularly true if these churches are apostolic—that is, if they are seeking and saving the lost and building genuine communities of disciples. Not all megachurches do this.

Here are four reasons why megachurches should not be our primary source for new wineskins:

1. *Megachurches are too limited in cultural context* to be a primary source for wineskins. Wineskins are in part an issue of cross-cultural effectiveness. Do we want churches that can be birthed and grow in diverse cultural contexts? Then we need to look deeper than megachurch models.

Granted, there is diversity among megachurches. But the models commonly lifted up today from the U.S., Korea, Singapore, and a scattering of other places are more alike than different.

Most megachurches are composed primarily of middle-class, professional, young to middle-aged, upwardly mobile people

who live either in suburbs or in relatively affluent urban neighborhoods. They are accustomed to commuting by private automobile or public transportation for employment, shopping, and entertainment. Though they may be heterogeneous in other ways, they tend in this sense to be homogeneous.

There are exceptions, of course—for instance, urban megachurches that are primarily African American, and megachurches of the poor in major cities around the world and sometimes even in rural areas (for example, regions of Central Africa). But when it comes to wineskins, these churches are little studied and are not the models that attract hordes of visiting pastors looking for success.

Is it possible that megachurches are in fact, historically speaking, an anomaly rather than the wave of the future? Is it possible that they function only within a rather narrow cultural range, and if taken as models can lead church leaders down a blind alley?

Today's Protestant megachurches are not particularly unique. As Michael Hamilton writes, "For a century now, self-confident preachers have been willing to reinvent church in order to appeal to the unchurched. They have used nonsacred architecture, innovative worship services, popular music, drama, and diverse programming to meet the needs of people who felt unwelcome in traditional churches. And a few of these churches—to the surprise and dismay of the traditionalists—grew really large."¹ True, though we should look back perhaps 1,000 years, not just 100.

Throughout history megachurches have flourished (and then waned), especially since the time of Constantine. Unfortunately, little research has been done in this area. But we do know, from church architecture and other sources, that in most eras of Christian history megachurches have existed and sometimes had great impact. We could find examples from medieval Europe and from a variety of mission contexts throughout history.

Eighteenth-century England provides examples. A number of non-Methodist Anglican pastors who were caught up in the great Evangelical Revival built strong congregations of two or three thousand members. Or, in 19th-century America, we might think of Charles Finney's Broadway Tabernacle in Manhattan, Henry Ward Beecher's affluent Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, or his brother Thomas Beecher's First Congregational Church in

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Elmira, New York. Then there were the gospel tabernacles of the 1920s and 1930s, such as Paul Rader's Chicago Gospel Tabernacle, and Aimee Semple McPherson's Angelus Temple in Los Angeles.

Manhattan's Broadway Tabernacle in the 1830s was the nerve center of a nationwide social reform and benevolence network that helped reshape American society (though this was more a matter of convenience than an explicit expression of the church's ministry). Thomas Beecher's church in Elmira (a town of 38,000 in 1900) had a Sunday School of 1,000 and a worshipping congregation of about 1,500. Beecher's Elmira church, sometimes called "the first institutional church" in the United States, boasted a gymnasium, library, theater, a variety of social rooms, and a pool table in basement. Beecher called it "a family on a large scale."²

In fact, many such "institutional churches" were built in England and America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Though highly successful at the time, they left later generations with aging buildings and huge maintenance costs that became a major drain on mission.

Rapid growth and congregations running into the thousands are nothing new. But they seem to be limited to particular social contexts. Perhaps the most important thing to note about these examples from history is that, while they had laudable ministries, they were not the most important thing that was happening in the church at the time. Then, as now, the church was growing and extending its witness not primarily through megachurches but through rapidly growing networks of small churches.

2. A second reason why megachurches are not a reliable source for new wineskins is that they are, in general *too biased toward bigness and too focused on size*; on "success" in numerical terms.

This familiar criticism is often dismissed as "knee-jerk reaction," jealousy, or something worse. My point goes much deeper. I rejoice in the growth of any church which, without compromising the Gospel, is growing in numbers and ministry. And I am not opposed to large churches. I am speaking, actually, more to North American cultural values than to the question of megachurches *per se*.

North Americans place inordinantly high value on size, growth, and newness. This is our worldview. These are assumed

values; seldom questioned, except in specialized areas like body weight and microtechnology.

Some of the literature on megachurches and “meta-churches” explicitly rejects this bigness bias, or at least stresses that megachurch principles can operate successfully in any size church. In spite of this, the clear message that most people receive is: Large churches are better than small churches, and “success” is a function of rate of growth.

I question this at a theological and worldview level. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find even a hint that faithfulness to the Gospel of the Kingdom is related to size – unless it is to smallness (a mustard seed; a grain of wheat). The numbers given in the first chapters of Acts show clearly that when the Holy Spirit is poured out, the church grows and expands. But then Luke leaves statistics behind. Paul indicates (for example, in 1 Thessalonians) that the Gospel spread into surrounding regions from the little churches he planted, but his point is extension through church planting, not the growth of super-congregations.

The Bible has no theological bias toward either largeness or rapid numerical growth. Nor does church history support any significant correlation between Gospel fidelity and large congregations. We know that in the case of early British Methodism, John Wesley sometimes viewed large numerical increase as a sign of God’s blessing and at other times as a red flag signaling a breakdown in discipline and rigor. Growth and size were never factors by themselves; they had to be gauged by other criteria.

In other words, to focus on congregational size is too one-dimensional. Given the importance of other factors, we may question whether it is even an important consideration at all. We know that healthy things grow. If the church is a healthy organism, it will grow. But growth is not always a sign of health. Cancer and other diseases tell us that growth may signal serious illness.

This is another area where more research is needed. What is the correlation between congregational size, numerical growth, and effective witness? This is researchable. Is there an optimum size for a congregation – which, no doubt, would vary according to socio-cultural context? Given the sweep of Christian history, my hunch is that there *is* an optimal size, perhaps in the range of 100 to 200. Christian Schwarz’s research suggests that, on average, smaller churches grow more rapidly than larger ones and

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reports, "On nearly all relevant qualify factors, larger churches compare unfavorably with smaller ones."³

If this is true, megachurches are something of a historical anomaly. While there probably always have been and always will be megachurches, they are the exception, rather than the rule. Probably they fill a niche, but they are neither normative nor the wave of the future. More importantly, if the church functions best with medium-sized congregations, what does this say about strategy? Should not thousands of churches that are now growing into the thousands actively be planning to "mutate" into networks of smaller congregations, rather than simply growing larger? Certainly they should be planting new congregations, even as they (perhaps) experiment with creative ways to network these in such a way as to gain the advantages both of smallness and largeness.

Some may view these first two reasons for not using megachurches as resources for new wineskins—limited cultural context and excessive focus on size—as irrelevant. The argument often runs something like this: We live in a new social context; a new, postmodern world in which the megachurch is the wave of the future. That view is very naïve, and very limited both historically and theologically. It simply is not true.

This leads to a third, and more substantial, reason for not using megachurches as models:

3. *Megachurches seldom emphasize the Gospel to and for the poor.* Here also we can find exceptions, particularly among African American and Roman Catholic urban churches. But it holds true for the bulk of middle-class Protestant megachurches that get the most media attention.

I once heard the pastor of a megachurch enthusiastically tell the story and philosophy of his growing church. It was full of tips on leadership, programming, and evangelism. But there was not one word on social justice or on reaching the poor. In fact, the whole ethos was just the opposite. The church was "seeker-sensitive," but it was clear that a particular class of "seekers" was desired. Here was a church being built, and *seeking* to be built, primarily of middle-class professionals. The whole mentality was success-oriented in a way calculated to appeal to young professional people. Totally lacking was the spirit of Jesus' words in Luke 4: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor."

I am not suggesting that all churches should be churches of the poor or make the poor their primary focus. Faithful churches will to some degree reflect their particular social context. My point is that Scripture in both Testaments stresses God's particular concern for the poor. That is an essential biblical note. If it is missing from megachurch models, to that degree those models are useless as sources for new wineskins.

4. Finally, megachurches do not provide good material for new wineskins because *they have no ecclesiology as megachurch*.

Granted, some megachurches have articulated excellent, Bible-centered ecclesiologies. I think, for example, of Willow Creek, Saddleback, and Ginghamburg United Methodist. But I would argue that what is good about these ecclesiologies is not essential to their existence *as megachurches*. Conversely, their existence as megachurch is in some tension with their articulated ecclesiologies. I would hypothesize, in fact, that the larger a single congregation becomes, the harder it is to incarnate an ecclesiology that maintains biblical standards of vitality and discipleship.

Put another way: Though some megachurches have good ecclesiologies, there is no good megachurch ecclesiology. A megachurch ecclesiology would articulate theologically the basis for existing as megachurches. But that is generally not what one finds. Because megachurches are large enterprises, the models they follow *as megachurch* tend to be business models. The problem is that models, concepts, and procedures taken over uncritically from the business world are not subjected to theological critique *based upon a biblical ecclesiology*. The result, too often, is a growing disconnect between the stated ecclesiology and the actual practice. This is probably one reason why many people initially attracted to megachurches leave them by the hundreds to settle in smaller churches with deeper levels of community.⁴

It is very difficult for a congregation to grow beyond, say, 1000 without developing a serious discipleship gap which eventually undermines its vitality.⁵

Where, then, do we go to find material for new wineskins? Especially, where do we go theologically? I suggest that the place to go is *not* to megachurches because their cultural context is too limited; they are too biased toward bigness; they tend to overlook the poor; and they lack a megachurch ecclesiology.

If not megachurches, then what? Some people, in reaction to megachurches or the so-called “organized church,” have argued for house churches or other very small Christian communities. We might call these “microchurches.” So what do we learn from the microchurch model?

II. Microchurches

The microchurch model is, primarily, the house-church model. There are other forms, however, including Roman Catholic “base communities” (*comunidades de base*). Early Methodist class meetings and the Pietist *collegia pietatis* also fit this model to some degree.

House churches are providing the primary vehicle for church growth in China today. Granted, a “house church” running into the hundreds, as sometimes happens in China, is no longer a house church in the traditional sense. But the Chinese church has grown primarily through the multiplication of small home-based units, even though many have expanded beyond the simple house-church form. This is not surprising. Arguably it is the more normal way the church has grown in many places over nearly two millennia.

There is a whole literature on microchurches which, I would guess, is unknown to 90% of the people attending this conference. I am speaking primarily of a semi-underground literature which over the past four centuries, in particular, has argued that the house church is the normative form of church life.

We have much to learn from house churches. In fact, we ignore the long history of microchurches to our peril. We find it difficult to reflect *ecclesiologically* on the fact that the New Testament church was essentially a network of house churches. In studying microchurches we can learn much about church vitality.

Still, I would argue that, like megachurches, microchurches do not provide the necessary material for new wineskins today. We can learn from them, but (at least as usually articulated) the house-church model is inadequate to provide a functional ecclesiology.

Why? I cite four reasons:

Microchurches are too biased against “traditional” churches. In most house-church thinking, the “organized” or “traditional church” is the enemy. This bias may take the form of a fairly so-

phisticated theological argument about the fall of the church and the “secret history” of a faithful remnant through the ages. More often it takes a pragmatic and psychological form. Thousands of people who have been wounded in traditional churches find comfort in intimate, relatively unstructured house churches and maintain a strong animus against denominational or other more traditional churches. This is totally understandable, of course, from a psychological standpoint.

Most people in megachurches or denominational churches don’t realize how many house churches there really are. By definition house churches tend to be nearly invisible. They have no church buildings or elaborate organizations and get no media attention. Anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that there are at least tens of thousands of house churches in the United States, often unknown even to each other outside fairly limited networks.

In this sense, one *could* make the case that microchurches deserve to be taken as seriously as megachurches. Because of their bias against traditional churches, however, microchurches generally miss some essential elements of a faithful and effective ecclesiology.

In many cases, *microchurches are ingrown and have little evangelistic witness*. Though there are happy exceptions, most microchurches are so focused on creating and sustaining their own community that they have little evangelistic vision or witness. This is partly a spill-over from my first point. Many house churches expend tremendous energy in restoring people to health and in tending the wounds received from “bad” church experiences. They have little energy left over for outreach and often lack evangelistic vision.

As a source of raw materials for new wineskins, microchurches can teach us much about community. But often the sense of community is not matched by apostolic vision.

Microchurches generally lack a theology of the “great congregation.” Healthy churches maintain a creative balance of the small group and the large group. Microchurches generally are good at the small group but slight the large group. The church, as we see especially from the Psalms, is not only *koinonia*; it is also “great congregation.” It is the people coming together in numbers for corporate worship and shared vision. There is an inherent dynamic, a synergy, in combining the small group and the large

group in a church's life. Most microchurches fail to perceive this. They see the "great congregation" as inescapably tied to dead formalism. Thus they miss some of the inherent dynamic of a biblical ecclesiology.

For these and other reasons, *microchurches generally have a one-sided ecclesiology*. They not only focus on the small group to the exclusion of the large group; they often have a truncated theology of the Kingdom of God in which the Kingdom is too internalized and is divorced from sociopolitical and economic spheres. This is not always the case; some house churches do have a strong sense of Kingdom values; of the church existing as a Kingdom counterculture. But others (perhaps influenced by Watchman Nee) develop a spirituality that is essentially dualistic when it comes to the church's witness in the world.

In these and other ways, microchurches often exhibit a sociological naiveté that fails to appreciate the importance and usefulness of traditional forms of the church and of the necessary structures of society. They tend to view traditional church structures as hopelessly compromised or apostate, when in fact, historically speaking, these very "dead" structures have often proved to be the incubators of fresh forms of renewal. Renewal movements do not spring from nowhere; they arise from within (though often from the periphery) of the "institutional church."

For all these reasons, I suggest that microchurches, like megachurches, do not provide primary material for new wineskins today. We can, and should, learn from them. But we must go deeper.

III. Models from Business

What about models from business? What can we learn from the experience of successful business enterprises, particularly those which are most effective in achieving their goals? Do they provide raw material for new wineskins?

Without question, the church can learn many things from successful business enterprises. This is true in several areas: The importance of a clear mission and of priorities consistent with mission; approaches to organizational effectiveness; insights about leadership and working with teams—though we may ask: Do we really need business models to learn these things? We would see that most of these things are taught clearly, and with deeper rationale, in Scripture if we took biblical ecclesiology

more seriously.

While the church can learn from business models, these models do not provide primary material for new wineskins, especially theologically. This is true for at least four reasons:

Business enterprises do not operate on the basis of Christian presuppositions. They operate primarily on the basis of the profit motive, though sometimes this is moderated by other considerations such as the welfare of employees or (occasionally) environmental concern.

This is not a criticism of business enterprises *per se*. It is simply an observation about their nature. Businesses are not the church. Therefore, at the fundamental level of ecclesiology, I believe Eugene Peterson is right that business has *nothing* to say to the church. Whatever we *do* learn from business we must pass carefully through the filter of a biblical ecclesiology.

I would go further and say that *the fundamental model of business is in tension with Scripture*. Clearly business itself is not evil, for Scripture gives useful advice on how to act responsibly in business. But there is a fundamental distinction between business and the church.

If we take the New Testament seriously, we must conclude that business enterprises are part of “human tradition and the basic principles of this world” rather than of Christ (Col. 2:8). They are part of “the basic principles of this world” which is passing away, and to which through Jesus Christians have “died” (Col. 2:20).

Christians are to act as salt and light within the world’s structures. If faithful to the Kingdom of God, Christians act to humanize the world of business, economics, and politics. But as citizens of God’s new order, they are aware of a fundamental tension and must be careful not to confuse business with the church.

Like megachurches, *business models are too limited in cultural context* to provide fundamental material for new wineskins. Commercial enterprises take different shapes in varied times and cultures. Often the church imitates business (or other dominant social structures) in its life and forms. Arguably, such imitation has done more harm than good. The reason is what I articulated above: A fundamental tension between business models and the essential nature of the church.

True, we are in a new age of globalization—perhaps even at

“the end of history” in the sense that free-enterprise capitalism has emerged as the dominant global system. But it would be naïve to think that this means that all “successful” churches must now mimic cutting-edge global corporations. Quite the opposite. We should remember that there are many other forms of human organization effectively at work *right now* in the world, from various kinds of cooperatives and networks to the range of voluntary societies and NGOs. The church is to operate as salt, light, and leaven within the globalizing structures of this world, not simply to follow their example.

Finally, *business enterprises do not make community primary*. That is not their purpose or uniqueness. Interestingly, some of the most effective, cutting-edge businesses today *have* discovered community as a means toward greater business effectiveness. But community is a means to an (economic) end, not a business’ reason for existence.

In contrast, community (*koinonia*) is a *primary* consideration for the church. The church is the “*koinonia* of the Holy Spirit”; it is “devoted to community” (2 Cor. 13:42; Acts 2:42).

In sum, business has very little if anything to teach the church *as church*. But I would add an important point: Creative, effective business organizations *do* have a lot to teach about how Christian organizations can function—*as human organizations*, not as church. Church structures, from local to denominational to various mission and service organizations, can benefit considerably from careful analysis from a business perspective. They can learn much about organizational effectiveness. But in all such analysis we must be clear about one thing: Such church structures are to serve the life and mission of the church—nothing else. Because we so seldom think theologically about the church, we tend to blur the distinction between church as Body of Christ and our human-made structures. The result is predictable and perhaps inevitable: We “nullify the word of God for the sake of [our] tradition” (Matt. 15:6).

What I have said so far may seem largely negative. I do intend it, in fact, as “deconstructive” of much contemporary thinking about the church, and of much of today’s church practice. This has been a ground-clearing exercise in order to answer clearly the question with which I began: *With what materials are new wineskins to be constructed?* Where do we find the *resources* if we wish to speak of new wineskins?

The Right Materials for New Wineskins

I will now suggest *three sources* for new wineskins that are less limited to today's cultural context and that transcend the criticisms offered above.

I. The Bible

The Bible is our primary source for new wineskins. While this should be obvious, many cautions have been raised against going to Scripture to answer the structure question. These range from the claim that the New Testament teaches nothing about church structure to the view that whatever we do learn from Scripture is not relevant to the present context.

This is wrong. I suggest *four basic reasons* why Scripture must be our primary source for ecclesiology generally and, therefore, for church structure.

This needs emphasizing because today we confront an inbred aversion to building ecclesiastical practice on Scripture. Call it a blind spot. Evidence is everywhere. At my seminary, it is found high on one of our buildings:

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Notice the adjectives. The *preaching* is to be *biblical*, but *leadership*, by implication, comes from church tradition. We do not say "Center for Church Preaching and Biblical Leadership." This represents a common bias. Should not leadership in the church—a fundamental issue of ecclesiology—be based as much on Scripture as is our preaching? (Can we in fact have the one without the other?)

Here, then, are four basic reasons why Scripture must be our primary source for ecclesiology and for church structure:

1. *The Bible is God's unique revelation of Jesus Christ and therefore concerning his Body, the Church.* Evangelicals claim to believe in biblical authority and to make Scripture our primary rule for faith and practice. But we have a blind spot when it comes to ecclesiology. Seldom do North American Christians mine the depths and apply the authoritative teachings of Scripture regarding the nature and practical operation of the church, except in very limited areas.

The Bible is God's unique revelation as to what the church is and how it is to function. But much church practice, especially in

North America, would suggest that we don't really believe this.

2. A related reason why the Bible should be our primary source for new wineskins is that *ecclesiology itself is a primary focus of Scripture*. Much of the Old Testament focuses on what it means to be the people of God; most of the New, on the new community of the Spirit formed around Jesus. But in Evangelical theology in particular (with some exceptions), this has not been the focus.

Can there be any doubt that ecclesiology is a primary focus of Scripture? The New Testament is all about Jesus Christ, Head and Body. As Robert Coleman pointed out years ago, the Gospels show that Jesus spent more time in forming his community of disciples, the church in embryo, than in preaching to the crowds. Acts is, in large measure, the story of the formation and extension of the Christian community. And look at the letters of Paul and the other New Testament writers. What is the focus? There is very little explicit focus on evangelism. We find a rich, profound, full-faceted Christology, but the Christology invariably leads to ecclesiology: "Live [corporately] a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called." "Walk as he walked." Likewise, the essential teachings on soteriology, even in the book of Romans, are all ecclesiology grounded.

Primary evidence here: The amount of space in the epistles given to the nature of relationships within the Christian community; the dominant use of the pronoun "you" in the plural rather than the singular; the rich stratum of "one another" passages; the teachings on spiritual gifts; the prominent use of "Body of Christ" and other organic metaphors. Clearly the New Testament is about Christian community – what it is; how it is to function. Our tendency, however, is to interpret this rich ecclesiological material individualistically, and with a rather narrow soteriology.

All of this leaves us with the disturbing question: Why do we *not* go to the Bible for our ecclesiology, when the church is a primary focus of Scripture?

There are historical and cultural reasons. Historically, the churches of the Reformation (with the exception of the Radical Reformation) have focused so narrowly on soteriology that they have neglected ecclesiology. Culturally, the Protestant tradition has been so marked by individualism that it has largely neglected the corporate nature of Christian experience.

For these reasons, we often approach Scripture with blinders

on. We misread much of the New Testament—for instance, individualizing what clearly has corporate meaning and over-emphasizing the vertical dimension of reconciliation to the neglect of the horizontal (social) dimension. It is not that the Bible has little of practical relevance to say about the church and its structures. It is rather that we have not taken with sufficient theological seriousness what clearly is there.

3. A third reason we should go to Scripture for new wineskins is *the example of the early church*. Many of us would agree that the early church (or churches), for all its imperfections, was the most dynamic embodiment of the Gospel that history has seen so far. Certainly we would agree, at least, that a powerful Gospel movement grew out of those initial days after Pentecost and, within decades, began to shake the world. And most of what it is essential to know about the early church is contained within the New Testament.

So the *experience* of the early Christian community (not just the explicit biblical teachings about the church) needs to be mined when we face the issue of new wineskins. As Paul said of the Old Testament, the New Testament record of the church was “written for our instruction.” It is not incidental; it is not just the husks that contain the kernel of Gospel truth.

We learn much about ecclesiology and about wineskins from the experience of the earliest Christian communities. It is from this perspective, I think, that Michael Green’s *Evangelism in the Early Church* and Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity* are such prophetic books. In large measure, these are really books about ecclesiology. Stark’s book, for instance, shows that the genius of the early church’s growth and witness was not its strategy or organization but its embodying of Christian virtue in countercultural, but culturally engaged, community.

4. Finally, we should go first to Scripture in seeking new wineskins because *Scripture uniquely combines church and mission*. There is very little distinction between “church” and “mission” in the New Testament. Someone has said, “The church does not have a mission; the mission has a church.” Biblically, this is true. But we must go beyond merely affirming this. We must ask: Why was this the case in the New Testament? What do we learn there that helps us develop the kind of Christian communities in which it becomes unnecessary—redundant—to put the word “missional” before the word “church”?

I will attempt to show that the Bible provides us with essential and highly relevant material for answering these questions.

A common response when it is suggested that we go to the Bible for new wineskins is: Historically, that attempt has failed. It has led to arguments and divisions; to different and competing ecclesiastical traditions, such as the episcopal, congregational, and presbyterian. I suggest, however, that there is a way around this problem. It comes in part through paying attention to a second source of materials for new wineskins: The history of renewal movements.

II. Renewal Movements

I have learned, and continue to learn, a great deal from the ways God's Spirit has repeatedly renewed the church throughout history. Here is helpful material for church structure.

At least four insights from the history of church renewal can help us in the quest for new wineskins:

1. *Renewal movements set the issue of the church within the broad sweep of church history.* They thus raise the question of history, including a theology of history. They remind us of the relativity and variety of cultural contexts, and that the church has survived and thrived in quite different social, political, and economic settings.

As Visser 't Hooft reminded us years ago in *The Renewal of the Church*, the church has an extraordinary capacity to experience renewal, even under the most difficult circumstances and at times when it appears totally dead. Thus the church's repeated experience of renewal is a major teacher for us today.

2. *The history of renewal teaches us about the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.* How does, in fact, the Spirit renew the church? One doesn't have to search far before noticing recurring patterns. Certain things keep getting forgotten and then rediscovered in the life of the church. We need to pay attention these lessons.

In a moment, I will suggest some of what this means.

3. *Renewal movements show us that deep renewal often begins from the periphery*—from the margins or the underside of the church. Seldom does it begin from the "center," or from established church leadership.

I could give numerous examples, but one of the most compelling comes from the history of renewal within Roman Catholicism. Renewal has often come through the birth of new religious

orders. Typically these orders (of both men and women) have been founded by marginal, if extraordinary, figures on no other authority other than their own charisma, endowed by the Holy Spirit—by a Francis of Assisi, a Benedict of Nursia, a Scholastica, a Clare, or an Angela Merici, foundress of the Ursulines. In those occasional periods in Roman Catholic history when the church sought a reform pope, generally it turned to an uncorrupted monk from one of the orders. Thus God worked to renew the church.

So today, in any quest for new wineskins, we should look at what God has done and is doing at the margins of the church.

4. Finally, *renewal movements implicitly point us to the Trinitarian life of the church*—and, in consequence, to a Trinitarian *understanding* of the church. They help restore a Trinitarian balance.

I am not arguing that renewal movements are uniquely Trinitarian, nor that they necessarily have a coherent or balanced Trinitarian theology or practice. The lesson here is more implicit than explicit.

The point is that renewal movements typically stress the “new work” of the Spirit. Renewal generally break forth at times when the church has largely forgotten or “routinized” the work of the Spirit. There is little expectation that God will do a new thing. But suddenly a new movement appears, usually at the margins and usually emphasizing the presence and power of the Spirit. The logic is generally simple and straightforward: Just as God worked in the early church, so he is now pouring out his Spirit afresh, doing something new, restoring the church to vitality. (Needless to say, this new energy can take many forms, both theologically and structurally, and is more or less genuinely in the spirit of the New Testament church.)

Renewal movements thus restore an emphasis on the Spirit to the life of the church. Vital, effective churches are Trinitarian. They understand (though they may not articulate) that God creates communities of personal interrelationship so energized by the Holy Spirit that they make Jesus Christ real and new and alive in new contexts. Thus they tend to re-energize *theology*, living from an apprehension of God that is more consistent with a sound Trinitarian theology. It then becomes the church’s *theological* task to reflect on this dynamic and articulate a more full-orbed Trinitarian theology and ecclesiology.

The recovery of a biblically-based Trinitarian theology that

takes its primary cues from God's action in Jesus Christ is a key to vital church life. In this sense, renewal movements point us in the right direction. Although our primary source for ecclesiology and for new wineskins is Scripture, renewal movements help us understand how the Bible actually functions in vitalizing churches.

III. Ecology

I would like now to move from Scripture and renewal movements more directly to the contemporary scene. Granted the primacy of Scripture, where do we find today, in contemporary, fast-globalizing culture, clues that may help us build or discover effective wineskins? I suggest that the most promising place to look is today's increasing sense of ecology and ecological models. Ecological models are more promising than models from business because they operate at a deeper conceptual and metaphorical level.

Here are the reasons why I believe ecology can help us in the quest for new wineskins:

1. *Ecology is more consonant with the way God created the world.* As science shifts from mechanistic to organic models, it is discovering (or rediscovering) the ancient concept of ecology. The key insight of ecology is that all creation (and particularly all life forms) is made up of complex, highly interdependent relationships, and that it is not possible to touch any one element in the system without affecting the whole. One of the key watchwords of ecology is, "You can never do just one thing."

Ecology is much broader than environmentalism or biological systems. It has power to operate at a metaphorical and paradigmatic level, something that affects worldview—our understandings of how the universe operates. This is now beginning to happen—in the United States, and increasingly around the world. We are all part of a complex ecological web. As Christians, of course, we understand that this interrelatedness derives from God's creative activity as Trinity and his ongoing sustaining and eschatological purposes.

We will make more progress ecclesialogically as we recognize that the church is a complex organism with its own ecology and operates within a larger socio-cultural ecological environment.

2. *The ecological model is more consistent with systems theory*

than are other models (as I've already hinted). We often learn more about the church from studying family and other social systems than from business models, for example. But ecology takes systems theory an important step deeper, revealing that every system operates within a larger ecology that constitutes all of culture and, in fact, the whole universe. We are part of a highly complex creation that is marked fundamentally by interrelationship and interdependence.

As awareness of this grows, older mechanistic, linear, and hierarchical models are collapsing, being replaced by the model of ecology. The good news is, this model is much closer to the biblical revelation and to the nature of God as Trinity. Consequently, the church should seriously consider the implications of ecology as it seeks to understand itself and to form faithful new wineskins.

3. *The ecological model is more in tune with where contemporary culture is headed.* Ecology awareness (in a much broader sense than biological science, but including it) is growing at every level of society. It will increasingly shape political, social, and economic discourse. In fact, it already is.

Two examples: Thomas Friedman, in his highly-acclaimed *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (rev. ed., 2000), argues that an ecological perspective is necessary to really understand the new global system. Globalization is a highly complex arrangement which must be understood multidimensionally, and "it is the interaction of [multiple perspectives] that is really the defining feature" of the system. "There is increasingly a seamless web" uniting the diverse components of this new system, necessitating "an ecological perspective" in order to understand it (pp. 23-26).

A second example comes from John Chambers, visionary CEO of Cisco Systems. Chambers argues that "leading companies will . . . form an 'ecosystem' of partnerships in a horizontal, rather than a vertical, business model." He adds, "Companies participating in [such] an ecosystem . . . will emerge as the market and industry leaders of the future." Cisco's "ecosystem model," he says, allows the company "to remain agile, quickly enter new markets, and provide both breadth and depth of solutions through the ecosystem community" (Cisco Systems, Inc., 2000 *Annual Report*, 4).

These examples underscore my point. Rather than arguing

that the church should take its cues from business, I am highlighting that business itself, at its cutting edges, is beginning to think ecologically.

So must the church. As it does – provided that it keeps Scripture primary – it will discover a host of insights about the wineskins through which it may effectively serve as agent of God’s mission in the world.

For all these reasons, I argue that the church today has three key sources for dealing with the question of new wineskins: Scripture, renewal movements, and ecology. With biblical revelation primary, creative leadership in the church will discern points of convergence between these three sources and will develop appropriate structures, naturally making the necessary adjustments to different and ever-changing cultural contexts.

What does that convergence look like, in fact? I would like to conclude by suggesting *five theological principles* for the church and its structures and *four operational principles*. Based on these principles, churches today, *in any cultural context*, can be faithful to God and creatively effective in carrying out God’s mission. These principles function at a level of sufficient generality that they escape the limitations of the three wrong sources I criticized earlier.

Theological Principles for New Wineskins

The Bible, interpreted through insights from renewal movements and ecology, gives us fundamental principles for the life and structure of the church today. Though I might articulate more, it seems to me that the following five are of primary importance. They need further elaboration than I can give here, but I can state succinctly the essential points:

1. *The central focus of the church is worshipping God and serving his mission.*

The primary passion of a vital church is God – worshipping him and serving him. This can be so easily accepted as a truism that we fail to see that this is the central principle of *ecclesiology* and therefore of church structure. The church is the community gathered around Jesus, willing to be his Body, his mode of action in the world.

There is no conflict or tension between the worship of God and the mission of God. Authentic worship leads to mission. Worship that does not lead to mission is worship of an abstract,

passionless God. Any such worship has lost a central truth of the Trinity – that the passionate love of the Trinity overflows to passionate concern for the care and restoration of his creation. Authentic worship leads to a passion for God’s Kingdom, and especially for reconciling persons to the love of God poured out in the life of Jesus Christ.

In saying this is a fundamental *ecclesiological* principle, I mean that all the church’s life and existence is to be ordered around this central passion. It is a primary task of leadership – perhaps *the* primary task – to be sure this is the case.

2. *The church’s life, conceptually and operationally, should be based on organic and missional metaphors.* The church, as Body of Christ, is essentially a living social, spiritual, charismatic organism. It is alive. Thus the central biblical images of the church are all organic and ecological – Body, bride, family, vine and branches. Even static “building” and “temple” images are turned into organic ones: “Living stones,” a growing building, a temple animated by the Spirit.

Metaphors and models are powerful. Think of the church as a building, and it becomes building-centered and architecture-dependent. Think of it as an organization and it becomes overly preoccupied with organizational forms. Think of it biotically, and its focus is on what makes for healthy life.

Biblically speaking, the church is a unique kind of organism. It is charismatic because it is born in grace (*charis*) and functions by grace (the *charismata*). And it is missional, serving the mission of God. The church is unique because it is the only social organism in all creation that can be called Body of Christ. Yet, due to the consistency of God’s created order, it *is* an organism with an identifiable ecology. Thus it can be understood ecologically and organically.

Organic images, however, if not sufficiently tied to mission, can be understood in too static a sense. This is where the history of renewal movements helps us. The church is the social movement of the Spirit for the sake of God’s kingdom. Vital churches, therefore, need to be based in images that are both organic and missional.

This is a fundamental principle for church structure, as I will show momentarily. The wineskins that best serve the church are organic, ecological ones. They are missional models that help us understand the church as a social movement in service of the

mission of God.

3. *Vital churches maintain a healthy balance of worship, community (koinonia) and witness.* These are key elements in a healthy church ecology. They interact with and depend upon each other.

This is a theological principle. That is, worship is central and vital because of who God is. It functions to glorify God and extend his mission—not primarily to give people a personally fulfilling worship experience. Community is vitally important because people’s lives have been touched by the Holy Spirit, prompting a deep love for one another and a costly commitment to one another—not just because people want to enjoy a social experience. Witness is vital because the love of God impels people into the world, full of love and a passion for justice—not just because the church wants to enlist volunteers in its programs. This ecological balance is grounded in who God is, in what he has done and is doing through Jesus Christ and through the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

This is true theologically, and it is proven true in practice. Every church I have seen that is vital and strongly missional maintains this balance. Its worship life is animated and deeply authentic; its social infrastructure works to build and advance accountable discipleship; and the church makes an impact on the world through a combination of evangelistic, servant, and justice ministries. Each of these elements of the church’s ecology reinforces the others. In fact, one can use this ecology of worship, community, and witness diagnostically to identify pathologies in the church—reasons why a church is not vital.

I would add in passing that this three-fold ecology corresponds quite nicely with Christian Schwarz’s “eight quality characteristics” outlined in his book, *Natural Church Development*. His model of the church is organic (or “biotic,” as he puts it), and focuses more on church health than on church growth. In all these ways his model is similar to mine, though he puts less emphasis on justice and a theology of the Kingdom.

4. *The central task of leadership is to build an apostolic, ministering community.* It is, in a word, “to equip God’s people for the work of ministry” (Eph. 4:11-12). While pastors do many things, the controlling task that gives coherence and focus to everything else is the equipping of the whole community for effective mission. Preaching, counseling, planning, and all else should be tested by this central principle: Is it helping the whole church to be

in ministry, to be an active agent for the Kingdom of God?

This central leadership focus is based on the fact that to be a Christian is to be a minister. To be a disciple of Jesus is to be engaged in completing the work Jesus began. The clergy/laity dichotomy is rejected as heretical, and professional pastoral leadership is endorsed only in the sense that pastors should carry on their work with excellence.

Underlying this principle is the charismatic nature of the church and the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. All Christians are charismatically gifted; all are priests before God for his mission in the world; and all are servants of and co-laborers with Jesus Christ in the work of the Kingdom. In New Testament perspective, all Christian leadership is charismatic (based on spiritual gifts; Ephesians 4:7-16) and is character-based (the fruit of the Spirit; the "mind" of Jesus).

Leadership gifts vary (1 Cor. 12:1-28, Eph. 4:11-112), but are based on a fundamental principle: Building a community of disciples who, in diverse ways, are all engaged in the church's apostolic mission.

This principle interacts, of course, with the ecological balance of worship, community, and witness. Leaders do not attempt to turn all church members into evangelists or social activists or disciplers. Rather, they help each one find his or her place in the Body so that the *whole Body* may function apostolically. When this functions in a healthy way, some members' service will be fulfilled primarily in worship, some in building accountable community, and others in direct witness in the world. It is the whole Body that is called into mission through the ecological interrelationship of all its members.

5. *Vital churches exist as a countercultural missional community*—a "missionary minority" or "counterculture of the Kingdom." This principle interacts with and supports the other theological principles I have already mentioned.

Clearly, the call to be a counter-cultural community does not mean disengagement from culture or from social transformation. Rather, it means that the church's essential life is centered in Jesus Christ and in a shared social commitment to God's Kingdom. It is this centered commitment, then, that impels the church into apostolic engagement with the world. Vital churches show that Jesus' words about being salt and light, about being in but not of the world, are fundamental ecclesiological principles.

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They are not teachings first of all about our individual lives but about the nature of the Jesus community, the Body of Christ. Healthy churches maintain a vital balance between being too much in or too much out of the world; the creative tension between distinct social identity and transforming social engagement.

The church as Body of Christ is missional not in a secondary but in a primary sense. It is missional not just for some of its members but for all, as suggested earlier.

These are theological principles that shape and give direction to leadership strategy. In my experience, the most effective church leaders are those who, consciously or intuitively, put these principles into practice.

Operational Principles for New Wineskins

This discussion leads, finally, to several operational principles. I will list four. Through these, the theological principles can be implemented and leaders can build churches with functional structures that help the church fulfill its Kingdom mission.

1. *Evaluate all structures and programs by organic and missional principles.* If you are in church leadership, use the above theological principles as a means of ongoing assessment:

Is the central focus of our church the worship and mission of God?

Is our life based in organic and missional images and metaphors?

Do we have a dynamic balance of worship, community, and witness?

Are leaders equipping all the members for God's mission?

Is our church authentically a counter-cultural community engaging the world through the power of the Gospel?

Congregations can be evaluated by these criteria. Leaders can take steps accordingly to build effective, faithful churches. When it comes to structures, leaders must take care especially to avoid the twin dangers of "sacralizing" them so that they can't be changed or modified as necessary, and of "secularizing" them, forgetting that structures, though purely functional, do reinforce values and worldview assumptions.

2. *Build an effective infrastructure of accountable small groups.* There are many ways to do this, and the specifics will vary according to context. But all Christians need face-to-face accounta-

ble community. This has been a constant in all great, transformative renewal movements in history.

Apostolic churches find ways to do this so that the small groups really help members find and be effective in ministry. Obviously this is a key leadership challenge.

The genius of the church is the dynamic ecology of worship, community, and witness, and the mutually-reinforcing rhythm of small group and large group. An infrastructure of healthy small groups is essential to make this ecology come alive.

3. *Build a leadership team that collectively models the character of Jesus Christ.* Effective leaders know how to build teams. This is based theologically on the fact that Jesus Christ (not any human person) is Head of the church, and that he exercises his headship through the Body, not through one person. Effective leadership is Christ-centered leadership. Pastoral leaders build leadership teams based on character, spiritual gifts, and a sense of call to ministry.

No congregation can be equipped for ministry by just one person. It requires a team (as Philip Jakob Spener argued over 200 years ago). Here also varieties of models are possible, and team leadership can operate within quite different church polities. But the principle is clear: The biblical model is not the solo pastor but pastors who know how to extend their leadership through forming teams of mutual vision, vulnerability, interdependence, and equipping for ministry.

4. *Minister the Gospel to and with the poor.* Here is a key litmus test of Kingdom ministry; of vision for God's New Order. This is a biblical mandate and it is reinforced by church history. Those Gospel movements that have lasted longest, have most transformed society, and have been most effective in winning people to Christ have been movements that embodied Jesus' passion "to preach Good News to the poor." John Wesley's comment on Hebrews 8:11, "for they all shall know me, from the least even to the greatest," is relevant here: "In this order [from least to greatest] the saving knowledge of God ever did and ever will proceed; not first to the greatest, and then to the least" (*Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*).

Wherever a church finds itself – whatever its social context – God invites his people to join with him in ministering to, with, and for the poor. This is always prophetic, because it runs directly contrary to the assumptions and values of the world system –

and counter to ever worldly church system.

Conclusion

If we are concerned about growing disciples, not just congregations;

if we are concerned about Kingdom growth, not just church growth;

if we are concerned with turning multiplied thousands of unbelievers into disciples of Jesus, not just church members --

Then we will be passionate to grow churches and church structures that are at heart compatible with the true nature of the church itself. We will build churches that really are communities of the King.

Writer

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NOTES

1. Michael S. Hamilton, "Willow Creek's Place in History," *Christianity Today* 44:13 (November 13, 2000), 64.

2. Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Saints, Sinners and Beechers* (New York, NY: Blue Ribbon Books, 1934), 371-74.

3. Christian Schwarz, *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches*, trans. Lynn McAdam, Lois Wollin, and Martin Wollin (Carol Stream, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 1996), 47f.

4. I recognize that some megachurches provide deeper, more meaningful community than do smaller congregations (generally through networks of small groups) and that many small congregations are dysfunctional. Nevertheless, statistics on congregational size would seem to indicate that, on average, community is more intense in smaller than in larger churches.

5. A discipleship gap is the differential between professions of faith

and the actual living out of the faith in costly discipleship – the difference between professing faith in Christ and living like Christ. It is the gap between evangelism and discipleship. Once the discipleship gap reaches a significant level, it is the superficial adherents to the faith who set the tone and the agenda for the church, not the serious disciples.