



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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Church, Church, Church?

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I want to go church next Sunday.

Let's all meet at the church Wednesday night.

I belong to the church, and have all my life.

The Church on the Corner Church – or any local group organized as a church.

The Presbyterian Church – or any other denomination. The Protestant Church – or the Catholic – or any other.

The Church – the Body of Christ – visible and invisible.

The word “church” has many uses and many meanings. My church. My home church. He was church-ed (put out or punished) for what he did. A congregation called the church. An emotional – psychic – spiritual entity. Whatever Jesus meant by church. And this is by no means an exhaustive list, although it may be fairly inclusive.

Most of the so-called "mainline" churches are declining, when measured by numbers and dollars, or so I am told. The "conservative" and "evangelical" churches are reported to be growing by leaps and bounds. Again, in the main, when measured by numbers and dollars.

I listen to people use the word "church". Sometimes I know the meaning they are using. Sometimes I do not. I note that, frequently, when the word is used, the assumption is that everyone involved knows the meaning and it is the same for all. I doubt that this is always the case. It troubles me that we take so little care to make sure that the meaning being used is known to all, or that we even realize we need to.

The intent of this paper is to give definitions for the word "church", and to discuss how the church, thus defined, may possibly grow and maintain itself. Assuming, of course, that growth measured by numbers, dollars, and activities is what is most desired. I don't intend to try to cover all the meanings I have mentioned.

CHURCH.

The local church, meaning that entity located on a piece of property somewhere, with members, a budget, leadership, and a program of some kind. By this definition, what is the purpose of the Church? Almost immediately, I realize that, again, there are several different purposes and that the tendency is to assume that everyone has the same purpose in mind, and knows what it is.

I don't think it works out quite that way.

If I asked for a statement of purpose, I expect I would get statements like, "We are Christ's Church, and our purpose is to evangelize the whole world." Or, "We exist to

serve our membership and our community, and to bring them the Word of God.” Or “We are here to worship God, and to serve him.” And those making the statements would quite sincerely mean what they were saying.

What happens in that place and among those people might suggest that those statements aren't entirely correct.

For instance, the church (a building) had been in that location 175 years. No present members have been around that long, although some have been for 80 or 90 years, and the names on the headstones in the cemetery remind viewers of persons and families who have belonged to that church since its founding. In recent years, however, both the community and the membership of the church have declined markedly. The future of the church in that place is very uncertain, and the people are quite anxious about what is going to happen.

Will the church just cease to be? Will they have to merge with a neighboring church in order to survive at all? What will they be able to do?

As long as “church” means a building and a group of people in a particular place, changing times and circumstances just may mean that the church will cease to be. It may have just stopped being the church in that particular place, or the people may elect to merge with a group in another location. In either case, the church in that particular place would no longer exist. In a manner of speaking, the church would be dead, and all that would remain would be the grieving.

Let's stay with the definition of the church as a building (or buildings) and a group of people in a particular place. Only, this time, the place is a populous urban area with great potential for adding numbers and raising money. A look at the program, and at the emphasis from the pulpit and in the publicity, will indicate what those who set the tone and emphasis see the purpose of the Church in that place to be. Frequently, it is to focus on keeping and increasing numbers and, dollars even though much may be said about ministry and service.

As I listen into ministers and others, I begin to get the impression that, no matter what is said about the purpose, it turns out to be to keep the numbers and keep the dollars. And/or to increase the numbers and dollars.

The measure of a successful church is seen to be its growth rate in numbers and dollars. Of course, much is said about mission to membership, community, and world, and, often, there is much pride in mission programs and the dollars spent on them. I do not wish to minimize that in any way.

However, if the real purpose of the local congregation and its leadership spoken or not – is to grow by adding members and enlarging the budget, there are numbers of ways to do that. Do the currently popular things. Don't upset anyone. Advertise – intensely advertise – all that the church has to offer prospective members. Get out into

the community and really put the pressure on people to join the church. Be enthusiastic. Attract attention. Make it the popular thing to be a member and to attend that church. Build ever larger, more expensive, and more beautiful buildings. Everybody knows – it is said – that congregations need a building program to get them involved. People give better to building programs than anything else, they say.

If adding members and increasing dollars is what the church is, and is about, it just might be wise to be up front about that and build the program, publicity, and worship to accomplish that purpose. It may be expensive, but it isn't hard to do. If that is what we see the church to be, there are plenty of ways to make it successful. When I look at denominational statistical reports, the clear impression is that numbers and dollars are the measure.

CHURCH !

If the real purpose of the local congregation and its leadership – spoken or not – is to preserve itself, or to survive, in its particular location, there are many ways to do that – up to a point. Adding members, and increasing the number of dollars, isn't quite so important. Keeping things as they have always been is – both beliefs and practices. To do so means to stand firmly against ever threatened encroachment. Take no risks. Keep the reins firmly in the hands of the existing leadership. Rally around. Maintain what has always been. And see that no changes are made. The church is this group of people, this program, this building, in this place. Don't move. Don't enlarge. Do whatever is necessary to preserve and survive. It can be done for a long time.

In a like manner, a denomination or a sect can preserve itself, its positions and beliefs for a long time, and survive. If the church is an entity, an institution, an organization, a facility to be maintained for its own sake, there are any ways to do that. Conforming to generally accepted standards, values, beliefs, and practices will do it. Doing the popular things will do it. Leaving the pioneering leadership to someone else will do it. Soft-pedaling the insightful and challenging messages of the Bible, and especially those that Jesus taught, will do it. Doing good in the world, but being careful not to upset or risk affronting anyone else, will do it. Don't make too many waves. Don't upset the status quo. Sort of live and let live. That will do it – for a while anyway. There are many effective ways to preserve the entity, institution, or organization and enable it to survive. I am not at all exhaustive in these suggestions. However, I wonder if, in the long run, decline in numbers and dollars is inevitable.

I wonder, also, if the definitions I have used, or alluded to, are what Jesus meant when he said to Simon Bar-Jona, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16: 18) Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe, to a degree. In any case, may all those definitions, and any others we could mention, are valid and have their place. Maybe we need them all for the church that Jesus had in mind to be – and to continue to be – a reality. I don't know.

CHURCH!

The purpose of the local congregation – especially the paid leadership – is to be attentive to me. After all, I tell myself, my reason for joining was to have my belonging needs met, and for the leadership to pay attention to me. Certainly, when they were trying to get me to join, they emphasized how much the church had to offer me and how I would benefit from being a member.

After I joined, I was very active. I always attended Sunday Morning Worship, and practically everything else that was offered. I gave generously. I taught in Church School. I took other leadership positions. I volunteered whenever asked. For a long time, I practically lived at the church.

Then some things changed in my life and I couldn't be as active as I had been. I couldn't even go to church on Sunday morning. Weeks, then months went by. I didn't hear from anybody. No visits. Not even a phone call. Not a word from the minister.

One day I happened to meet the minister in the Mall. He smiled brightly, greeted me warmly, and said, "I've been missing you at church."

I was noncommittal. "I've had some things I needed to work out. I guess it has been six months since I came to church." The minister didn't say anything.

Still there were no visits nor phone calls. I guess nobody cared and after all that I had done in that church. Apparently, no one missed me. Finally, I joined another church.

Certainly, members of the congregation need pastoral attention, both from fellow members and from the minister. And, if the purpose of the church is to be attentive to its members, there are, of course, many ways to do it. Using them can enable a church to grow in numbers and dollars. Although it is appropriate that the church, by any definition, be attentive to the pastoral needs of the people who make up, I wonder if that is its ultimate purpose.

CHURCH?

At this point, I want to state a definition of my own and write some things about the church being the church by that definition.

The church is the body of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the people who have accepted and believe that they are chosen by God to proclaim to all the world that the Kingdom of God is at hand, and that Jesus is Lord of all. It is people who know in faith that they are created in the image of God and loved unconditionally. Their task it is to be witness-proclaimers and servant-lovers and to make known what they have come to know about how to live in this world as God's chosen people – doing so by how they live and what they do as much as, and maybe more than, with spoken words. There is nothing original about my definition.

The purpose of the church is to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to the

whole creation". (Mark 16: 15) It is to know what the Gospel is. It is to preach and to serve – each other and all others – in the name of God and in the way of God, through Jesus Christ.

By this definition and purpose, the church is not a building in a place. It is not determined and defined by numbers and dollars – and certainly not by prestige a position. A building in a place, numbers, and dollars certainly are important. They increase the potential for witnessing, proclaiming, and serving. But they are not the church – not by the definition I have chosen.

Each person who, in all of life, is about the business of loving, witnessing, proclaiming, and serving is the church. All the people thus involvd are the church.

How is the church to be maintained? What about growth, and resources to maintain facilities and program? What about the needs of the people who are the church? What about knowing what and how to witness, proclaim, and serve – and where? What about all the things that enable the body of believers to be and to be effective in the world? I believe that people who are committed to being the people of God will find a way. Mother Teresa does, for instance.

Many years ago, I read a little book that profoundly affected me and how I viewed the church. It was written by Elton Trueblood, and was titled, *THE COMPANY OF THE COMMITTED*. He was writing about the church. I understood his definition to be similar to mine.

Dr. Trueblood also saw the church as the people. He imaged the facilities as a drill hall where the people gathered for fellowship, for instruction, for support, for sharing, for receiving directions, for thrashing out problems, for making decisions, for doing all the things to equip and encourage for daily life at home and in the market place.

Thus equipped and encouraged, each person could go into the world to preach the gospel to all creation with word, witness and service wherever his/her world happened to be.

Dr. Trueblood's view of the church makes sense to me.

By that view the purpose of the church would not be to maintain itself, nor to build numbers and dollars. It would be to do all that was necessary in the way of building and program to equip the church – individual and corporate – to be the Word of God in word and service in the world in response to the need of the world. It would be to minister to one another, and to any person, with the ministry of God him/herself. It would be to be willing for the facilities and program to cease to be when they no longer served the purposes of the gathered church – and, indeed, to assist in that happening.

The church is not place, nor organization, nor exclusive group, nor program, nor numbers, nor dollars, nor external entity, nor building, nor any external thing. The

church may be in any of these, and all of them, but they are not the church.

The church is the body of believers, proclaiming and teaching who God is, and who we are by the grace of God. The church declares what God has done for God's people through Jesus Christ. The church loves as God loves. The church- individually and in group – reaches out to fellow human beings according to each person's need.

Think about being the church by the definition I am using. We gather, learn, support, encourage, work out what to do so that we can be the Word of God – the body of Christ – in our world. We are not interested in preserving ourselves, nor surviving. We are not seeking position, power, and status. We are not anxious about today or tomorrow. We are only concerned that we know the will and way and love of God in Christ Jesus and bear witness in and through every aspect of our lives.

By my definition, that would be being the church.