

Complementing the church: The Church and the Para-Church

How do the church and the para-church ministry relate to each other? What does it mean for the para-church to collaborate with the church? Today, many people are unclear of the relationship and role between the church and the para-church. This question is not irrelevant, for it comes to the forefront when addressing the further question of what is the church's (and the para-church's) role when it comes to helping people cease destructive behaviors, especially in the area of life dominating sins (addictions)? Typically, the answer is either "I don't know," or that "The church's role is to refer people to rehab." For those who are able to answer, referral to a rehab facility is viewed as the church fulfilling its goal. The reason for the answer is normally connected to the belief that the church lacks the resources to adequately help those who struggle with life dominating sins, and/or the proper equipping and training. As a result, people are referred to parachurch ministries (or non-parachurch ministries) where it is believed they will receive the help they need. In order to determine if this answer is sufficient or not, we must first consider the roles of the church and the para-church.

In order to understand both the role of the local church and the parachurch correctly, we must begin with a biblical-theological examination. After that foundation has been established, then the particular roles of the church and parachurch can be determined. In this paper, I will present the biblical-theological basis for the church and the parachurch, as well as the practical implications. That will set the stage for the discussion for the role of the church and the parachurch in regards to helping people with life dominating sins. My main thesis is that the para-church ministry is called to strengthen and complement the role of the church, not to compete or replace. Fundamentally, philosophy drives practice. What we do comes out of what we believe, so that establishing correct beliefs is essential if the practice is to be correct.

What is the church?

We can define the church as the community of true believers for all time.¹ The church consists of all those for whom Christ died and redeemed (Eph. 5:25). The church includes believers from all

¹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 853.

ages of times (both those in the Old Testament and in the New Testament periods), and believers from all nations (Eph. 2:14; Rev. 5:9). The Greek word translated “church” (*ekklēsia*) means the gathered ones, or the assembly (Heb. 12:23).² It is used in at least five ways in the New Testament, such as the description of a group of people in general who are called for a political gathering (Acts 19:32, 39, 41); a Jewish group (Acts 7:38); the local church (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1); a group of churches (Acts 9:31); and the universal church (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22-23).

The church consists of people whom God has “chosen” for eternal life in Jesus Christ (Acts 2:47; Eph. 1:4; Col. 3:12; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet. 2:9). The church belongs to Christ (Matt. 16:18; Titus 2:14) and his people were purchased by His own blood, therefore a precious possession of God (Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:7, 2:13; Rev. 14:4). The church consists of the universal church, or the body of believers from all periods of time and places, and the local church. These differences are not in conflict with each other, but simply different aspects of the church.

The wrong way to think of the church is to think of it primarily as location (physical building), a particular denomination, or membership in a congregation. While it is true that a church is in a physical location, the biblical idea of the church is that it is the body of Christ. Unbelievers attend churches and are often members (Matt. 13:24-30). The origin and life of the church is not derived from men, but from God (John 1:12-13; Gal. 1:1-2). The source and life of the church is from God alone (Matt. 16:18; Acts 26:15-18; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 1:22-23). The church on earth is invisible, as only God knows the heart of men (2 Tim. 2:19), but the church is also visible in that we can see the community of God’s people who profess faith in Christ in their lives (Acts 2:41-47). The church is both local (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1) and universal in nature (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 12:28).

The true church consists only of those who truly follow Christ, called disciples (Matt. 19:21, 28, 28:19-20; Luke 9:23; John 10:27, 12:26). The Scripture uses a number of metaphors to help us better understand the meaning of the term “church”. These word pictures include the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 4:11-16; 5:23; Col. 1:18), the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:32; Rev. 19:7-9), the family of Christ (Rom. 8:15-17; 1 Tim. 3:15; 2 Cor. 6:18). Other images include a flock of sheep (John 10:26-27; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2), branches (John 15:5), a

² The definition of ἐκκλησία is not the called out ones, as commonly asserted, but is determined by the context of the word.

building (1 Cor. 3:9), the house of God (Heb. 3:6), a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5-9), and the temple of God (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Pet. 2:5).

The church has several purposes on earth. We, serving as a holy priesthood, are worshippers of God (John 4:23-24; Rom. 12:1-2). We work to build each other up in useful service to God (1 Cor. 12:4-27; Eph. 2:10, 4:11-16), and are the hands and feet of Christ on earth in the ministry of the gospel (Matt. 25:31-40; 28:19-20; Acts 19:11). The church displays the grace of God to the world (Eph. 2:7; 3:10), and brings glory to God (Eph. 1:5-6, 12; 3:21). The church worships God corporately (Col. 3:16; Rom. 12:1-5) and is one of the main means in which God accomplishes his purposes of earth.

On earth, the church carries out the purposes of God by evangelizing and making disciples (Matt. 28:19-20; Luke 24:47; John 20:21). The church lives as ambassadors of Christ (Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 14:23-25; 2 Cor. 5:20). The role of building believers up in spiritual maturity and in the faith, is given to the church (1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 4:14-16; Col. 1:28-29; 1 Thess. 5:11; Jude 20). The church also is commissioned with helping believers grow in holiness (John 17:17; 1 Cor. 11:32; 2 Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:25-27).

What is the difference between the church and the para-church?

Defining the difference between the church and the para-church is essential, so that the two are not confused. The para-church can fulfill some of the purposes of the church, but are not the church nor a substitute for the church. Almost any group or person can organize a church that would fulfill the legal requirements, but to be recognized by the state is not the determining factor of what a true church is. Granted, the debate on what constitutes a biblical or true church is not unanimous, but there are essential elements a true church must have, and without these would not be a true church (in the biblical sense).

A true church begins with the intention of being a church. A group of people who meet for bible study would not be a church, in part because they do not have the set intention to be one. A church requires a regular meeting time and place, and the set intention of being a church. A true church holds to the gospel, meaning they believe salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. A church that holds to salvation by works or that faith in Jesus is

merely one of a number of ways to be saved would not constitute a true church. A true church passes the test of orthodoxy, meaning they hold fast to Scripture and the teachings of the Christian faith as passed on in the historical creeds and councils (i.e.-Apostle's creed, Nicene, Athanasian, etc.). In addition to passing the test of orthodoxy, the true church must pass the test of holiness. In other words, they love the things Jesus loves and hate the things he hates.³ They are Word-Centered, meaning the content of preaching and teaching is taken from Scripture, as well as their authority.

The biblical church has responsibility for carrying out the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, as well as church discipline.⁴ Prayer, fellowship, and biblically qualified leadership are also marks of the true church. The biblical church sees souls converted, practice evangelism, take responsibility for discipleship, and has biblical requirements for church membership.

The para-church should pass the tests of orthodoxy and holiness, as well as being Word-centered. The para-church should be marked by prayer and fellowship. However, the para-church does not carry out the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and does not practice church discipline. These differences will be exemplified in more detail in the biblical/theological implications section.

Why the Para-church?

Para in Greek means to "come alongside" of. A para-church organization is one that comes alongside of the local church, to support and strengthen them. Examples of parachurch organizations include the International Missions Board (IMB), Cru, InterVarsity, Navigators, and the Gospel Coalition. These organizations, as well as countless others, were founded with the intent to fill a need or weakness not met by the church with a Christian solution. Para-church organizations differ from organizations such as the Kiwanis club or the Lion's club. Numerous organizations can promote community service and meeting the needs of others, but this does not make them para-church organizations. What makes an organization a para-church one will be addressed in the following.

³See Rev. 2:6; 14-15; and 2:20 for examples of either passing or failing the holiness test.

⁴See Matt. 18:15-20; 28:16-20; and Luke 22:14-23.

One of the first questions that emerges is whether or not a para-church organization is needed. Does the para-church exist because the church is failing at its mission, or does it exist to benefit the church? The answer is not always that the church is failing at its mission per se, but always that the para-church exists to benefit the church. However, the church is not fulfilling its calling in many cases, resulting in the need for parachurch organizations. Understanding the need and benefit of the para-church requires another look at Scripture.

The parachurch finds its roots not as an invention of modern times, but in both the Old and New Testament. The assembly of Israel, while worshiping at the temple, was supported and strengthened by prophets and writers who “spoke and wrote to inform, reform, and disciple the community, and to proclaim the Lord’s name, promises, and will to the nations.”⁵ In the New Testament, Jesus began a parachurch movement outside the Sabbath gatherings to strengthen and expand the family of God. Likewise, the apostles were sent out by the church to plant new churches, disciple, and strengthen the local churches.

What makes a para-church organization different from one that serves the community? The answer is that the para-church is designed to complement, but not replace, the church in a distinctly Christian way. By this, I mean the gospel is proclaimed in such a way that points unbelievers to faith in Christ. The para-church fulfills a role, but has never intended as the end goal. However, when both work together in the way they were intended, the church and the para-church are strengthened. This of course raises the question of specifically how the church and the para-church are to relate to each other, which will be answered in more detail as follows.

Para-church ministries and organizations are not wrong. As noted earlier, they have fulfilled a role in both the Old and New Testaments. Para-church ministries and organizations are able to serve the church by addressing problems in which the church lacks the resources, training, or time to handle. They must do so in a way that does not replace or substitute the church, however. These ministries play a vital role, but only for a season. Para-church ministries will one day end, while the church continues forever. Lambert and Powlison note, “Para-church ministry can often be helpful, even necessary, for a season. But when all is said and done, it is

⁵Heath Lambert and David Powlison, “Biblical Counseling, the church, and the para-church,” in *Biblical Counseling in the Church*, ed. Bob Kelleman and Kevin Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 352.

dispensable. At the end of history, the gathered familial church will remain. All para-church ministries will have finished their temporary purposes.”⁶ Due to the temporal nature and purpose of the para-church, para-churches must have the central aim of strengthening and supporting the eternal church.

The para-church also plays a role in supporting the church and fulfilling a purpose by motivating the church to greater faithfulness. The “one-another’s” and numerous other scriptural passages call the church to do what is modernly called “counseling.” Often, the church does not fulfill these passages well, thus creating the need for the para-church to help. Para-churches offer strength in the area of resources and training as well. Churches on their own, especially smaller sized ones, often do not have the resources, equipping, or time to do what para-church organizations can. This is not necessarily a bad thing, for the para-church is able to focus on specific areas that would otherwise be neglected. Para-church organizations can also provide shared resources to many churches, as well as to bring churches together to accomplish what a single church cannot. The challenge to the para-church is that they not replace or substitute the role of the church, but instead come alongside to assist. Balance is the key, for the church needs to provide proper accountability so that the para-church benefits from the church fulfilling her role.

Biblical/Theological Implications of the Church and Para-Church

1. The church is eternal while the para-church is temporal.

All para-church ministries will one day end, while the church will remain forever. The various institutions that God has ordained such as the government, family, and marriage are important, but also will cease to exist. The church, or God’s family, will remain in perfect relationship eternally. This truth prioritizes the church, so that the para-church does not unintentionally attempt to replace or usurp the role of the church.

2. The church is God’s design and creation. The para-church is sovereignly part of God’s plan, but is not the mystery revealed in the New Testament.

⁶Lambert and Powlison, “Biblical Counseling, The Church, and the Para-Church,” 355.

The church is not a product of human invention. God designed it before the foundation of the earth. The implication of this is that the church differs from a para-church ministry, a creation of humanity. Even though the para-church is a creation of humanity, it still is a part of God's sovereign plan. The difference lies in the fact that no matter the wisdom and strength of humanity, no one but God can take credit for the creation of the church. The para-church ministry owes its existence to God, but be allowed by God as a statement of human ability and skill, rather than divine grace. In other words, people with gifting and talent can develop a para-church ministry and drive that ministry by their own efforts rather than those of God. On the other hand, the church would not exist if it were not created by God.

3. The church is given the primary role of discipleship and evangelism, but the para-church can play an important role.

The Great Commission in Matt. 28 is one passage that places the responsibility for discipleship on the church. If the church fails at discipleship, it has failed at one of its primary roles. The church cannot outsource discipleship, or allow a para-church ministry to become a substitute for discipleship in the church. This does not mean that a para-church ministry cannot assist in discipleship. Para-church ministries are very important in serving the church in discipleship, but they must take on a servant role and not a leadership role.

A problem exists if people look first to a para-church ministry rather than to the church first for discipleship. J. Mack Sills observes, "There are many good things the church can do, but most of these good things are not unique to the church. After all, secular organizations do most of them, sometimes even better. The church has a unique and high ministerial calling that stands above all others: the right teaching and preaching of the Word. So when the many good things begin to encroach on the primary task of the church, the parachurch can take that good ministry onto its own shoulders and so protect the church."⁷

4. Only the church can minister the ordinances of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and carry out church discipline.

Jesus gave the church the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The para-church does not have the authority to baptize or celebrate the Lord's Supper. Church discipline is

⁷J. Mack Sills, "Nine Marks of a Healthy Parachurch Ministry," available at <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalnine-marks-healthy-parachurch-ministry>. Accessed 10/28/19.

required by the church along with baptism and the Lord's Supper, which the para-church ministry does not practice. The church does not recognize any baptism or church discipline instituted by a para-church ministry. Sills adds, "One of the things which the parachurch needs most today is a strong and healthy ecclesiology. It's not enough to understand that a parachurch protects the church. If a parachurch ministry doesn't know how it's different than a church, it's doomed to produce unhealthy fruit. To be healthy, parachurch ministries must understand what makes a church a church and what makes a parachurch a parachurch."⁸

5. The qualifications for leaders in the church and para-church are similar, but yet different.

The biblical offices for church leadership are the elders and deacons. The requirements are described in 1 Tim. 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9. All Christians are expected to strive to be biblically qualified (c.f. Titus 2:1-15), but there are distinctions that come with the roles and offices of elder and deacon. The Bible does not allow women to be elders/pastors, but they can be deacons. In a para-church ministry, leaders should also strive to meet the biblical requirements, but women can lead para-church ministries.

6. Both the church and para-church work together to encourage mutual accountability.

Throughout church history, the church has benefited from using para-church standards of accountability. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith has helpfully guided and guarded Christians in biblical truth for years. This confession was the product of a group of clergy men, but has been used by numerous churches. Para-church organizations can seek to maintain high standards of accountability, or the recognition of skill and faithfulness of their practice, that benefits the church. Likewise, the church encourages the para-church to accountability in the reminder of the temporal nature of the para-church ministry and the centrality of the church.

The danger of the lack of proper accountability is one that the para-church faces. Carl Trueman points out:

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Ibid.

The second reason parachurch groups go awry is that they rarely if ever have proper structures of accountability. The New Testament makes it clear that the appointed custodians of the faith are the elders, men specially selected because of their qualities of character, ability, and reputation, who have a special duty to safeguard the faith and practice of the church. Parachurch groups have no such biblically sanctioned structure, and many of them have not thought carefully about the framework of accountability needed to remain orthodox. Further, they tend to be run by the self-appointed, or by people with money, or by those with a can-do attitude.⁹

The para-church can combat the lack of accountability by intentionally focusing on and addressing the issue, but intentionality is the key. Asking for critique and feedback from churches, and submitting to those churches is a healthy mark of accountability.

7. Para-church ministries can fulfill seasonal and specialized needs, but are not to replace the centrality and role of the church.

The church is not able to meet every seasonal and specialized need there is. Para-church ministries are able to focus on specific needs, and to devote resources and attention towards meeting those needs. The danger is that the church could believe it has no responsibility for some of those needs, so the church must continually evaluate how it approaches those areas. In addition, some people will seek out a para-church ministry first, rather than a church to find assistance. The para-church can and should seek to meet the needs the church is not equipped or able to handle, but must do so in a way that does not replace the centrality and primary role of the church. If people believe they can have all their needs met through the para-church, it has not succeeded in what it was intended to do. Trueman notes:

Coalition movements almost by definition sideline the issues that divide their members in order to find common ground on what unite their members. Thus, in evangelical circles one often finds parachurch groups that, say, agree on the Trinity, the Incarnation, the authority of Scripture, justification by faith, and the need for the new birth. Other matters—the sacraments, the nature of church government, and even, in some cases, issues of predestination and perseverance—are set to one side as not germane to the central task of the organization.

This sidelining in itself is not problematic, provided one major point is kept in mind: the parachurch is not the church. It does not do what the church does, and it should not supplant the church in the minds and lives of those involved in its work... Thus, I find it very disturbing when church leaders start to be known more as leaders of a particular parachurch group than as leaders in their churches. This serves to create a confusing image in the mind

⁹Carl Trueman, “How Parachurch ministries go off the rail,” found at <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalhow-parachurch-ministries-go-rails/>, accessed 10/20/19.

of the Christian public, whereby the boundary between church and parachurch is eroded, or, worse still, the parachurch is regarded as the place where the real action and excitement take place. This in turn consigns the church to an apparently less important role, and serves to relegate to the level of secondary or even tertiary importance the doctrinal elaboration and distinctives for which individual churches and denominations stand. The Christian public comes to regard these ecclesial distinctives as hindrances to the real work of the gospel—real work that, by inference, is done by the parachurch better than the church.¹⁰

8. Para-church ministries can serve the church in training and collaboration.

Churches working together can accomplish more than a single one on its own. Para-church ministries play a vital role in helping churches work together to achieve common goals. Para-church ministries can save the church time and energy in unified training and resources, so that each church is not reinventing the wheel.

9. Serving and giving in the para-church is not a substitute for serving and giving in the local church.

Christians can serve in para-church ministries. These ministries are usually dependent upon Christians to serve and give to. However, they are not a replacement or substitute for serving and giving in the local church. Christians should make their first priority the local church, and then after that the para-church.

There are other biblical/theological implications that could be examined, but those listed above describe the main ones. This paper has not yet answered the question of what specifically the church is called to do in helping those dealing with life-dominating sins, or how the para-church's role specifically looks, but it has set the foundation for answering those questions.

¹⁰Carl Treuman, "How Parachurch ministries go off the rail," found at <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalhow-parachurch-ministries-go-rails/>, accessed 10/20/19.