

Christ's Basic Bodies

Embracing God's presence,
power, and purposes in
true biblical community

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So, I found two young bucks in ministry and asked them to review the manuscript. The current version is the result of suggestions made by Matt Hammon and Shae Cottar. Their input was invaluable to my writing process. Thank you both for your hard work and dedication to this project.

It is my desire to speak as a mentor to those who are trying to do something different. It is my prayer the chapters will be so used by our King, inspiring visionary young men and women to see the church not as it is, but as it can be.




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A decorative rectangular border with intricate floral and scrollwork patterns, framing the central text.

Christ's Basic Bodies

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A community formed and baptized by the Holy Spirit. Each member is led by the embodied Christ, who edifies and reveals his presence, power, and purpose through them.



Introduction

After planting a dozen churches in the Northeast, working for Billy Graham, and serving on the Evangelism Division of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, I came to a moment of truth. The more I worked with churches large and small, the greater my frustration grew. Modern Christianity blockaded God's people in physical structures and the church no longer touched the people in the communities around them.

Dr. Penrose St. Amant was my professor at New Orleans Theological Seminary when I worked on a Th.D. in church history. He profoundly impacted me when he stated, "Those of you who get to this level of academics have a moral obligation to hold this denomination at arm's length and bring rebirth to it. This is your task!" That very day, God's Spirit impregnated my value system with those words and they shaped my journey.

I walked the floor in my Dallas home reflecting on my daily encounter with declining Baptist churches as I served them, praying about my destiny. At thirty-six years of age, I knew I had to respond to the burden in my heart. I thought, "Surely there is a way to help these churches renew their lifestyles and become more biblical in their structures."

I sensed the need for a "parable church" set in the midst of traditional structures. I did not desire to expose or criticize the traditional church. My hope was to lovingly show these churches a more effective way to reach people who would not be caught dead in a church building.¹

I spoke to a professor of evangelism from Southern Seminary about my burden. He encouraged me to do something about it and assured

me a biblical model would make an impact. I then wrote a sixty-eight-page strategy of what an “experimental church” might look like.

I decided the only way to begin would be to totally withdraw from organized church life or teach in a secular university to reach those whose paradigms had not been constrained by past experiences. With them, I would experiment with body life. I would affectionately keep my ties with my denomination, believing wholeheartedly that if I showed them a better way, they would respond with a passion to transition to a more life-giving environment and structure.

Correcting misconceptions

I have never been angry with my brothers and sisters in traditional structures, but I quickly admit my frustration with them . . . a frustration strong enough for me to sell all my security to buy the pearl of great price. At the time, Ruth, my precious wife, said, “Honey, if you know God is calling you to develop an experimental church, I’ll return to nursing.” My oldest son Ralph said, “Dad, I can get a job sacking groceries after school to help out.” With three sons, a mother-in-law and two dogs to shelter and feed, I decided to make the break and do whatever it took to form a parable church.²

I have also never been anti-church. Those in the old paradigm don’t always have a framework for classifying me and so I am written off as anti-church. This is simply not true. My passion has been the *restoration* of Christ’s body, not the *assassination* of it. I am saddened by the frequent reference to me as the “father of the cell church movement.” I have always advocated far more than this structural pattern for church life. My heartbeat is to help the church think how it lives its life, not just change its structures. Theology breeds its own methodology!

At seventy-nine, I know facts today that were fuzzy forty years ago. For example, in 1969, while launching our new lifestyle in the experimental church formed in Houston, I spoke at the Maryland Baptist Evangelism Conference. I shared with the executive secretary of a nearby

state convention my dream of showing my love for the denomination by developing a prototype that could be a model for others. He pointedly said, “Ralph, no one asked you to do this. We do not need a new model. We are committed to make the present one work better!”

Ouch!

As the years have passed I realized he was telling me the truth. Denominations are imprisoned by their traditions. It takes a very special calling to be an innovator or early adopter. Power usually rests with the early and late majority and the laggards, not with the innovators and early adopters.

If I had to live my life over again, I would do exactly as I have done. I do not own a vision. *The vision owns me!* I pray, dear reader, that you will sense my love for the body of Christ as you read these pages. As Winston Churchill wrote, “If you have an important point to make, don’t try to be subtle or clever. Use a pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again. Then hit it a third time—a tremendous whack.”

This book is another whack at a message that is my life’s calling and passion. It shouts, “*churchianity* blinds the people of God from being the body of Christ. God is reshaping the called-out people to live as Christ’s bodies all over the earth!”

“Never ask a goldfish what water is like”

This Chinese proverb provides a metaphor for our church-structure dilemma. In this generation, the American church is a private goldfish bowl, now fully isolated from its surroundings. When fish stare into the glass walls of their bowl, they see only their mirrored reflection. They cannot see the world outside.

Churchianity is a goldfish bowl. Those who swim within it are unable to understand why their comfortable environment is not the only one needed. They are blind to how foreign they look to outsiders peering through the glass and murky water.

Have you ever thought about the fact that all living things are created to survive in a certain environment and will not survive if that environment is not proper? Consider fish. They experience only one environment: water. By their Creator, they are limited to exist in one habitat.

There is no reason for fish to reflect on the makeup of water. It's not an element to be analyzed, but rather an environment to be experienced. Within their environment, fish are sensitive to water conditions, all related to their own "comfort zones." They select a proper depth to provide the exact amount of light and heat to make them comfortable. They may experience dirty water, fresh water, or stagnant water, but to them it is always water and they don't have to give it much thought.

The contemporary church is a living thing, requiring a specific environment in which to survive and thrive. I believe it may be suffocating from the environment it currently inhabits without realizing it. For example, take the concept of the kingdom of God. "*Seek first his kingdom ... and all these things will be given to you as well*" (Matthew 6:33) is a familiar verse that rarely pondered. It is time for kingdom people to select a lifestyle that has eternity in view rather than focusing on careers, sports, shopping, vacations, and TV specials.

A new term for a new season

After much prayer and contemplation, I am going to introduce a new word for referring to *ekklesia* in its most basic formation, sometimes called "cells" or "basic Christian communities" or "holistic small groups." I will use the term *Christ's Basic Body*. It defines what the contemporary church does not fully grasp: the authentic *ekklesia*³ is not an opt-in small group. It is a spiritual body inhabited by Christ—answerable to him alone—empowered to reveal his presence, power, and purpose. As you will read repeatedly through this book, *it is the most sacred community on earth today*. We must remain diligent to fulfill

the calling of *ekklesia*. (This term and the deeper meaning of it will be discussed in detail in chapters four and five.)

I beg of you: do not defensively reject what this book discusses until you have completed it. Please return with me to the source: Christ, the one who has chosen the *ekklesia* to be his body in this age. Ponder what is written. You may decide you are not a goldfish after all!

More than a decade ago I wrote *Where Do We Go from Here?* It introduced the cell church model to thousands of people. Since then, new Christ's basic bodies are found in great number on every continent.

Many versions of cell-based churches have appeared, each with their own oversight system. Far too much attention is paid to the management of cells compared to the awesome ecclesiology⁴ that supports this "last days" church life. For this reason, I will deliberately not discuss church management systems in this book. The focus will remain far more foundational.

Many church-growth methods have become fads, endorsed by those who want to put patches on the old wineskin of traditional church life. Church leaders flock to conferences touting each new innovation, return excitedly from the seminars, read a book or two, and then idolize those patches. Some pastors even sever friendships with other workers over their loyalties to different patches. Soon enough, the old wineskin rots in another place and opens the way for another gimmick to be added as a patch. As you will see, I don't believe in patches. I do, however, believe that new wineskins can replace the old. Transition is taking place everywhere at this time.

I worked with hundreds of churches in South Africa in the mid 1990s. There was such a thirst for patches! The cell group structure was first seen as one more patch sewed on old structures. When pastors and churches adopted the goal to *replace* old wineskins, I helped pastors make the transition. For two years, I made quarterly trips back to walk them through a strategy to completely transform their congregations.

Today we have entered a third generation of the cell church

movement. Things are not the same as when my first book was written. Now there are many “streams.” Some of these streams developed cell groups⁴ as mere assembly lines to manufacture “converts” in rapid fashion. I am concerned they are growing mushroom groups that grow quickly but will not be able to survive the heat of spiritual warfare.

I believe the lethal ingredient at this stage is a fuzzy ecclesiology or an incomplete understanding of the sacredness of the body of Christ. It is to this issue I direct the chapters that follow. Please bear with me as I cover basic learning concepts before I move into the meat of the subject matter. The first chapter is vital to absorb to receive the balance of the book in a transformational way.

The gospel is hidden from those who are lost because the church has failed to live in biblical, holistic communities that clearly articulate their faith. Perhaps the greatest deterrent to the spread of the gospel is the existence of present “church” activity, which essentially focuses on what takes place in a building. Christ doesn’t ask us to hold events for people to “come and see.” We are challenged to go and be his body among the culture around us. I propose we reject this attractional model to embrace a more incarnational model. We must penetrate small, dark segments of society with the light of Christ’s presence.

Our culture has had enough of the lifeless version of contemporary Christianity. The steady decline of church membership in America proves this. Only through Christ’s basic bodies will we be able to bring the hope and life of the kingdom of God to an otherwise immune culture. Living in true biblical community provides flesh and blood to the words we speak. If we do not wake up to the problem, we will see more people lost from the kingdom of God.

I encourage you to read this book in small bite-sized morsels, pausing to chew on the concepts before you move forward. As you read, please keep in mind the crucial issue of this book: *Christ indwells a sacred body, and we become its members as the Holy Spirit forms basic Christian communities!*

One final caveat: I strongly believe people fully absorb new information after they have heard it numerous times. My motto is: “It takes six to stick!” With this in mind, don’t think this old man has forgotten what he said in an earlier chapter when concepts are revisited. The reprise is for your benefit. If you don’t catch it the first time, maybe the second or third time it will sink in.

Are you ready? Shall we begin?

— Ralph Neighbour