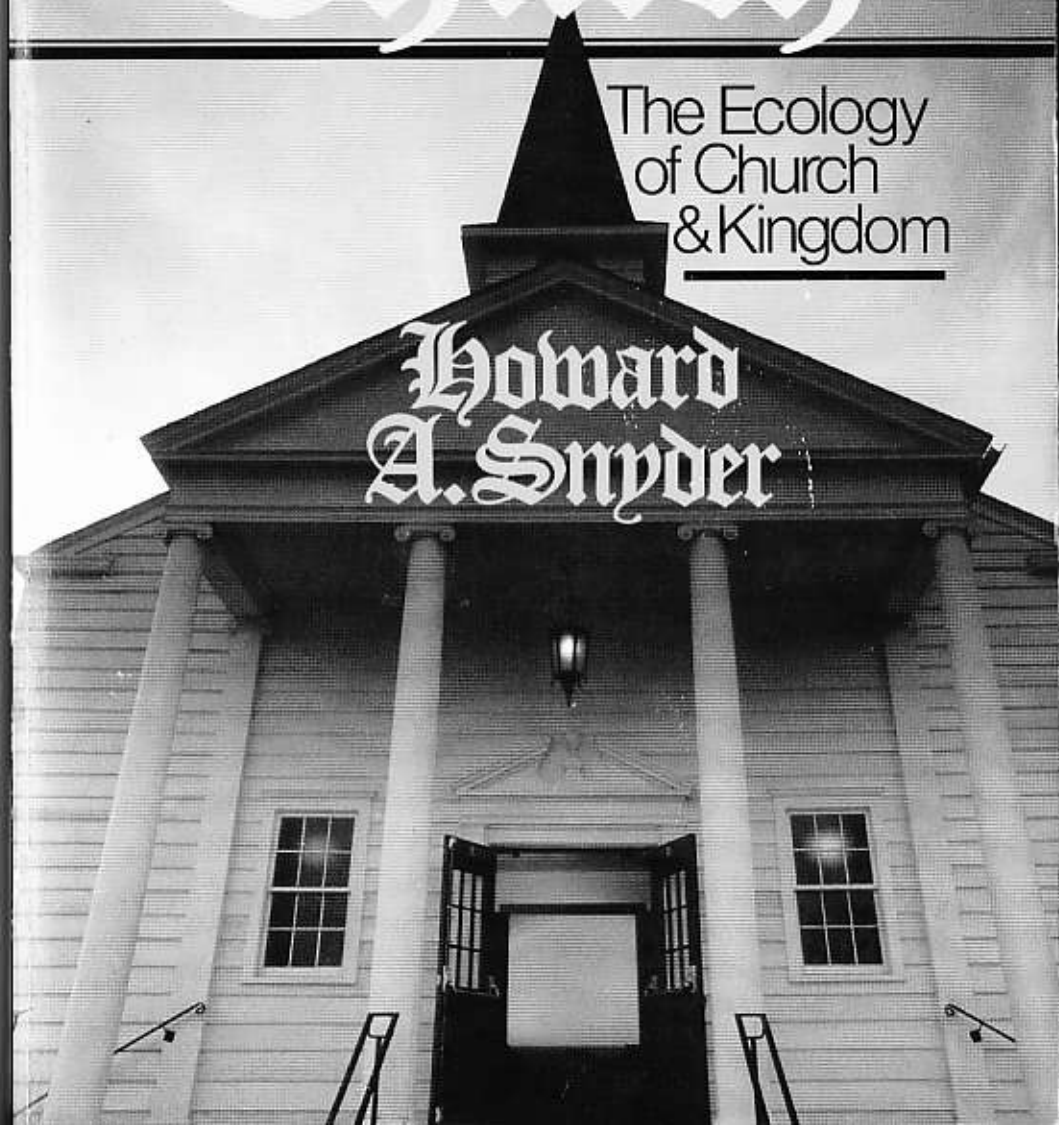


Liberating the Church

The Ecology
of Church
& Kingdom

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and Greenville colleges and Asbury Theological Seminary, I served as a pastor in Detroit for two years. This was followed by six years' missionary service in Brazil and five years' work in Winona Lake, Indiana, both in affiliation with my denomination. In 1980 my family and I moved to the Albany Park area of Chicago, where we presently reside.

The chief value of my writing, as I see it, is in offering an alternative model—a new way of seeing—and not in giving specific blueprints. For me, fulfillment and confirmation come in learning of the growing number of places around the world where more biblically authentic, Kingdom-conscious models of church life and witness are successfully being put into practice.

My aim in this book is to be constructive, not controversial. Yet I know that the range of topics covered, and the comprehensiveness of the perspective proposed, may raise both questions and eyebrows. I have probably managed to offend everyone at some point. But my quest is for the real truth of the Kingdom.

PROLOGUE

LIBERATION AND RENEWAL

The church gets in trouble whenever it thinks it is in the church business rather than the Kingdom business.

In the church business, people are concerned with church activities, religious behavior and spiritual things. In the Kingdom business, people are concerned with Kingdom activities, all human behavior and everything God has made, visible and invisible. Kingdom people see human affairs as saturated with spiritual meaning and Kingdom significance.

Kingdom people seek first the Kingdom of God and its justice; church people often put church work above concerns of justice, mercy and truth. Church people think about how to get people into the church; Kingdom people think about how to get the church into the world. Church people worry that the world might change the church; Kingdom people work to see the church change the world.

When Christians put the church ahead of the Kingdom, they settle for the status quo and their own kind of people. When they catch a vision of the Kingdom of God, their sight shifts to the poor, the orphan, the widow, the refugee, "the wretched of the earth," and to God's future. They see the life and work of the church from the perspective of the Kingdom.

If the church has one great need, it is this: To be set free for the Kingdom of God, to be liberated from itself as it has become in order to be itself as God intends. The church must be freed to participate fully in the economy of God.

What this means practically is the burden of this book.

This is a book about liberating the church. It is written not out of pessimism over what the church has become, but out of optimism over who God still is. It reflects not hope *in* the future but hope *for* the future because of what God promises and because Jesus said he is coming back. The point is not to make the church what people think it should be, but to let the church become what God alone can make it. Maybe this is a dare to God's people: Dare to be the church and see what happens!

Perhaps the greatest text for the church today is Matthew 6:33: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." In the Sermon on the Mount, "these things" were food and clothing—the material things the world runs after. You, Jesus says, are to seek higher things: the Kingdom of God and its justice.

Making the Kingdom our goal means deciding for justice. God told his unfaithful people in Isaiah's day, "Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (Is 1:17). According to Proverbs 29:7, "the righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern." Righteousness and justice are the very foundation of God's rule (Ps 89:14; 97:2). Righteousness before God and justice in society are not secondary or peripheral issues but the central truths of God's Kingdom—and therefore the central issues for the church. My concern in this book is that the church seek *first* the Kingdom of God, not the "these things" of churchianity and world-defined success. Jesus warned the embryonic church in his day about preoccupation with feeding and clothing itself.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not

much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. (Mt 6:25-32)

Later Jesus said his disciples should focus on the hungry and thirsty, the refugees, the sick, the naked, the imprisoned, and not on their own self-nourishment and self-protection (Mt 25:31-46). These are the concerns of the Kingdom. My hope is that the church today can become free for such Kingdom concerns.

We must see that *everything* is for the sake of God's Kingdom. The world was created to show forth God's good rule. Jesus' birth was for the sake of the Kingdom. The new birth is entrance into God's Kingdom (Jn 3:3) so that we may live for Kingdom priorities (Mt 6:33). The baptism of the Holy Spirit is for the sake of the Kingdom; "the Spirit knows that the very crux of all truth lies in the Kingdom of God."¹ Sanctification and holiness are for the Kingdom. The gifts of the Spirit are granted so we may do the work of the Kingdom. The church is for the Kingdom; it prays constantly that God's Kingdom may come (Mt 6:10). Evangelism is for the Kingdom; its goal is to win people to God so that they will serve the King. And Jesus' Second Coming, "the time . . . for God to restore everything" (Acts 3:21), will finally establish the Kingdom forever. So we "look forward to the day of God and speed its coming," knowing that "in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" and justice (2 Pet 3:12-13).

The church in Fortress America, especially, needs to hear such words. Surveys show that most Americans have guns at home and many support more guns in Washington. They have a siege mentality bred of fear, distrust and the breakdown of community. Much of the church is also caught up in this mood. Like the nation, America's churches breathe the atmosphere of self-protection and self-aggrandizement. They run after the same things the world does. The church is not free for the Kingdom. Its sickness is symbolized by the average church budget: eighty or ninety per cent spent on itself, a pittance for the rest of the world.

In North America, many Christians have so mixed free enterprise with Christianity that they can't tell the difference. Like Amway's Richard DeVos, they believe that poor people are poor because that

is "the way they choose to live." "Most people I know want a new house, a nice car, a cottage on Lake Michigan," DeVos says, and he thinks these are proper goals for success-minded Christians. The Amway empire and others like it have been built on such self-centered piety. The poor, DeVos believes, should understand that "those who work shall be rewarded, that you should not covet what your neighbor has—it's none of your business." Everyone has access to employment and success, so if anyone really is poor (which is questionable), then it's his own fault. And this philosophy is safely insulated from any larger accountability to society or even the church because "accountability to God is very personal" (read "private"). The gospel concerns only one's individual relationship to God, and the church's mission is simply "to reach the unchurched and support each other in the body of believers."² The church's mission, in this view, is not to show any concern about social justice; that smacks of socialism. Church business and commercial business operate in different worlds. Kingdom business is shrunken to church business, which means business as usual.

If there is one charge to be made against the church today, it is the charge of worldliness. Evangelical churches protest the world's values at some points (sexual morality, family life, abortion) but have been seduced by the world at others (materialism; personal and institutionalized self-interest; styles of leadership, motivation and organization; the uses of power). Many Christians are convinced that technology changes things, even if they are unsure that prayer does. Technique works better than grace in the technological society.

Perhaps it's true that what's good for General Motors is good for the church. But at what price? Certainly the church can powerfully use the ways of the world. But is it then still the church of *God's* Kingdom? Take a Madison Avenue approach, and you get a Madison Avenue church.

Liberating Models Because of the morass the church is in today, I have chosen the themes of liberation and ecology in organizing this book. These provide a usefully unsettling way of looking at the church in our day. This is certainly not the only way to look at the church. But these themes pinpoint where the church is weak and how it may become more faithful. Using them is like saying, "Let's

walk over here a ways and look at the church from a different angle. Maybe we'll see some things we hadn't noticed before."

Despite thousands of books and the speculation of scholars, the church remains a mystery. Perhaps as time passes and more is said about the church, its true reality becomes even more clouded. In any case, since there is truly "something of God" in the life and course of the church, even in its most institutionalized form, it always eludes our full explanation.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the best way to deal with this strange phenomenon called "church" is the way Scripture itself does—through various figures, word pictures and images. Formally, this means understanding the church through the use of models.³ Models and mystery. Precisely because we can't fully grasp the meaning of the church, we resort to models and images to give us some "insight into the mystery" (Eph 3:4) of Christ and his church.

Models can be liberating, even revolutionary. A new model can be dangerous, as Galileo and others like him found out.

Revolutions, in fact, often spring from the discovery and exploration of new models. This has been true in science, economics and other fields. And this has been happening in the church in recent decades as the power of seeing the church as the *community* of God's *people* has been challenging and undermining entrenched models of the church as a religious institution dedicated to a kind of technical spiritual work that does not disturb the political, social and economic status quo.

Thomas S. Kuhn has argued that scientific revolutions spring from a change in fundamental models of understanding—what he calls a "paradigm shift." The root models or paradigms by which a scientific community understands itself and its work undergo a change which, in turn, produces new insights. "Led by a new paradigm," says Kuhn, "scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before."⁴

This is happening in the church. Today's ferment signals, in part, a paradigm shift and the accompanying struggle of new models to displace old ones in the corporate consciousness (or perhaps the collective unconscious) of the church. The Holy Spirit, it seems, is

at work in this ferment, and that is potentially liberating.

This book, then, is an exploration of the church's life and renewal—its liberation—using various models and images. The arrangement of the book is not formally logical, nor is the book a systematic examination of models, such as those found elsewhere.⁵ Rather, the arrangement is more like an informal conversation, or perhaps like a musical composition woven around a few major themes with several secondary or minor themes intertwined and reappearing intermittently. The basic theme is the liberation of the church viewed ecologically and explored through the use of several models and images. The basic thesis is that a fuller understanding and appropriation of fitting models will help free the church to be the community of the King and the agent of the Kingdom as God intends.

The book proceeds as follows: The first chapter examines the nature of the church's calling as liberating agent of the Kingdom. It also surveys where the church has been and where it appears to be headed, noting some related tendencies in contemporary society. The primary focus here, as throughout the book, is on the local church (but with reference to the larger context) and on churches mainly in the North American evangelical tradition (but with application to the church more generally). The next two chapters then outline and explore a new way of looking at the church, an ecological model which underlies the discussion through the rest of the book.

The major portion of the book examines several key issues affecting the liberation of the church—among them the role of leadership, the meaning of community, the function of Scripture, the ministry of women, the question of lifestyle, the place of theology, and the concerns of justice and the poor. These are treated not as separate topics but ecologically, as aspects of the total life and liberation of the church. Models either proposed or presupposed in dealing with these issues are, primarily, the church as sacrament, community, servant and witness, and, less explicitly, as universal priesthood and as counterculture. I make no claim to comprehensiveness in this use of models; other images might well be used. But I see these models as particularly relevant and pointed in the present situation of the church and as especially compatible with the liberation and ecology themes introduced in section one.

Theses on Renewal Reflecting on my experience and study of the church over the past several years, I have come to some conclusions which provide, for me at least, a basic perspective—a "place to stand" in viewing the church's life. These may be considered as theses on the renewal of the church. While most of these are not formally elaborated in the course of the book, they are assumed and often provide the foundation, or substratum, of specific discussions. Perhaps listing these in advance will help clarify where the argument is headed, and why. The reader who disagrees with these thesis statements probably won't find much in the book to agree with. I hope those who do agree with these propositions will check whether the theses really lead to or support the various positions and proposals put forth in the book. Perhaps readers who don't initially agree with these theses will have second thoughts by the end of the book.

The ten theses are as follows:

1. The fundamental crisis of the church today is a crisis of the Word of God. The church must recover the full dynamic of the Word, not just as Scripture, but as God-in-communication, especially through the written Word of Scripture and supremely through the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. This is another way of saying the church must recover a consciousness of who God is.
2. Behaviors and structures in the church reflect fundamental concepts in the church's self-understanding which often remain unarticulated.
3. The church is essentially the community of God's people, not primarily an organization, institution, program or building. This is a distinction of fundamental importance because it is linked to the basic models of the church which Christians employ.
4. The experience of salvation is incomplete and not fully biblical without genuine experience of the church as the community of God's people and agent of the Kingdom.
5. The most dynamic and prophetic thing the church can do is first of all to be a worshiping and serving community.
6. Every believer is a minister, servant and priest of God. Every believer is called to ministry, and all God's people must be equipped to minister.
7. Every believer receives grace for ministry. Therefore spiritual gifts must be identified and employed to God's glory.

8. Leadership grows out of discipleship. Where careful discipling is lacking, leadership cannot be biblical and a crisis of spiritual leadership results. Worldly qualifications for leadership replace biblical ones.

9. The church's concern for and identification with the poor are sure signs of its faithfulness to the Kingdom and are often signs of fundamental renewal.

10. In North America today a vital, biblically faithful church will be a countercultural community living in tension with the non-Christian elements of society and marked by a lifestyle that is distinctively Christlike and Kingdom oriented.

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A NEW MODEL
FOR CHURCH AND KINGDOM
