

Nine Marks of a Healthy Parachurch Ministry

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Parachurch ministries are everywhere.

From Joel Osteen to John Piper, from Creflo Dollar to Tim Keller, from Joyce Meyer to John MacArthur, it's difficult to find Christian leaders who don't lead a parachurch ministry.

According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics, 91,272 non-profit Protestant organizations filled a 990 tax form for Christian work last year. These organizations reported total revenues of \$1.8 billion a year, with total assets of over \$4 billion. And these billions did not include churches, Christian non-profits which reported less than \$25,000 a year, or any of the country's 106,000 Christian educational institutions.

This dizzying array of parachurch ministries feed the hungry, focus on families, evangelize youth, and send missionaries. They publish, lobby, and educate. They broadcast, fund, clothe, and heal. Parachurch ministries serve the Christian community around the world, right down to the parachurch ministry that distributes this very article.

The standard cliché for parachurch is that it's not the church, but an arm of the church. Yet historically, that arm has shown a tendency to develop a mind of its own and crawl away from the body, which creates a mess. Given the grand scope and size of many parachurch ministries, those which go wayward can propagate error for years: missionary organizations become gyms, heretical seminaries pump out heretical pastors, and service organizations produce long-term confusion between the gospel and social action.

So what should mark a healthy parachurch?

WHAT SHOULD MARK A HEALTHY PARACHURCH?

I've been involved in parachurch ministry for over three decades. I've helped form and now lead a parachurch student ministry in a Muslim nation. I've also been involved in church reform and church planting both in the US and abroad. So I speak from the seminary (another parachurch institution) of hard knocks.

In order to narrow the focus of this article, I write with a number of assumptions. Specifically, I am writing about evangelical, Protestant ministries. I am not writing about parachurch ministries that serve as a front for someone's oversized ego or desire to get rich. I'm assuming fiscal accountability, the personal integrity of the leadership, and a solid, orthodox doctrinal statement.

I am writing about parachurch ministries that start with a good heart and a biblical rationale. With these foundational principles in mind, here are nine marks of a healthy parachurch ministry.

Mark 1: A healthy parachurch ministry knows that it exists primarily to protect the church.

The parachurch does not primarily exist in order to “step in” and “do the job” which the church is failing to do—even if that is true at times.

The parachurch does not primarily exist to do a certain ministry better and more efficiently with a “targeted, laser beam focus”—though that can happen.

The parachurch does not primarily exist to mobilize and equip the church for which they are “para” to—though many do.

It’s not even to be an “arm of the church.”

Not primarily.

It exists primarily to protect the church.

Think of it this way. 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.

A good biblical model for parachurch ministries is found in Acts 6, in which the Greek widows were being left out of the church’s daily distribution of food.[1] One suspects the Hebrew widows were receiving the food because they had Jewish connections which the Greek widows simply did not have, though perhaps it was a more nefarious case of racism. Regardless, when they complained, the Apostles assigned seven godly men to the case. All these men were Greeks, as evidenced by their names, which was a sure fire way to end any cronyism or racism. But note *why* the apostles took care of this attack on the church in that way: “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:3-4).

And so, it appears that what would become the church’s office of deacon was established to protect the primary ministry of the church, that is, the ministry of the Word.[2]

Parachurch ministries must understand the principles the Apostles employed in Acts 6. Though there are many important things the church can do—as important as feeding widows!—nothing should subvert the primary calling of the church: to preach the Word. Parachurch ministries should come alongside the church both to fulfill important roles and to protect the unique and primary calling of the church.

Mark 2: A healthy parachurch ministry makes a clear distinction between church and parachurch.

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.

I was speaking to an American missionary recently and somehow we started talking about the church and parachurch. When I said the word "parachurch" he raised up in his seat and said, "I don't like that term!"

"What term?" I said.

"Parachurch!" he replied.

"Why?" I said.

"Because we're all church. There's no church and parachurch," he said, with a righteous tone.

This man is a good friend. I love his passion for Jesus and his willingness to put his life on the line for God. But he's flat wrong. Not all gatherings of Christians are "church." The church has specific parameters that make it church. Unfortunately (and this is the great irony) my friend is "into" church planting, and I fear he represents the majority opinion—even among those in ministry.

The church is the God-ordained local assembly of believers who have committed themselves to each other. They gather regularly, they teach the Word, celebrate communion and baptism, discipline their members, establish a biblical structure of leadership, they pray and give together. Certainly the church may do more, but it is not less than this.

On the other hand, parachurch, by definition, is less. That is, parachurch ministries have only a narrow slice of the church's responsibilities and prerogatives.

If this basic understanding of ecclesiology is lost—or worse, rejected—by a parachurch ministry, mental red flags should stand on end. Many negative repercussions will follow, including the two we will discuss in marks 3 and 4.

Mark 3: A healthy parachurch ministry avoids acting like the church.

If a parachurch organization confuses the boundaries of church and parachurch it will begin to practice things best left to the church.

When parachurch ministries begin to act like the church they often allow people involved in their ministries to substitute parachurch involvement for church involvement, which is an unhealthy exchange.

Okay, true confession. When I was a young Inter Varsity staff worker on a beach project, I baptized two Ethiopian men who had come to Christ during our week of outreach. After all, what could have been more biblical? They were from Ethiopia! And there was water! But looking back on it, I wish I had been more careful to make sure they had genuinely come to faith. This kind of discernment can only occur in the context of community. And it should have been the local community who was willing to vouch for their professions of faith who baptized them. I needed a stronger theology of the church (and of baptism, for that matter).

The same is true of other things which should be practiced in the church: communion, say, or church discipline.

Mark 4: A healthy parachurch ministry does not pressure the church to act like a parachurch.

With some frequency, parachurch leaders will tell “the Church” what “the Church” needs to do. They will advise it to partner with Catholics, to patch holes in the gospel by caring for the poor, to adopt new leadership structures, to become more relevant, to just about anything you might imagine. Often, this advice is disorienting since it can seem both cutting-edge and self-serving.

It’s not just the leaders of parachurch organizations who pressure the church to act like a parachurch, either. Church members do, too. The programs run by parachurch ministries are numerous and powerful. From support groups for addicts to camps for kids, the list is endless. Church members who have benefited from them can naturally want these programs to be reproduced by their church. But if this inclination is not tempered by a clear understanding of the differences between church and parachurch, these well-meaning church members will pressure the church to look and act like a parachurch ministry.

Too many people view the church through parachurch lenses. Perhaps that explains why so many churches today look like the campus group or high school ministry of yesteryear?

One specific area in which parachurch movements should be careful not to pressure the church is doctrine. Parachurch ministries often have the luxury of ignoring secondary doctrines. After all, I didn’t care that much about the mode of someone’s baptism when I was in a parachurch ministry.

But this luxury can lead to an open dismissal of church doctrine, as if secondary doctrine is unimportant.[3]

When I became an elder of a new and growing church plant, those doctrines which I had set aside as a parachurch worker suddenly took on great importance. How do we handle people whose divorce was unbiblical? What will church discipline look like? What should the requirements for church membership be? What is our church’s responsibility to the poor? How do we teach on baptism? What is our position on women in ministry?

Certainly parachurch leaders have the right to call the church to greater gospel faithfulness. Certainly churches are free to learn from parachurch programs. But a healthy parachurch ministry should avoid pressuring a church to dismiss church doctrine that may not have much meaning in a parachurch context, but which has a real impact on the health of the church.

Healthy parachurch ministries should practice and teach the distinction between church and parachurch, so that they don't violate their chief reason for existing: to protect the church.

Mark 5: A healthy parachurch ministry humbly heeds the history of parachurch movements.

Almost no large parachurch movements that existed a hundred years ago are now found faithful to the gospel.

Even fewer educational facilities that started as Christian institutions now proclaim the gospel faithfully. The rocks of history are strewn with the shipwrecks of parachurch ministries which should serve as a warning to us. Parachurch ministries usually go bad because they are unwilling to hold to biblical principles, tending to seek growth at the cost of principle.

One of the reasons to start a parachurch ministry is that it can grow far beyond the size of a local church ministry. Even smaller parachurch ministries dwarf the size of the average church. But a healthy parachurch ministry does not equate size with spiritual success. With increased size comes an increased difficulty in knowing what is going on with rank and file members. Often a desire for growth can result in bigness for bigness' sake: corners are cut, doctrinal positions are fudged, and the ministry focus shifts with popular opinion.

Mark 6: A healthy parachurch ministry understands the difference between the pragmatic and the principled.

There are many pragmatic reasons for a parachurch ministry to exist. Parachurch ministries are effective. They allow a group of Christians to spend years honing specific skills to reach a certain people group or to serve a certain aim. They allow Christians to join together for gospel work across a wide spectrum of denominational affiliations. They can grow rapidly and to enormous size and scope. Parachurch ministries also have the freedom to approach such work creatively.

But these are all pragmatic concerns. They're good ones, but they're pragmatic, which means that *pragmatism* is an ever-present danger.

The danger of pragmatism is that we can begin to trust in skill, techniques, or programs more than we trust in the Spirit's work or in the clear commands of Scripture. For example, pragmatism tempts us to think that the *method* of our evangelism is as important (or more important) than the *content*. Or that the ambience of the location where we evangelize is more important than the evangelist's faithful walk with God. But God is much more interested in our faithfulness to the message and the faithfulness of our lives than he is with any pragmatic concern.

Healthy parachurch ministries avoid resorting to pragmatic programs (those things that often seem like gimmicks and fads with hindsight) and instead have a strong confidence in the gospel and in the Scriptures.

Mark 7: The healthy parachurch has a counter-cultural understanding of management and money.

Modern corporate culture values efficiency, risk management, clean organizational structures, and a strong financial ledger. Corporate culture and structure is routinely imported into parachurch ministry leadership. As a result, many parachurch organizations then also place a high value on what raises the most money, minimizes risk, or produces the most efficient management structure.

But these are not the values that bring spiritual revival, passion for the gospel, or people who are willing to lay down their lives for Jesus. Are there things to learn from modern corporate culture? Sure. Should they be our highest values in ministry? Never. Consequently, parachurch ministries need an understanding of management and money that runs counter to worldly culture.

There needs to be a constant, radical call for the management of parachurch ministries to be like what they call their staff and members to be like. A political, corporate leadership erodes a biblical mindset. When that happens in the leadership of a parachurch organization the death of the real ministry is not far behind.

I was speaking to a friend about her move to the head office of a large parachurch organization. She said that, as she began to get to know the office culture, she made two lists of people in the office: one list of those who were godly, and another list of those who were in power. And she said—tellingly—that they were different lists.

Money can also pose a problem for parachurch ministries, and I'm not merely referring to failures to fulfill financial "best practice." I am assuming accountability with finances. Instead, it's the danger of pressure to raise funds that overrides the confession and mission of a parachurch ministry. Training events for parachurch workers should focus on the Bible and on integrating the gospel into ministry; if there is time left over, some training on fund raising is okay, too. Unfortunately, the emphases are often the other way around.

This past October, I attended the Lausanne Congress in Cape Town (an amazing parachurch event) and happened to meet an old friend from Inter Varsity. We sat for coffee. I had written [an article](#) about IV last year with the hope that it would produce some discussion about worrisome trends within that movement. But the immediate internal response of IV was to distribute "talking points" for IV staff to use if their donors asked questions about my article. So I commented to my friend that I was amazed at the gears that began to spin within IV to protect the "30 million dollar donor base" rather than producing discussion about gospel faithfulness. He smiled, patted my arm, and said, "Mack, it's more like 60 million . . ."[4] He said it like it was nothing personal: just business.

My, oh my.

There is no question in my mind that IV has the highest ethical standards of fiscal accountability. Even when mistakes were made, humble repentance followed. But an organization like this needs more than a business mentality about money. Nothing so endangers the health of a parachurch ministry than suppressing discussions about gospel faithfulness out of fears that it might hurt the donor base.

Bottom line: healthy parachurch ministries need to issue constant, radical, internal calls for the organization to be driven by the gospel rather than by management principles, finances, and fundraising. That way, the ministry looks like a ministry from top to bottom.

Mark 8: The healthy parachurch maintains a strong commitment to, and understanding of, the gospel.

One of the best reasons for a parachurch ministry to exist is to bring people together who are passionately committed to the gospel but who might not agree on every secondary doctrine.

To be healthy, all parachurch ministries must maintain a deep commitment to the core of Christianity—the gospel—no matter what else they do. Beware of any parachurch organization that does not hold to the gospel with a firm grip.

The gospel is the *message* from God that leads us to salvation. As we learn from Scripture, the gospel is the message that tells us how a holy and loving God sent his Son as a ransom for sinners, and that through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead any who would repent of their sins and put their trust in Christ can be reunited with God for eternity.

The watchword for all who call themselves evangelical believers is this: “If you love the gospel you’re my partner in ministry.” At the same time we should also say, “If you mess with the gospel, redefine the gospel, turn implications of the gospel into the gospel, or add or subtract anything from the gospel, then we have issues.”

But even then, those who affirm a solidly biblical statement of faith are apt to *assume* the gospel. This is exceedingly dangerous. An assumed gospel leaves the gospel message implicit and unspoken, such that anyone who claims to be a Christian is accepted as a Christian, regardless of their understanding of the gospel or their practice of the Christian faith.

Assuming the gospel is one step toward losing the gospel. Consider how often the Apostle Paul would talk about the gospel. He could barely write a sentence without bringing it up. He didn’t do that because the people had not heard the gospel, but because he knew that people easily assume or forget the gospel message. If you are not hearing the gospel in people’s prayers, in their stories, or in descriptions of their heart’s concerns, you should be concerned that they are assuming the gospel.

Most parachurch ministries have a doctrinal confession that clearly articulates the gospel. But does it matter? Is it relevant on a day-to-day basis? All publications, all literature, and all internal and external communication should square with the doctrinal statement. All staff from the top to the bottom should know it, believe it, and live it out in every decision—from publishing to hiring. There is almost nothing more corrosive to a parachurch ministry than a doctrinal statement that has become irrelevant.

A tremendous example of keeping the gospel front and center is in the parachurch ministry of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES), the sister movement to Inter Varsity in the US. Their doctrinal statement is no mere formality, but something they live out in their management, their publications, and in the student leadership on campus. In many ways, AFES serves as a model of how parachurch and church can work together towards gospel faithfulness.

Mark 9: A healthy parachurch ministry seeks accountability relationships with the church.

Being in accountability relationships with the church goes beyond mere church membership or attendance; many parachurch organizations already encourage or require church membership. What's needed is transparent accountable relationships, both individual and corporate.

Yes, parachurch ministries should hold their staff and members more accountable to robust involvement in gospel-centered churches, and to a lifestyle of submitting to church leadership. But further, parachurch leadership should seek out evangelical church leaders who are willing to challenge and exhort them about these nine marks.

My first mark of a healthy parachurch outlined how parachurch ministries exist to protect the church. But here is a way for parachurch ministries to be protected *by* the church: if more parachurch ministries sought accountability relationships from a church, both for individuals and for the organization as a whole, they would find themselves protected from the dangers implicit in marks 2 through 8.

A healthy parachurch ministry needs transparent and honest relationships with evangelical churches, and should invite critique from those churches. Parachurch organizations are not above reproach. Defensive postures on the part of parachurch ministries are indications of illness. Parachurch organizations would gain much from submitting, as an organization, to the leaders of healthy gospel-centered churches.

A positive example: the Mustard Seed Foundation has determined that it will not give funding to a local staff or ministry unless that staff or ministry is also funded by a local church. This demonstrates an outstanding understanding of the place of the leadership of the church for the parachurch by submitting to the leadership of the church, first. Does this rule slow ministry down at times? Yes. Is that bad? Not at all. It protects gospel faithfulness.

CONCLUSION

Parachurch ministries are bigger and more influential than ever. And within the vast majority of them, God is at work for his kingdom in powerful ways. But we should never forget that his chosen method for the expansion of the kingdom is his church. So a healthy parachurch ministry keeps the primacy of the church front and center. It makes clear distinctions between church and parachurch, both avoiding the temptation to act like the church and refusing to pressure the church to act like the parachurch. A healthy parachurch ministry humbly heeds the history of parachurch ministries, takes hold of the principles of the ministry over the pragmatism of the world, maintains its commitment to the gospel, and seeks accountability relationships with the church.

[1] Notice I say model, not biblical basis. You will not find a direct basis for parachurch in the Bible; though some would argue that in 3 John 5-8 John is encouraging support for traveling evangelists who are proto-parachurch workers. Some others point to Acts 13. See, for example, the Lausanne Occasional Handbook 24 on church and parachurch relationships, at <http://www.lausanne.org/all-documents/lop-24.html>.

[2] I am not saying that parachurch is diaconal work, or that deacons are parachurch workers. Rather, I'm merely saying that we can learn from the principles of the establishment of the diaconate by the apostles. I do think Acts 6 is why all churches would be wise to assign deacons (or elders) to keep in touch with every parachurch ministry that is a part of their church.

[3] A rule of thumb: Primary doctrines are doctrines we stake our lives on, for example, Christ's deity. Secondary doctrines are not issues of life or death—that is, our salvation—but are of critical importance for faith and practice, for example, whom we baptize. And tertiary doctrines are things which are mentioned in Scripture, but are neither a life or death issue nor a issue of faithful practice, for example, head coverings for women in church.

[4] Actually, according to the NCCS, total revenues for Inter Varsity in 2010 were \$84 million.

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