



# The Latimer Trust

PO Box 26685  
London N14 4XQ

Chairman: The Rev'd Dr Mark Burkill  
[administrator@latimertrust.org](mailto:administrator@latimertrust.org)  
[www.latimertrust.org](http://www.latimertrust.org)

## **Biblical Truth for Today's Church**

The Latimer Trust. Registered Charity No. 1084337

*This document contains the opinions of the author(s) at the time of original publication. Permission to quote or publish in any other form must be sought from the author.*

### **LATIMER COMMENT 27**

#### **THE GOSPEL COMMUNITY**

A Review of THE GOSPEL COMMUNITY and its leadership by John Tiller with Mark Birchall (Marshalls, 168pp, pb £4.95)

'Without a readiness to reform structures, the new life which is given in renewal becomes blocked and frustrated, preventing the church from becoming a channel of God's grace to the world. All too often the new life has been acceptable only if it fits itself into the existing structures. But this can seldom be more than a temporary state of affairs. If it is prolonged the survival of a church may well be in jeopardy.' (p.8).

This statement sets the tone for this important and helpful book, which includes a prophetic message to the church to put its house in order. It is important to point out that 'renewal' is seen as wider than charismatic renewal: it would include, for example, 'rediscovery of the laity'.

John Tiller sees the church as often 'an institution riddled with arteriosclerosis' (p.11). It has a 'constant tendency for commitment to and maintenance of the institution to become and end in itself' (p.38). He points out that Jesus did not refer to structure. Some claim that this was because of his expectation of the end of the Age and his return. But Tiller rightly points out that, according to the New Testament, we should never stop expecting this. He adds 'As soon as it begins to give an appearance of permanence in the world the church ceases to be a herald of the Kingdom. For successful perpetuation of its mission it actually requires a continual process of death and resurrection.' (p.44).

One factor which bolsters up this rigid institutionalism in the church is what John Tiller calls 'Cult Religion'. I found this a helpful section of the book containing some illuminating and memorable statements. Society still desires the Church (normally conceived of as the clergyman) to be associated with the various important events of life. Cultic religion has no concept of being the church: there is no need for regular assembly. 'People in this country do not so much feel that they belong to the Church of England as that the C. of E. belongs to them. It exists to provide a public service ... the affirmation of human activity through cultic ritual. The purpose of the ritual is not to change behaviour but to confirm that the behaviour is acceptable to God ... whatever form of ritual is used will make relatively little difference. The priest alone is expected to understand what the ritual means.' (p.31).

Tiller goes on to affirm that the true Gospel Community is one where all share in the ministry of the Spirit and the priesthood of Christ. Consequently 'cultic religion, with its shrines and official priesthood, has no significance for Christianity.' (p.45). There is no longer a separate order of Priests. Jesus himself was a lay-person. The whole Christian community presents daily offerings of witness and obedience. These are not cultic and there is no point in making cultic offerings or sacrifices.

The author claims that 'the New Testament evidence suggests that the various activities which took place when the Church met were secondary to the gathering itself, which is essential for the purpose of awaiting the coming of the Lord and thus proclaiming that they were living in the "last days".' (p.49). He concludes 'The Gospel Community

is unsuitable for fulfilling the religious needs of mankind which continue to demand the provision of shrines and cultic priesthoods.' (p.50).

John Tiller is correct in his analysis of the situation in the church. There is indeed a rigid institutionalism, in many evangelical churches among others. There is nothing wrong with structure - it will always develop. But structure was meant to be flexible. To use popular terminology, the problem with old wineskins is not that they are old, but that they are inflexible. Consequently the 'new wine' (or new movement of the Spirit) splits them. I am convinced that some of the divisions of the church have been God's plan B. A new movement of the Spirit took place and plan A was that the 'wineskins' (structures) should be changed by it. But they were rigid and the only way the movement of the Spirit could continue was through the unhappy means of division.

There are some people who embrace renewal (in the various senses of the word) and fondly imagine it will not require structural change. They unwittingly will 'tame' the renewal and make it acceptable. Instead of being the wind of the Spirit sweeping away irrelevant and harmful structures it is reduced to a gentle breeze which simply dusts the existing structures. Respectability and acceptability have proved the death of many a renewal movement.

I found John Tiller's exposition of cultic religion very clear. It explains some of the problems we face in the Church of England. We are expected to baptize paganism (sometimes with literal baptism). In fact, cultic religion has similarities not only with superstition but also with the occult. There is belief in supernatural power and the need for supernatural protection and blessing. But the desire is to manipulate that supernatural power for human purposes without facing any moral or spiritual demands. It is an Aladdin's lamp religion and contrasts with true Christianity which is based on the self-giving of sacrificial love. Re-ordering our churches and changing the words of our services will achieve little for the cultic religionist. His superstitious views and needs are so powerful that he will miss the significance of the changes.

However, it is possible to meet the cultic religionist where he is and to get through with the Gospel. This will not only be through the preached Word. For example, the love of the Gospel Community might be the initial means of breaking through barriers. We can use our ancient buildings, and the desire for ritual associated with the great events of life, as contact points for the Gospel. But we must be scrupulously honest' relatively few are won this way. We must not underestimate the power of cultic religion to deafen people to the Gospel.

Tiller goes on to ask how we can overcome the problems of institutionalism backed up by cultic religion, by fear of change and by rigid traditionalism. Is it to opt out of historic denominations? He describes as an 'inadequate solution' the view that 'schism without heresy is the true path of renewal in every age.' (p.39). Some have, of course, left for Housechurches and the book briefly refers to them. Instead of the usual blanket condemnation of the Housechurches as 'authoritarian' the book accepts that the authority of leadership and degree of centralisation of the network differs between the different Housechurch strands. The author does however say that many Housechurch members are disaffected members from other churches. Although this is no doubt still true, it is increasingly true that many Housechurches are winning new members through evangelism. In any case it is not unusual for 'renewed' churches in historic denominations to have received a fair number of disaffected members from other churches. Can we altogether blame such people if their former church was suffering from 'arteriosclerosis'? However, I do agree that some Housechurches will develop a rigid denominational structure with unusual speed. At least some of the key national Housechurch leaders are, to my direct knowledge, aware of this danger.

But if the answer is not opting out, what is it? The book's answer is that we should have the courage to make radical changes, albeit as sensitively as possible. The true Gospel Community, as we have seen, involves every-member-ministry and the priesthood of all believers. Leadership is a vital subject. Whereas different patterns are present in different parts of the New Testament there are, nevertheless, certain key principles. There is no one-man-ministry. Leadership is corporate and basically indigenous. The clergy-laity distinction is most unhelpful. The word 'laity' does, of course, refer to the whole people of God - including leaders. So Tiller questions why divine authority (signified by ordination) is limited to one (or three) kinds of ministry.

The New Testament never envisaged a congregation being dependent upon a professional Minister. Where this is the case (as in most churches) a lack of growth in maturity, responsibility and numbers results.

The word 'hierous' (priest) is never used of Christian leaders in the New Testament. There is no separate priesthood and, says Tiller (rightly in my view), the term 'priest' in the Church ought to be replaced by 'presbyter' or 'elder' (which is

what, in the Church of England, it actually means).

He continues that in the New Testament, 'Authority in the Church is not regarded as something transmitted through a historical succession of leaders, but as the direct provision of Christ to the Church in every age.' (p.56). 'So authority for ministry is given by Christ to the whole Church, including those appointed to any leadership function.' (p.57).

Tiller does, however, see it as important for some of the local church's leadership to be related to and recognized by the wider church. The book acknowledges that change to corporate leadership is difficult and often painful. Opposition may come from the Minister who may be threatened by it and may have heard horror stories of such schemes going wrong elsewhere. The Church council may fear it is going to be made redundant by some self-perpetuating elite. The congregation may be threatened if they are very dependent on the one-man-ministry.

The last part of the book incorporates the results of extensive research carried out by Mark Birchall. There is a good deal of practical advice about setting up corporate leadership. For example, there may be a Pastoral Team, perhaps of housegroup leaders. Or there may be a Consultative Group for the Minister. This might be drawn mostly, if not entirely, from the Church council. Alternatively there may be a Management Team which may take the form of an enlarged Standing Committee or staff meeting or meeting of heads of departments in the church. Finally there may be a Pastoral Leadership or eldership which is the most radical possibility. Some churches are quoted as seeing this as a 'corporate vicar\*', others as a 'corporate curate'!

The book is realistic in pointing out the difficulties such schemes can face. 'Shared leadership seems to bring out the worst in each of us, such as pride, jealousy, envy and malice.' (p.122). There may be personality clashes. The charismatic movement is seen as giving particular scope for division. 'It is a bitter irony that the movement which in many places has brought such blessings, joy, healing, new life and growth should also often be connected with division and schism in the Church.' (p.120).

This is a far more balanced and fair statement than some would make. And it is true that the Charismatic Renewal Movement has its fair share of extremists, loonies and insensitive people. However, the division is often caused by renewal being confronted by 'arteriosclerosis' in the church. New life is disturbing and many Christians do not want to be disturbed. New life will also reveal the division already present in a church. Furthermore new life will always be attacked by Satan and division is a favourite ploy of his.

The author recommends the involvement of an outside consultant to advise and to help solve crises and difficulties. This is wise advice and seems to relate to the apostolic (small 'a') ministry, which I understand Ephesians 4 to teach is still current in the Church, though certainly not on the level with the Twelve, who were unique. I have written on this at length elsewhere ([The Challenge of the Housechurches](#) by Tony Higon and Gilbert Kirby, Latimer House). Briefly I would see some people having the gifts and insights to be church planters/builders. This is an apostolic gift and for a local church to have advice from such a ministry (where the authority remains vested in the local church leadership) will prove very valuable.

The book also goes on very helpfully to point out the difficult position of the Minister's wife when an eldership (or other corporate leadership) is set up. Beforehand she may have been the Minister's closest confidante and adviser. Then suddenly she is pushed out, if she is excluded from the corporate leadership.

Many hurts have indeed been inflicted in this sort of situation. I believe Ministers' wives are often oppressed and ignored. Their gifts, which are in many cases of major significance and complement their husband's, are often neglected and lost to the church.

The book points out that division is to be expected in a corporate leadership. Even those tutored personally by Jesus experienced it. If this is referring to their pre-Pentecost experience I do not believe it can be paralleled with the experience of the Church subsequent to Pentecost. However, even after Pentecost, Barnabas and Paul had a sharp disagreement. They resolved it by parting company. The author comments that this is seldom desirable nowadays. I am not so sure. True it is not the desirable ideal. But if there is very significant division in an eldership and it seems to be incapable of solution, it may be advisable to part company amicably. The leader who departs may well then find a new church where aims and methods differ and where he can feel much happier.

I think my main criticism of this book is that it does not do full justice to its title which is 'The Gospel Community - and its leadership'. The last three words are in smaller type. Yet the book majors almost exclusively on leadership in its

practical recommendations. It does not give practical advice as to how the typical church can become the Gospel Community with every-member-ministry working in harmony for the purpose of effective evangelism. It is as if setting up corporate, indigenous leadership will somehow produce this. But is not this akin to the old clericalism?

Spiritual renewal of the individual is required to provide the dynamic for such radical change, yet there is no advice on how this can be achieved. There is no advice on how to recognize and use the gifts of each church-member. And fundamental to all this change is the need to achieve a deep unity and mutual commitment in the church as taught in the New Testament. This should not be an inward-looking, exclusive unity but an outward-looking commitment to doing the Word of God together in the power of the Spirit. I am firmly convinced that achieving such unity is vital before the setting up of corporate leadership or radical delegation (including to housegroups) otherwise these activities can easily be a recipe for division. We have learnt this ourselves and given practical advice on it to many other churches. There are practical ways of achieving these purposes but this is not the place to expand upon them. I feel the book is, therefore, lacking a major section and would like to have learnt from such a section as I have from the other valuable sections.

With that very important proviso, I can recommend this book. But because of the proviso I would strongly underline one statement in it. 'There should be no sense of shame or failure in saying, "We are not yet ready for AN eldership".' (p.139).

Tony Higton

Further copies available for 15p. each plus S.A.E. from Latimer House, 131 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7AJ. Also Memoranda on 'The Truth and Significance of the Resurrection', 'The Use of Scripture', 'The Lima Report: Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry', 'The Tiller Report on the Ministry', 'The Guardians of the Faith' (Bishop of Durham Controversy), 'Sunday Trade: A Christian Perspective', 'The Voting of the Deaneries and Dioceses on BEM and ARCIC', 'Year of Decision for the Church of England', 'The Nature of Christian Belief', 'The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry', 'Oklahoma!', 'C.S. Lewis, Twenty Years On', 'Annus Mirabilis 1986', 'The Oppression of Women', 'Salvation and the Church', 'Not Just for the Poor', 'We Believe in God', 'Indulgences Today', 'Any News of what's Good for Society?', 'The Education Reform Act - A Christian Viewpoint' and 'A Discriminating Compassion?'