

# Theology of Church Consultancy



An exploration of the theological and biblical considerations of church consultancy.

## ***Church Consultancy in the New Testament Epistles***

Many of the letters in the New Testament can be understood as Paul, Peter, John, and James consulting with individual local churches, coaching church leaders, evaluating and developing a theology of leadership, and making recommendations about leadership appointments and ministries. For example, 1 Corinthians is a letter to the church at Corinth responding to issues that visitors from the church had raised (1 Cor 7.1; 8.1; 12.1; 16.1) or that had come to Paul's attention (1 Cor 1.11). In it Paul addressed such issues as divisions in the church (1 Cor 1.10-17; 3.1-9), immorality (1 Cor 5.1-13; 6.12-20), conflict, lawsuits and love (1 Cor 6.1-11; 13.1-13), marriage and singleness (1 Cor 7), exercising spiritual gifts appropriately (1 Cor 12), and worship (1 Cor 11; 14)<sup>1</sup>

In a similar way, 2 Corinthians is a response to false teachers within the Corinthian Church who were challenging Paul's authority over the church and his apostleship (1 Cor 6.1-13; 10.1-12.23). He addresses this issue along with concerns about appropriate church discipline (1 Cor 2.5-11) and giving to the poor (1 Cor 8.1-9.15).<sup>2</sup>

The importance of having a solid theological framework when consulting with churches is underscored by these examples of correcting doctrinal error and the resultant behaviour that accompanied it. Paul's letter to the Galatians is written in the context of converted Jews seeking to navigate the transition from Judaism to Christianity and sought to refute the teaching of those who insisted on adherence to the Laws of Moses.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the author of Hebrews wrote to Jewish Christians grappling with this same paradigm shift to affirm the superiority of Christ's sacrifice on the cross over the Jewish sacrificial system (see especially Heb 4.1-13,16).<sup>4</sup> Paul also countered a mix of extreme Judaism and incipient Gnosticism in the Church at Colossae which was resulting in both an unhealthy asceticism (Col 2.16-23) and licentiousness (Col 3.1-25). So, Paul emphasizes the full deity of Christ, rather than any inferior system of angelic mediators and secret knowledge (Col 1.13-23; 2.9-10,18).<sup>5</sup> Correcting false teaching was a significant focus of many of the New Testament epistles.

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1. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1987), 1–880.

2. Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 40. (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1986), 1–527.

3. For example, circumcision (Gal 2.11-16; 5.1-12); Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 41 (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books, 1990), 1–323.

4. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991), 1–211; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Texas ; Word Books, 1991), 213–617.

5. Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1982), 1–328.

The use of letters to coach church leaders is exemplified by Paul. Paul had left Timothy in charge of the Church at Ephesus while he travelled to Macedonia. Some people in the Church were teaching false doctrines (1 Tim 1.3-4) and Paul gave Timothy instructions about worship (1 Tim 2.1-15) and the appropriate setting apart of church leaders (1 Tim 3.1-13), as well as personal encouragement for his leadership role (1 Tim 1.18-20; 4.11-16). Paul's concern for the Ephesian Church during Nero's persecution dominates his charge to Timothy to endure through difficult times, and faithfully preach the gospel even in the face of suffering (2 Tim 2.1-4.8).<sup>6</sup>

These are just some examples of various New Testament authors addressing particular concerns in churches, whether they were in need of encouragement in the face of persecution, correction regarding false teaching, addressing sensitive moral issues, encouragement to live faithful Christian lives, or some other matter. The issue of persecution does not figure as highly in our contemporary context as it does in the New Testament epistles. However, false teaching, moral issues, and living faithful Christian lives are still as relevant to the modern Christian and church setting as they were then, and therefore the concern of pastors and church consultants today.

### ***Evaluating Churches***

Theologically and biblically, why should churches be evaluated?

Firstly, God is an evaluator.<sup>7</sup> God is often portrayed as judging ((κρίνω, ἀνακρίνω and διακρίνω) nations (1 Chron 16.33; Ps 7.8, 9.8, 96.10,13) and individuals (Rom 2.6,16) or kings with an evaluation of their reign as good (e.g. 1 Ki 22.43; 2 Chron 24.16) or evil (e.g. 1 Ki 16.25,30; 2 Ki 8.18,27).<sup>8</sup> In a similar way, Jesus is one who evaluates the nations (Mat 25.31-32), churches (Rev 2.1-3.22), and individuals (2 Thess 1.8; 2 Tim 4.1). In passages such as Matthew 25.1-46, Jesus as the "Son of Man" (Mat 25.31) is depicted as the One supervising the process of sifting and evaluation, or separation (Mat 25.32) to "eternal punishment" or "eternal life" (Mat 25.46).

Part of the church consultancy process is evaluative, as churches and issues are assessed. However, the aim of this evaluation process is to be grace-filled and redemptive: that is, for the purpose of those individuals or churches being strengthened or repenting (Rev 3.19-21). This may occur, for example, as those with broken or strained relationships with others in the church are challenged to take steps towards reconciling those frayed relationships.

Secondly, this assessment is something that is often delegated to God's appointed leaders such as prophets (Hos 6.5), priests (Deut 17.9,17) judges (Jdg 4.4) and kings (2 Sam 14.17).

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6. William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46 (Nashville: T. Nelson, 2000), 1-641.

7. Tim Dyer, "Biblical and Theological Basis for Consulting," Handout at Consultancy Training Day (Epping, NSW, 2009), 1.

8. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Vol 1: Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (Electronic Ed. of the 2nd Edition) (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 363; Logos Bible Software 4.2 [Electronic Resource] (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000-2010).

Thirdly, every person should assess themselves spiritually (Judg 5.15-16, Psalm 139, Prov 4.23, Rom 7.14-25, 2 Cor 13.5, Phil 3.12-14, Gal 6.4-5), and Christians are regarded as more competent to evaluate or judge than secular people (1 Cor 2.12-16), with some Christians having special gifts in the area of discernment (1 Cor 12.10) to assist in this process. However, because of our tendency towards self-deception (Jer 17.9; Prov 12.15, 16.2, 21.2) as individuals and churches, it is vitally important for the evaluation of others to be done with a view to encouragement towards spiritual health and growth (Eccl 4.10,12, Gal 6.1-3, Rev 2.1-3.22).

Fourth, as indicated above, many of the New Testament letters to churches are concerned with the evaluation of churches and individuals in terms of such things as Christ-like living (e.g. 1 Cor 5.1-13), conflict (1 Cor 6.1-11), and correct doctrine (e.g. Col 2.8-23), so that these issues may be addressed. In church consultancies such matters may be addressed from time to time, either to the whole church, or in a private discussion with an individual as appropriate. Biblically, God has entrusted the church generally with specific purposes. Some authors have attempted to outline these purposes (see Section 2.4), with Rick Warren listing them as worship (Matt 4.10), fellowship (Eph 2.19), discipleship (Col 1.28), ministry (Eph 4.12) and mission (Matt 28.19-20).<sup>9</sup> Additionally, each local church has a specific vision and mission that reflects their unique identity and their specific local context. Whether that focus is on the general purposes of the church, or the specific vision and mission of a local church, part of this sacred responsibility is asking, "How is this church succeeding with what God has entrusted us to do?" This is one area of evaluation, and in the context of church consultancy is effected firstly by a church's leadership in assessing their need of a consultancy, and secondly by inviting the church consultant(s) to partner with them further in that process of church evaluation.

Evaluation is an important theme in Scripture. It is carried out by God, God's leaders, authors of letters to churches in the New Testament, and every Christian in different degrees and contexts. The purpose of such evaluation is to ensure that the ministry of churches is effective and God-honouring, that people are coming to faith in Christ and growing in Christian maturity, and that improvements are regularly made as a result of that feedback.

### ***A Multi-faceted Christian Ministry***

However, to frame church consultancy as merely a tool to evaluate churches would not give the whole picture. At its base it is a Christian ministry that seeks to minister both to churches and the individual attenders within a church. In this it shares many of the characteristics of other Christian ministries. That is, it seeks to encourage towards growth and health,

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9. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message*, 103–7.

individually and corporately (Acts 14.22, 15.31-32, 16.40, 20.1-2; Rom 1.12; 1 Cor 14.3, 31; 2 Cor 7.4-7; Eph 6.22; Col 2.2, 4.8; 1 Thess 2.12, 3.2; 1 Pet 5.1).<sup>10</sup>

It can encompass a ministry of comfort or consolation to those who have experienced a church-wide trauma, including but not limited to, extensive bullying by a leader, or a breach of ethical boundaries by a leader impacting the trust of those in their care (2 Cor 1.3-7).

Church consultancy can be a ministry of exhortation for times when a church needs to be urged to return to its Scriptural mission, or individual attenders need to be called back to Christ-like living (1 Thess 4.1, 5.14; 1 Tim 4.13; 2 Tim 4.2; Titus 2.15; Heb 12.5, 13.22).<sup>11</sup>

It can incorporate a ministry of equipping, (Eph 4.11-12) as consultants assist a church and its leaders with the processes, tools and strategies they need to grow in health and strength. Equipping can also include consultants facilitating or recommending skilled people to run specific workshops in areas needing to be addressed.

Church consultancy can be a ministry of reconciliation in situations of conflict or strained relationships (Mat 5.24; Acts 7.26; Col 1.20; Eph 2.14-22; Phil 4.1-3), as is appropriate for those who have been firstly reconciled to God (1 Cor 5.18-20).<sup>12</sup>

Church consultancy can be a ministry of evangelism (Mat 5.14–16, 9.9–13, 10.33, 28.18–20, Acts 1.8) insofar as it facilitates a greater missional focus on the surrounding community by a local church. The aim is that those outside a church increasingly come to faith in Christ. This may involve a church dealing with any internal blockages, such as conflict, that mar its witness in the community.

Church consultancy is a multi-faceted ministry grounded in the bible that shares many of the characteristics of other ministries, seeking to bring God's wholeness into situations of stress or stagnation, or realise potential. While not specifically termed 'church consultancy,' in the New Testament, there are many examples where apostles consulted with and encouraged churches and church leaders regarding effective ministry, doctrinal error, appropriate behaviour and many other issues. Working with church leaders in evaluating the effectiveness of that church's ministry, outreach, and growth in Christian maturity, and recommending ways to increasingly honour God and expand his Kingdom have been, and continue to be, the agenda of God and his servants.

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10. Dyer, "Biblical and Theological Basis for Consulting," 1.

11. Dyer, "Biblical and Theological Basis for Consulting," 1.

12. Dyer, "Biblical and Theological Basis for Consulting," 1.