



NCD Sample Pages: *Paradigm Shift*

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The sample pages contain the table of contents, the preface (in which the purpose of the book is summarized), and then pages 151-160 (in which the theological system developed in this book is applied to dealing with Christian traditions). These pages may give you an idea of the character and layout of the book, so that you can decide whether it is useful for your purposes. The remaining pages offer the whole theological system behind NCD and apply it to numerous topics of systematic theology, church history, and contemporary church life.

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Introduction:

What This Book Is About

Every reformation movement is confronted with an opposing force known as “orthodoxy.” This was true in the days of the 16th century Reformation (when the opponent was Roman Catholic orthodoxy); it was true in the days of Pietistic revival in Europe (which was opposed by orthodox Protestants); and the same seems to apply to the different movements that fight for a reformation of their churches today. The stiffest opposition comes often from those who stand up for “doctrinal purity.”

Why is this so? Are the renewal movements on the wrong theological track? Or is there something wrong with what we know as orthodoxy?

In conversations with many Christian leaders, I have come to the conclusion that the greatest obstacle to strategic church development is not a lack of methodological know-how, but deep-rooted theological blockages. By this, I am not referring to “God-is-dead theology,” nor to groups that contest the absolute claims of Jesus or advocate a syncretistic theology. I am talking about theological blockages in Christian groups whose doctrinal “correctness” is beyond question. The fact that some of the greatest obstacles to church development are to be found in these circles is, in my estimation, the real dilemma.

Why People Talk at Cross Purposes

Over the last few years, in many countries a lot of theological battles have been fought on topics related to church growth. However, the *progress* made in these discussions has so far been surprisingly small. In many cases, people are talking at cross purposes.

The reason seems to me to be that some advocates of church growth—whether consciously or unconsciously—think in a different theological paradigm than their critics. They have another perspective from which they view their own experience and interpret the church (and the world). Different paradigms cannot be related to each other. Christians who think and act in different paradigms are, in effect, talking different languages. Even where they use the same words, they may

mean something completely different. Thus it is easy to explain why the very same phrase that makes one person's heart beat faster can give another one a sinking feeling in the stomach. On both sides of the debate people make the same mistake of criticizing theological statements that originated in another paradigm from the point of view of their own paradigm—without realizing how hopeless a task it is. Different paradigms are mutually incompatible.

Perhaps a simple illustration may clarify this. Let us suppose that the only eating utensils we have are knives and forks. The foods (topics) to be “dealt with” are steaks on the one hand, and soup on the other. Research in this area would probably come up with the result that steaks are a highly suitable type of food, whereas soup is rather dubious and completely unfit for human consumption.

This illustration shows us the dilemma we are facing. To understand what church growth is about, we need the appropriate theological utensils. If we do not have them, the subject *must* seem, at best, irrelevant, and at worst, a real threat. There is a limit to the applicability of those illustrations, but even this caricature—and it *is* a caricature—highlights a real aspect of the issue involved. In this case, it is the fact that the theological paradigm that stands in the background of what we call *Natural Church Development* is incompatible with conventional theological thought patterns.

A lot of contributions to the debate have, in the last analysis, been expressions of a different (and, for some, completely new) paradigm. But those of us who presented their theses were insufficiently aware of that reality. Some may have wondered: *What in the world makes these people reject this tasty, wholesome soup (and be so aggressive about it)?* As long as we remain within the illustration, the answer is simple. People who only have knives and forks *cannot* appreciate the value of soup. It seems to me that this is the reason why discussions about isolated theological topics are often so fruitless. We spend our time wondering whether the soup might be better accepted if we were to spice it a little more, but we overlook the fact that the real problem is on a completely different level.

Is Numerical Growth the Key?

In the last few years, there have been a large number of publications on the theology behind church growth.¹ However, most of these publications were surprisingly one-sided in their focus on the aspect of the “numerical growth”—as if this were the theological key to understanding the essence

1 A lot of these discussions, however, have taken place outside the English-speaking world. In this book I want to reflect those parts of the debate which I believe are most relevant for everybody who is interested in evaluating the theological presuppositions behind supposedly “value-neutral” methodologies.

of the subject.² The scant attention paid to this issue on the following pages is due, first of all, to the fact that so much has been written and said about it that I probably couldn't add anything new. But second, and more important, the question of numerical growth seems to me to be just a side issue—albeit an important one—of church development. It is not the strategic goal, but one of many natural consequences of a church's health to experience growth. The concentration on numerical growth goals overshadows the fact that, at the heart of the debate there are far more fundamental issues concerning our basic theological understanding, and in the last analysis, even our picture of God. Decisions in this area—they may be reflected or not—shape our approach to church growth, and not the methodological question of whether or not we have numerical growth goals.

In this book, I try to link church development with some of the *loci classici* of the systematic theological discussion.³ What is its relevance in relation to doctrine, ethics, the understanding of Scripture? What is the effect of the underlying paradigm on the discussion about baptism and communion, on church traditions, on the question of church planting and ecumenism? What concept of spiritual gifts is the consequence of this approach, on what understanding of conversion is it based, and what is the outcome of this paradigm when related to social and political questions? Finally, are the movements that put “church growth” or “church development” on their agenda restricted to a particular school of theological thinking, or do they present a method which is theologically neutral? Is this “school of theology” (or “method”) orthodox?

All of these questions are fundamentally theological ones which require a theological answer. This is a challenge which the church growth movement—in the estimation of its critics and some of its leading proponents—has not faced up to sufficiently.⁴

- 2 The most thorough discussion of this subject I know of is still the dissertation by the Reformed theologian Charles van Engen, “The Growth of the True Church. An Analysis of the Ecclesiology of Church Growth Theory” (*Engen: 1981*). Here, the concept of growth is related to the classical *notae* of the true church. This book, however, is a typical example of the way the numerical approach is seen as the essence of the church growth movement.
- 3 This approach means that I deliberately use the technical terminology that has become customary in the theological debate. However, as I hope that this book will not only be read by theologians, I have endeavored to use the technical terms in such a way that their meaning becomes largely clear from the context.
- 4 For example, C. Peter Wagner: “It should be admitted that it (i.e., church growth theory) has not yet been wrapped in a recognizable theological package . . . The theory itself must be translated into ‘theologese.’ No one has yet done this because few missionaries are made in the image of the stereotyped theologian” (*Wagner: 1971*, p. 37). Compare also Michael Herbst: “The church growth movement hopes to enable as many denominational positions as possible to identify themselves with its basic ideas, so it does without precise dogmatic definitions. That the dogmatic question cannot be left out permanently is bound to be clear to everyone involved in church growth . . . The church growth movement cannot permanently be spared a controlled doctrinal reflection on these questions” (*Herbst: 1987*, p. 265).

The Need for Boundaries

In the past, the church growth movement has been relatively strong in the area of building bridges, in its famed “both-and” approach—and I see this as its divine purpose. When there have been struggles between “evangelicals” and “charismatics” or between proponents of “church renewal” and advocates of “church planting,” it has refused to take sides. It has tried to expose the theological and strategical futility of an “either-or” approach. It would have nothing to do with the divisions, segregations, and accusations of heresy that are common in so many Christian circles—and I thank God for that!

But at the same time, this strength is related to a major weakness. Where is the boundary for the “both-and” approach? I believe that advocates of church growth have not spoken out clearly enough at this point. It would be easy to (mis)understand them as proposing the unspoken maxim, “As long as a church is growing, we won’t ask too many questions about its theology.” In other words, the church growth movement may be a world champion in bridge building, but when it comes to setting out the standards for necessary, theologically justified boundaries, there is a lot of work still to do.

I am convinced that we do not so much need to tackle the assertive and often superficial anti-church-growth slogans of our time; the real task is to identify the far more subtle presuppositions. These are particularly devastating in their effect because they are accepted without question by the majority of Christians. The problem is that these presuppositions—in contrast to the slogans themselves—can be recognized only after considerable analytical effort.

The Theological Background of Natural Church Development

This book does not focus on practical issues, yet it has a practical intent. It aims to present the theological background of what we have chosen to call *Natural Church Development*.⁵ The practical books based on this approach are consciously kept free from theological arguments (in the narrow sense of the word). I considered it to be more appropriate to present the paradigm at the root of natural church development *in context*, rather than working with isolated theological statements whose motives may be difficult to comprehend, or trying to give an impression of “biblical correctness” by quoting a number of fairly random Bible verses.

5 Explained in more detail in “Natural Church Development” (Schwarz: 1996) and “Implementation Guide to Natural Church Development” (Schwarz/Schalk: 1998).

The work presented here follows on from the book “*Theologie des Gemeindeaufbaus*” (*Theology of Church Development*), first published in 1984, which was my initial attempt at a theological discussion of the church growth approach.⁶ After publication, this book acquired a number of friends and a host of critics. The most important critical comments were collected in the book, “*Diskussion zur Theologie des Gemeindeaufbaus*” (*Discussion of the Theology of Church Development*).⁷

I have learned a lot from the criticism voiced over the last few years. I hope this new general survey of the subject will overcome some of the misunderstandings that have accumulated, and even in those areas where the reader remains somewhat skeptical towards natural church development, at least he or she will understand better the background of what we present in our practical tools.

On the following pages, the “I” form is used fairly liberally. This is not usual in theological books, but I feel it appropriate because of the nature of the subject. When I speak about natural church development, I do not wish to pretend that I am able to present a sort of “objective” theology—with gloves, so to speak, so that no fingerprints can be seen. On the contrary! I wish the reader to sense that I am deliberately and consciously presenting theology as it inevitably must be: However impersonal and abstract the language it is clothed in, however consistently the authors take refuge in the passive verb form and use pronouns like “one” and “we,” theology always remains the attempt of one finite individual human being to communicate with the reader.

A New Reformation?

This book speaks about nothing less than a reformation. Some critics suggested that this term sounds rather lofty. That may be true. But I am convinced—as I hope the following pages will make plain—that we will make no significant progress in our churches without changes as radical as those of the Reformation.

When I use the term “reformation principle” on the following pages, I want to express my conviction that our task today is not to delete 2,000 years of church history and create something completely new. We would do well to identify ourselves with the great reformation movements that have had a lasting effect on the history of Christianity. Anyone who longs for a reformation of the church today—and any fundamental change of church structures or theology is, after all, a form of reformation—has every reason to be humble and learn from their “fathers in the faith.”

6 *Schwarz/Schwarz*: 1987.

7 *Weth*: 1986. The book includes critical contributions by Falk Becker, Ako Haarbeck, Michael Herbst, Eberhard Kochs, Christian Möller, Manfred Seitz, Reiner Strunk, Rudolf Weth, and others.

What we need today—and what I understand by natural church development—is nothing less than the *application* of the principles of the Reformation to the present situation.

If we refuse to tackle this task, we spurn one of the central principles of the Reformation, that the church must constantly go on in reforming itself (*ecclesia semper reformanda*). Cultivating a “Reformation heritage” is definitely not the same as applying the reformation principle in practice!

I believe, however, that the ideas involved in the phrase “reformation principle” will remain nothing more than a nice theory unless there is a radical paradigm shift in church and theology. The practical tools of natural church development will not help us until our thought patterns are in line with the theological paradigm which is in the background of any reformation movement.

Will we really experience something like a new reformation in our days? Yes, in many churches around the globe there are signs that this is far more than a vague hope.

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Please note that this PDF export leaves out pages 13-150 and continues with page 151. The chapter presented next might be a bit difficult to understand out of the context of the text and diagrams presented on the first 150 pages of the book.

2

Between Supra-Historical and Anti-Historical Tendencies: The Conflict About Tradition and Change

The hallmarks of historicity—transformation and continuity—are characteristics of the church as well. In order to express this fact, I place the terms *change* and *tradition* next to each other in figure 14,¹ where change belongs to the dynamic pole (church as an organism), and tradition to the static pole (church as an organization). The church as an organism will always produce traditions and (hopefully) learn from them. The criterion for this learning process, however, is how useful these traditions are for church development.

It seems to me that the Reformers aimed to express this relationship between tradition and change in the formula *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*.² “the church of the Reformation must constantly reform itself.” However, like so many slogans of the Reformation, the principle of the *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* has only halfheartedly been put into practice by most Protestant churches. The Lutheran and Reformed branches of Protestantism very soon arrived at a state of Protestant traditionalism which made a consistent application of this principle almost impossible.

In this area we can study the disastrous consequences of the unhistorical concept of God described in part 1,³ which influenced Christian theology in the process of Hellenization. It almost inevitably leads to an unhistorical concept of the church, which can express itself either in a *supra-historical* tendency (characteristic of the traditionalism of the institutionalistic misconception) or in an *anti-historical* tendency (as can be found within the spiritualistic paradigm which tends towards ecclesiological docetism).

1 P. 137.

2 The Reformers in no way rejected tradition; rather, they subjected it (*subicienda*) to the authority of Scripture.

3 P. 53f.

Danger to the Right: Traditionalism

Traditionalists believe that, by passing on traditions of experiences made in the past, the church as an organism can be secured. But they find that the physical law that unused energy crystallizes even applies to the realities of church life. When traditions are not subjected to the criterion of continual actualization and the need to demonstrate their functionality in each new situation, they become fossilized.

The institutionalistic misconception understands traditions technocratically. They are transported from one generation to the next, and traditionalists believe that formalistic adherence to every detail assures faithfulness to the cause. The interesting point is that many traditions were usually, in their original form, highly functional. This functionality has only been lost because the traditions have been handed down without changes into a different time or context. But traditionalists are convinced that functionality is, almost like a substance, automatically included in the ancient forms or formulas they use—an expression of their magical thought structure.

Otto Seeck describes this mechanism in his *Development of Christianity* as follows: “What became established for practical reasons first became a church custom, then a holy law, and soon nobody remembered that it had ever been differently. It is therefore possible to have the pious Christian conviction that Christ and his apostles founded the church just as we now see it before us, for no changes were carried out deliberately, they happened just by force of circumstances. Thus it is that forms of church administration could become a truth of faith that is valid, like the doctrine of Christ, for all eternity.”⁴

Perhaps the mechanism that lies behind traditionalism can best be clarified by a few practical illustrations rather than by abstract words, although the following examples may seem a little trite:

- It is said of Arturo Toscanini that he had such bad eyes that he could not read the notation on his conductor’s rostrum. He therefore had to learn the whole score by heart so that he could conduct without using a written score. His successors kept to the same style of conducting in the conviction that a great conductor *must* work without written notation.⁵
- Originally, priests of the Roman Catholic Church wore their normal everyday clothes even when they officiated in a church service. What was later made mandatory as “church robes” for all priests was, in fact, none other than the normal secular fashion of antiquity. In the church, this fashion was retained for traditionalistic reasons, even after it had been changed everywhere else.⁶

4 Seeck: 1921, p. 376f.

5 Cf. *Younghusband*: 1991, p. 199.

6 Cf. *Chadwick*: 1972, p. 189.

- Martin Luther's Bible translation was such a success largely because he "looked the people in the mouth" and managed to put biblical texts in the everyday language of his time. However, in many traditionalistic churches we find that this language of the 16th century, which nobody speaks any longer, is not only still used, but is sometimes even regarded as particularly "spiritual."

We could give many more illustrations. These examples enable us to determine exactly the point at which *traditional* behavior crosses the line and becomes *traditionalistic*. The mere fact that Toscanini's successors felt they had to conduct without a score is not in itself traditionalism, nor is the fact that clothes that were originally secular are still used in the church when they are no longer used by anyone else, nor the fact that some Christians can only express spiritual experience in antiquated language. All these phenomena are anachronisms, to be sure, but we can smile at them.

But the smile will disappear as soon as these patterns change into a full-blooded traditionalism. This is the point when the anachronistic behavior that has become established is implicitly or explicitly made into a standard for all, so that every good conductor from now on *must* work without a score, every priest *must* wear the fashion of Roman antiquity, certain antiquated linguistic forms *must* be used if the speaker wants his or her words to be accepted as spiritual. The degree of traditionalism becomes the criterion by which the truth is judged, the anachronism becomes canonical. This is the point at which the content that the traditionalist wishes to preserve is, in reality, betrayed. That is the decisive theological criticism we have to raise towards this way of thinking.

Perhaps the magical character of traditionalism can be seen more drastically than anywhere else in the area of linguistic usage. Some churches deliberately use a language in their ritual that has long fallen into disuse. For example, the liturgy of the Coptic church of Egypt uses the old Egyptian language, and it is interesting that the same structure is found in almost all religions (in the Brahmanic rituals of India, for example, the extinct Sanskrit language is used, and so forth). But even churches that celebrate their services in the mother tongue of the participants tend to make conscious use of archaic language in Christian rituals. As was pointed out above, that in itself is not traditionalistic—for a traditionally minded target group (or for people interested in linguistic history) it may even be decidedly functional. The institutionalistic paradigm is, however, in action if the traditional sound of the words is held to be important for the efficacy of the ritual—and where the archaic form is preserved even with people who find it estranging rather than helpful.

The fact that traditional language can quickly assume a divisive instead of a mediating function can be seen in the language of many liturgies and prayer books. The style being used there seems fairly strange when compared with the way children speak to their fathers, but for

many Christians it is such “sanctified” language that they use the same antiquated words in their own prayer life.

Antiquated linguistic forms are then identified with the message itself, so that Martin Walser, one of the great German poets of this century, could describe God as a “magical and quaint authority figure” whose “contorted use of language” we only accept because “God is a thing of the past.”⁷ With regard to such a language and the underlying traditionalistic thinking, Otto Weber’s criticism is right: “Where people think or (more often feel) like this, a doctrinal decision has, in fact, already been taken. The mystery of the word of God has been transformed into the tangible mystery of incomprehensible language.”⁸

Perhaps these examples may still seem relatively harmless. Why not let people pray in antiquated language if they wish? It won’t stop God from hearing their prayers! The disastrous consequences of traditionalism become apparent, however, as soon as it is extended to cover the structures of church life. Thus the very demands that are made in the name of Christian tradition can actually hinder the development of the church today.

This even applies, we must note, if these structures are based fundamentalistically on the Bible, as was implied in the chapter on our understanding of Scripture.⁹ That approach misuses the New Testament in a legalistic way, thus often achieving the exact opposite of what the New Testament authors intended.¹⁰ Walter Kreck rightly comments: “An ecclesiology can only be properly biblical if, instead of making a particular New Testament form into a normative standard, it comes back to the message of the New Testament in each new situation to ask afresh what is meant. This includes the possibility of disassociating ourselves from certain behaviors of the New Testament church in the same way that it had to relinquish stubborn adherence to Old Testament and Jewish laws and forms so that it would not become just a fossilized Jewish sect.”¹¹

Traditionalists point out, often with great emotion, that revelation is “historical.” They are firmly convinced that history is on their side, justifying their point of view. But they don’t notice that traditionalism is

7 Walser: 1964, p. 347.

8 Weber: 1964, p. 36.

9 Cf. p. 122.

10 Cf. the classical sentence by Eduard Schweizer: “The New Testament church structure is non-existent. Even in New Testament times, church forms were extremely varied” (Schweizer: 1959, p. 7). Michael Herbst rightly comments on this statement of Schweizer: “If, then, the New Testament contains a number of very different statements about the form of the Christian church, if we must even reckon with development and change within the New Testament books (e.g., in Paul, or in Acts after the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15), then we finally become aware of the historical dimension of the way God speaks and realize that it is not a question of mere legalistic copying of New Testament statements about the church and church development” (Herbst: 1987, p. 75).

11 Kreck: 1981, p. 16f.

just as unhistorical as the docetist tendencies of their spiritualistic opponents. Whereas the spiritualist regards the present tense as an absolute, the traditionalist absolutizes the present perfect (or even the past perfect). But a historical understanding of the works of God requires both, the present and the past. And it also involves the third temporal dimension, the future, as the church growth movement rightly emphasizes.

We can only claim to think historically if we combine all three dimensions. Traditionalism, however, is the attempt to “steamroller” the present and the future with the structures of the past. I find it rather difficult to understand why such an approach is so often described as “historical thinking” in theological discussion.

Danger to the Left: Docetism

In our description of the spiritualistic paradigm, we saw that spiritualists do not necessarily advocate a docetist Christology, such as was typical of the theology of Marcion or other thought systems influenced by Gnosticism in the early days of the church. But even where spiritualists are orthodox in their Christology and assent to the incarnation, rejecting the theory that Christ only appeared to have a physical body (*appearance = dokesis*), their docetist tendencies come to the surface in the area of ecclesiology. Just as for a docetist Christology the humanity of Christ is secondary, irrelevant and, in the final analysis, unreal, for a docetist ecclesiology the same applies to the church, the body of Christ.

Spiritualists demand a direct relationship to God that is unhampered by anything historical. They regard every connection with things past (or external) as aspects that are incomplete, or even dangerous, and therefore something that must be overcome. Thus it is not surprising that they find it difficult to relate to Christian traditions in a constructive, functional way. Behind all traditions they see—understandably, given their thought paradigms—the pathological condition of traditionalism, an externalizing of the faith.

The best illustration of this docetist, anti-traditional tendency is probably the phenomenon of “image breaking” (*iconoclasm*), which occurred in different phases of Christianity, especially in the Byzantine controversy over images in the 8th century and again, characteristically, in the age of the Reformation. The image breaking *iconoclasts* saw the veneration of images as idolatry, as a worship of material things which took the place of God.

The iconoclasts were undoubtedly right in rejecting images that had, in the mind of those who venerated them, taken the function of idols—this substantial superstition was widespread, and is still widespread today. But they went much too far when they suspected idolatry in *every* image, and even in every material, external form. It was a logical conclusion that

many of them banned not only images, but also music and other art forms from worship services. “Banish organs, trumpets, and flutes to the theater,” demanded the same Karlstadt who was the initiator of the breaking of altars and the images of saints in 16th century Wittenberg.¹²

The iconoclasts, in their struggle for the “purity” of the gospel, showed an unparalleled destructiveness. They not only broke and burned the images of Mary and the angels, they also destroyed artistically designed church windows, defiled the graves of Christians who were regarded as “saints,” and plundered monasteries. Luther finally found it necessary to oppose these people who claimed to follow him, and to exhort them to moderation.

Iconoclasm can be regarded as a symbol of the way docetists treat traditions. They use hammers and hatchets to destroy all that is traditional—in the name of the so-called “purity” of the gospel, but from a standpoint that, on closer examination, shows distinct signs of a spiritualistically colored anti-material understanding of the Spirit. It is true that the iconoclasts were justified in many cases, in that they destroyed things that really hindered faith, fellowship, and service. But their choice of means and their lack of discernment in what they destroyed are the points at which they are to be criticized.

Their destructive fanaticism, which often went out of control, could easily destroy things that are essential as aids to faith. The concept of faith that is left at the end of their spiritualistic struggle against false guarantees is stripped of all bodily form, and it is no use for church development. The influence of Puritanism, which goes in the same direction and has molded large sections of Protestantism, is one of the most common obstacles to church development. Everything that can help people to find faith (forms of evangelism that reach people where they are, a good atmosphere, need-oriented ministry, and so forth), and everything that can make life in the church more beautiful (architecture, music, colors, and so forth) is suspected by Puritanical Christians of corrupting the faith.

Influences of this kind are apparent in different areas of Protestantism today—for example even where the vivid, graphical language of the Bible is rejected in favor of abstract philosophical terminology. This abstraction is carried out in the name of the same “purer spirituality” that motivated the iconoclasts, with their hammers and hatchets. Karl Barth is right in his comment on Rudolf Bultmann’s program of “demythologization,” when he says that Bultmann’s New Testament, when freed from (alleged or real) myths, exuded a “strong odor of docetism.”¹³ This attraction to theological abstraction is no less than an intellectual form of iconoclasm—understandable in its motivation, but self-destructive in its effects.

12 Cf. *Bainton: 1983*, p. 210.

13 *Barth: 1952*, p. 34.

The Bipolar Approach

The best way of avoiding the twin dangers of traditionalism and ecclesiological docetism is to regard traditions from a functional point of view, as with all other institutional elements. Traditions in themselves are neither positive (as the traditionalist thinks) nor negative (as the docetist believes)—they are neutral. Here, again, the real question is what we do with them.

This approach makes any form of traditionalistic tyranny impossible. Many churches identify the historical development so strongly with the truth itself that any new people who come along have no choice—they must become traditionalists before they can become Christians. If they dislike certain traditional forms, these churches don't regard this as what it is—a different aesthetic taste—but rather see it as a "revolt" against the "faith handed down from the fathers." New people are expected to spend time getting accustomed to these strange structures and formulas until they can see them as positive. What was once an aid to faith has now become a hindrance, and there is an expectation that all newcomers should go back mentally and emotionally into the past until they find these traditions helpful—a procedure that actually can work, though with difficulty. This mental re-programming into a traditionalistic frame of mind is then, to make things even worse, confused with "maturity" and "growth in the faith."

A functional approach to traditions is not concerned with decorating the graves of the prophets, church fathers, and Reformers; rather, it is concerned to serve those who live today. In this quest, however, the experiences of the prophets, church fathers, and Reformers can be a great help. If we adapt a famous sentence coined by Friedrich Nietzsche, we could say: "We will only serve tradition insofar as it serves the development of the church." This functional approach is not directed against traditions; rather, it attempts to put into practice their real intention, and in this way—to use a common but ambiguous term—to "honor" them.¹⁴

First, a functional understanding of tradition assumes that we can learn an enormous amount from the experience of our spiritual mothers and fathers. We don't need to invent the wheel over again in every generation. Church history gives us a wide range of helpful stimuli that are useful for church development, and we accept them gratefully.

Second, this willingness to learn from history includes a willingness to learn from our ancestors how *not* to do things. Just as we don't need to re-invent the wheel, we also don't need to repeat the mistakes that our predecessors—sometimes quite persistently—made in the past. I do not

14 This term is ambiguous because it could imply a meaning of "honor" which is only rightly given to God.

“honor” Luther by repeating his mistakes in my generation, nor will I feel “honored” if my children take over all of my faults.

Third, it is important for every church that it develops specific habits, and thus “new traditions.” It is in the nature of habits and rituals that we don’t need to think through each step separately when we are using them. The whole procedure is more or less automatic, which can greatly simplify our lives, including the life of the church. New habits are established by repetitions—and here the benefits and dangers lie close together. We can demonstrate in many churches that frequent repetition (e.g. in liturgical formulas) does not so much deepen faith as immunize against it. When we have heard the same formulation often enough, we become so accustomed to it that we don’t take it seriously any more.

Fourth, a functional understanding of traditions cannot ignore the fact that there are traditions that must be broken. Whenever traditions have the effect of hindering rather than stimulating faith, we can speak of traditionalism. But if we do not wish to fall into the error of the iconoclasts, we must consider two things. First, what one person sees as hindering can be helpful for another person. We must beware of making our own feelings the judge of all things. Second, even traditions that are misused in a clearly magical way can be redirected in a functional way. It is possible to reinterpret traditions and to make them helpful for the gospel, rather than reaching for the hammer and smashing them.

Fifth, this understanding of the relationship between tradition and change includes the aim of encouraging the church to dare to experiment more. There are experiences, both positive and negative, that cannot be passed on by tradition—we must go through them ourselves. The widespread resistance to experiments in Christianity (which does not only stem from traditionalism) is one of the greatest obstacles to finding new ways. Whereas in business it is quite normal that for every successful attempt there are ten failures (which is the only way to achieve the one successful attempt!),¹⁵ in many Christian circles there is an assumption that mistakes must be avoided at all costs. No wonder Christian churches produce so little that is creative and innovative.

To repeat the main point briefly: institutions can and should be passed on. The church as an organism, however, cannot be passed on in

15 Cf. for example the comments on this subject by the management experts Tom Peters and Robert Waterman. In their classic bestseller *In Search of Excellence* the authors tell of a company that manufactures refrigerators and endeavors to encourage its researchers to be “willing to learn and take risks.” “To this end, it was defined precisely what may be regarded as a ‘total failure,’ and on each such occasion, a salute was fired. The concept of the total failure is based on the simple insight that every piece of research and development involves risks, that the only chance of success lies in making enough attempts, and that it should therefore be the paramount goal of the management to encourage as many attempts as possible, and that a failure that you can learn something from is a cause to celebrate” (Peters/Waterman: 1984, p. 95f).

the same way. It must become a reality in each new generation, the *factum esse* must again and again become a *fieri*. This constant actualization is a work of the Holy Spirit. If we make an effort to preserve structures and create new ones that fulfill this purpose (God's purpose!), then we are part of a process that we have elsewhere called "pneumatic functionality."¹⁶

Practical Illustration: The Quality Characteristic "Functional Structures"

The question of tradition and change has a close affinity to the quality characteristic that we describe with the term "functional structures."¹⁷ This quality characteristic signifies that it is not important how many or how few structures a church has, or whether its structures are old or new, but the criterion is how useful they are in a specific situation. I have frequently emphasized that this criterion must not be regarded as merely pragmatic, but rather that it is the only possible way to justify structures *theologically*.¹⁸

This quality characteristic should not be thought of as more important than the other seven—all eight must be present if a church is to grow in quality and quantity—but it does play a key role in natural church development. This is due to the fact that the decisive biotic principle of "interdependence"¹⁹ is expressed particularly in the structures of a church.

It is interesting that this element is the most controversial of the eight quality characteristics. I assign that to the probability that advocates of both the spiritualistic and the institutionalistic paradigms find it much more difficult to open themselves to the implications of this element than to the other seven. Whereas the mere word "structures" sounds like an unspiritual foreign term to spiritualists, traditionalists just cannot fit the concept of "functionality" into their thought paradigm.

What, then, are functional structures? It is in the nature of the historical approach proposed here that we cannot give an answer to that question that has a timeless validity. Just as there is not *the* New Testament church structure, there is not *the* functional structure for churches today. What is right in one church may be wrong in another. Which structures are most appropriate in which situation depends on the philosophy of ministry, the mentality of the people, the devotional style, the rules of the denomination, and countless other factors.

In our institute we have collected numerous examples of church structures that are very different from each other, but that fulfill their

16 Cf. p. 71.

17 For a more extensive treatment, see Schwarz/Schalk: 1998, pp. 74-85; Schwarz: 1987, pp. 162-190.

18 Cf. also the comments on the relevance of the structural question on p. 94f.

19 For a more extensive treatment, see pp. 224ff and 244.

purpose in their situation, and are therefore appropriate and functional. However, if we compare these structures, they do have some—evidently significant—elements in common.

First of all, all structural efforts are directed towards clearly formulated church guidelines (“philosophy of ministry”). Second, all “successful” structures concentrate on the specific focus as defined in the philosophy of ministry, which includes the willingness to eliminate all that is not useful. Third, the structures of growing churches are almost entirely multiplication structures, that is, they are not geared to additive growth (which at some point comes up against natural limits), but rather on the ongoing multiplication of the work. To make this multiplication possible, appropriate substructures are created, which have a certain degree of autonomy and are therefore self-sustaining.