

# BUREAUCRACHURCH

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Sociologists recognize that as groups increase in size, they become ever more complex, taking on a hierarchical structure so as to enhance control of the direction of the group. Positions become formalized, rules and procedures are spelled out in greater and greater detail, and relationships between individuals in the group now become more and more impersonal. The term given by sociologists to such groups is *bureaucracy*. Bureaucracies are highly complex organizations that are designed to accomplish some sort of goal in the most efficient way possible. The hallmark of the bureaucracy and the god it serves is *efficiency*. Walmart can sell goods and McDonalds can sell hamburgers so cheaply because they have achieved a level of efficiency beyond their competition. Anyone who frequents Walmart stores in different locations will quickly learn, for example, that they are all laid out almost identically. With the exception of a few items of local or regional taste or interest, all Walmart stores stock identical items on these uniformly patterned shelves. I'm told that even the heating and air conditioning is centrally controlled by headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas. Virtually nothing is left to the discretion of individual managers or workers. The result is an unprecedented level of efficiency which allows Walmart to sell at "guaranteed lowest prices."

It might be enlightening to examine the classic statement on the nature of bureaucracy formulated more than a century ago by the German sociologist Max Weber. On the basis of scores of bureaucratic organizations he examined in Europe and Asia, Weber identified six characteristic features of bureaucracies:

1. *A clear-cut division of labor.* There are specialized tasks assigned to each position in a bureaucracy. Individuals filling these positions are responsible for, and become adept at a narrow range of activities.
2. *Pyramid-shaped, hierarchal relations.* Relationships in a bureaucracy are arranged in a hierarchical manner, such that many people occupy lower positions, and are responsible to those immediately above them. Information is transmitted "up" the bureaucratic pyramid; directives are in turn transmitted down.
3. *Abstract, impersonal rules and procedures.* Rules and procedures are established that apply universally to occupants of all positions; i.e., there is not one set of rules for the foreman and another set for the line worker. All employees work from the same procedural manual.
4. *Impersonal Relationships.* Relationships within a bureaucracy are on a strictly business and professional basis, all with a focus to accomplish the task or purpose of the organization.
5. *Employment based on technical, impersonal qualifications.* All personnel decisions, including hiring, promotion, demotion and termination are based upon universal, impersonal standards.
6. *Bureaucratic organization designed for greatest efficiency.* All of the principles above are designed to produce a product or service with the greatest efficiency possible.

While Weber observed these features as what he called an “ideal type” of bureaucracy (meaning simply that these features can be observed in most bureaucracies), he warned of the restrictive and even prison-like implications of this form of organization. Individual freedom and creativity are stifled under these conditions. This restriction is, he says, inherent in the nature of bureaucratic organization.

The church in the west and in many other parts of the world has adopted this bureaucratic model of organization. Let us examine just briefly each of these elements of Weber’s ideal type as they apply to most churches we know:

- ***A Clear Cut Division of Labor.*** The most obvious division of labor that we see in church systems is the great division between clergy and laity. Much has been written about this as the essence of the Nicolaitan condition in the church at Pergamos addressed by Christ in the book of Revelation. This separation between clergy and laity attained a level of bureaucratic rigidity with the making of Christianity a state religion under the rule of Constantine in the fourth century. The division of labor is not restricted to the division between clergy and laity, however. *Among* the clergy class, there is a further division of labor that is highly refined. There are associate pastors, ministers of music, ministers of administration, youth pastors, and visitation pastors. At the denominational level there are general superintendents, district superintendents, bishops and any number of other offices filled by professional clergy. Among the laity there are committee chairs, Sunday school teachers, pianists and organists, deacons and elders. All of these positions have been highly defined with very specific duties assigned to each—all in an effort to achieve stated goals in the most efficient way possible.
- ***Pyramid-Shaped, Hierarchal Relations.*** A senior pastor occupies the single position at the top of the pyramid as the CEO of the church. Depending on the nature of the governance of that body, he may be answerable to a bishop, a presbytery, or in congregational style governments, his job is at the discretion of the ruling elders of the local assembly. Nevertheless, *functionally*, these ruling elders serve under the senior pastor, along with other associate pastors in a larger church. Committees, which are usually chaired by laity, serve under the pastors or the ruling elders. As in any corporate bureaucracy, information (regarding all manner of church matters, including attendance, giving, outreach activities, worship issues, etc.) are transmitted *up* the hierarchal pyramid, and directives are then transmitted *down* to be implemented by associate pastors, committees, Sunday school teachers, or whomever activities the directive may affect.
- ***Abstract, Impersonal Rules and Procedures.*** Modern bureaucratic churches function with a highly developed system of rules and procedures. Every denomination has its own “constitution,” by whatever name it goes. There is almost always an accompanying set of “by-laws” designed to implement the constitution. There are, furthermore, designated bodies at both the congregational and denominational levels to enforce these rules. While there may be some discretion in the enforcement of rules and procedures, the ultimate arbiter is the rule book and those designated to interpret and enforce it. Procedures are finely honed, with a set procedure established even for

conducting worship as described below. The bureaucratization of the church has also resulted in the formalization of doctrinal content. Creedal and doctrinal statements become ever more important as there is an attempt to produce a uniformity of belief among parishioners.

- **Employment Based on Technical, Impersonal Qualifications.** This feature applies most obviously to the pastor and other paid staff positions. Just what these qualifications are will vary from denomination to denomination and even from congregation to congregation. Some more established congregations in mainline denominations look for candidates with a substantial educational background. Less formal congregations have other criteria. Pentecostal bodies, for example, are typically looking for someone who has graduated from one of their Bible schools or seminaries. Usually churches in this tradition are looking for a pastor who can provide evidence of having been baptized in the Holy Spirit. Almost all denominations and local congregations are looking for potential pastors who can pass a doctrinal litmus test. In addition to the hiring of pastors, there are similar types of qualifications that must be met by incumbents of other positions, such as the board of deacons or elders, worship leaders, and even Sunday school teachers.
- **Bureaucratic Organization Designed for Greatest Efficiency.** All of these features are designed to insure the smooth operation of the church system, to minimize the conflicts, and to achieve the goals of the church in the most efficient way possible. Just what are these goals? There are, to be sure, many goals. More liberal churches typically focus on social outreach, and sometimes political agendas. Evangelistically-oriented churches have as a stated goal the sharing of a gospel message that is primarily focused on accepting Christ as a personal savior. Pentecostal churches strive to see people brought into a Pentecostal experience. These are all what I would call *penultimate* goals, at least at a practical level. Truly, the *ultimate* goal for most churches is to grow in size. They must grow in size in order to increase their budget, as a large budget is necessary in bureaucratic churches to pay salaries to the professional clergy as well as to pay for advertising, church functions, and, with whatever is left over after that, to pay for the implementation of the outreach and missions programs of the church. Increased size is also required to have the human resources necessary to carry out the stated (penultimate) goals of the church. It seems clear that modern church systems very closely reflect the bureaucratic principles of the most efficient corporations in our day, which is why I have termed it the *bureaucratchurch*. Even this brief observation of churches should make clear their bureaucratic nature with its allegiance to the god of efficiency. Even church meetings are honed to a degree of predictability that would make Walmart and McDonalds blush with envy. There is, of course, some variation across denominations and even congregations, but generally, it goes something like this:
  - Open the meeting with prayer at precisely 11 am
  - Announcements
  - A song set of 2 or 3 songs in what is termed “time of worship.”
  - Taking up the offering (usually with a choir singing or other background music)

- Possibly a time of receiving requests for prayer
- The sermon (this is central).
- A closing hymn, and depending on the type of church, possibly an altar call
- A closing prayer or charge to the congregation
- Dismiss promptly at 12 noon

The efficiency of this *bureaucrurchurch* is further enhanced by common hymn books (or more recently, powerpoint presentations) so that everyone can be sure to sing the proper words. Sermons, or at least the themes of sermons, in many of these organizations are taken from lectionaries so as to insure that all congregations within a given denomination are consistently preaching on the same topic. There is even a movement to develop ecumenical lectionaries to carefully control or at least guide the direction of the information that parishioners receive, much in the same way that McDonalds or Walmart insure uniformity across their product line.

A potential crisis may ensue if this corporate agenda is disrupted. The power of the bureaucracy is brought to bear on anyone (including the Holy Spirit) who might upset the protocol. Several years back, prior to my call out of organized Christianity, I was part of a small praise band in a small denominational church. God began to move in an early worship service that had been initiated especially to foster a more informal and “contemporary” atmosphere. The presence of the Holy Spirit became very heavy in direct response to the reading of a portion of scripture by a young man who was recovering from alcohol and drug addiction. I have learned that God uses the least among us when He wants to accomplish something significant in His kingdom. People began coming forward to the altar and weeping before the Lord. In the middle of the praise set, before the pastor had an opportunity to preach, members of the praise band were also finding their way down to the altar. The Holy Spirit was disrupting the agenda. Church leaders were not pleased, despite the fact that the day before they had called a gathering to pray for God to move that Sunday! The problem was that God did not move according to *their* personal or bureaucratic agenda. When called before the worship committee the next week, the only defense of the praise team was that we knew the Holy Spirit was moving, and we wanted to give Him room to move as *He* pleased. The chair of the worship committee, who had a reputation for being spiritually sensitive, squirmed at this, then looked at me and said, “In the future, do you think you could give the Spirit free reign between 8:00 and 8:20?” He was serious! This man was caught between a true desire to see God move and the demands of a bureaucratic system that required that “everything be done decently and in order.” The bondage that he was under because of these demands was palpably evident.

I know that many of you who read this have your own stories to tell. I am sure that there have been times when the Spirit of God was rising up in you to say something, to pray for someone, to reach out and touch someone in some way, but you felt inhibited because it would disrupt the meeting. I am not referring to those times when the Holy Spirit gives checks because it is not the right timing for a word. I am speaking of those instances in which you knew that the Spirit of the Lord was upon you to say a word or take an action. The inhibition that you feel at

this time is an anti-Christ spirit that is given free and unfettered reign in a bureaucratic church structure.

Jesus wants to take back His church. In a related article entitled *Ecclesia: Taking Back Our Identity* I made the point that the early disciples purposely chose the term “ecclesia” to describe themselves. In that day, the term *ecclesia* was commonly understood to refer to a political assembly called out for some particular task. The early followers of Christ chose this term because they purposely wanted to identify as citizens of an alternative Kingdom, with an alternative government—a government of the Spirit. They could have used the term *sunōgōgue* (from which we get our word synagogue) with all of the religious, and, frankly, bureaucratic trappings that this term had come to connote. They saw themselves, instead as “called out ones” to establish an alternative Kingdom under the Kingship and Lordship of Jesus. There would be no mistaking who was to be in control in their midst!

### **WHOSE CHURCH IS IT ANYWAY?**

My heart is beating for the body of Christ to function as Jesus intended. We have lost our way. We have lost our way because we have abandoned the Lordship of Christ. We call this monstrous bureaucracy that we have created, and the people in it, the body of Christ; but who is truly the head of this body? Just because we say He is in some creed does not make Christ the Head. He is only the Head if He *functions* as Head! He is functioning as Head only if He is truly in control through His Holy Spirit. If Christ is not in control, He is not Head and the assembly that claims to be gathering in His name is not His body. It is an assembly that belongs to a denomination, pastor or ruling set of elders.

Where is the evidence of Christ’s Headship in a *bureaucrchurch*?

Where is there even *room* for His Headship in the system of offices, positions, rules and liturgy that has been created here?

Even in so-called “spirit-filled” churches, the Headship of Christ is usurped by pastors and worship teams intent on a production worthy of attracting members and attendees. It is not that all pastors and worship leaders do not ever have a *desire* for the Holy Spirit to be in control. Many of them do, but they are stuck in an organizational system, and they don’t know how to break free from its slavish dictates. And so they desperately seek to develop a program that at least has the *appearance* of being Holy Spirit-led, but which must ultimately conform to the dictates of the bureaucratic system. It is a recipe for burnout, and many church leaders do just that.

This is why many have turned to house churches, believing that dismantling the bureaucracy will establish Christ’s headship. To the dismay of many, He is just as absent there as he was in the institutional church that they left. While I am convinced that bureaucratic church structure by its very nature inherently precludes the Headship of Jesus Christ in those assemblies—hence this brief essay—the *bureaucrchurch* is truly a symptom of a much larger problem: *the false head that must be decapitated*. This is why God must take those whom He has called, by way of our cross, to crucify our wills so our souls are subdued to the Lordship of Christ. Only when

we come together as His crucified ones, are we able to function with the mind of Christ under the Headship of Christ. This is an issue about which the Lord has been pressing Sarah and me in recent years. I anticipate that we will be writing much more on this in days to come.

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