



# SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

## MISSIOLOGY

MORTAR AND STONES: BIBLICAL  
PRINCIPLES FOR PLANTING AND  
BUILDING STRONG CHURCHES IN  
ANY CULTURE

DIETMAR W. SCHULZE

*Mortar and Stones:  
Biblical Principles for Planting and  
Building Strong Churches in any Culture*

*Dietmar W. Schulze  
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary  
Fort Worth, Texas  
dschulze@swbts.edu*

**1. Mortar**

Which mortar holds the living stones (1 Pet 2:5) of churches in different countries together? The answer to this question will help plant and build strong churches in challenging contexts. The ecclesiological question is a question for missions.

The first mortar that is described in the Bible was certainly not used to build a church, but the opposite. Genesis 11 describes the construction project of the Tower of Babylon. In verse 3 the mortar for the bricks is mentioned; it is *נחל* or, in English, asphalt/bitumen. This is very interesting at least in three ways. First: *λιθοι ζωντες* means “living stones,” not bricks. A stone is created; a brick is made. When God took dust he created man (Gen 2:7). When man takes dust he makes culture. The tower of Babylon was built of man-made bricks, a symbol for culture. Asphalt was the material which gave culture stability. Second: “Asphalt is one of the world’s oldest building materials.”<sup>1</sup> Third: It is assumed that asphalt or bitumen is based on dead organic substances.<sup>2</sup> Since Noah used pitch before the flood and the tower of Babylon was built with asphalt some time after the flood, it seems from the biblical perspective that the flood is not the only explanation for this substance. It is not the topic of this article to discuss

<sup>1</sup>Mike Sonnenberg, *Asphalt through the Ages*, Summer 2000, [http://www.asphaltinstitute.org/ai\\_pages/FAQs/PDFs/History/Asphalt\\_Thru\\_The\\_Ages\\_Summer\\_2000.pdf](http://www.asphaltinstitute.org/ai_pages/FAQs/PDFs/History/Asphalt_Thru_The_Ages_Summer_2000.pdf) (Accessed 15 February 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Single component polyurethane-modified bitumen compositions, US Patent Issued on October 3, 1989; <http://www.patentstorm.us/patents/4871792-description.html> (Accessed 15 February 2008).

young earth versus old earth theories. But it seems that both sides assume that asphalt was not created.<sup>3</sup>

To make the point: oil, coal and bitumen have something to do with dead forests and animals. The mortar of the tower of Babylon was the product of death. Death moreover is a consequence of sin.<sup>4</sup> This mortar was a product of the fallen world and was used to try to raise fallen humanity by itself (Gen 11:4) so that culture could triumph over the Creator. The Bible makes it clear that this attempt failed (Gen 11:8). Of course this text lends itself not to a ban of bitumen, but to the illustration of a principle.

The material was one thing but most important was the attitude of the builders. They wanted to worship themselves and refused to honor God (Gen 11:4)—this is evil (Rom 1:21). Asphalt or bitumen may be helpful to seal the church roof or build the parking lot in front of the church building. There is probably no church building around the world without any plastic—an oil product—inside. But such mortar is not able to connect the living stones in order to build strong churches.

The term “church” refers in this article not to a building, even if a building can be a symbol for the church (1 Cor 3:9–13). In the thirteenth century William Durand “found a lesson in the church’s mortar, composed of lime (fervent love), sand (earthly toil), and water (the Spirit, which unites the other two ingredients): ‘As stones of the wall would have no stability without mortar, so man cannot be set in the walls of the heavenly Jerusalem without love, which the Holy Spirit brings.’”<sup>5</sup>

The church is a living organism that the gates of Hades will not overcome (Matt 16:18). This organism is able to hear (Matt 18:17), knows fear (Acts 5:11), can pray (Acts 12:5), gathers together (Acts 15:30), can be strengthened in faith and grow in number (Acts 16:5), has a shepherd (Acts 20:28), has servants (Rom 16:1), meets in homes (Rom 16:5), has an inside and an outside (1 Cor 5:12). More characteristics can be added and

<sup>3</sup>A young earth explanation for oil, coal and bitumen is given by Schönknecht and Scherer with reference to Shevens’s model. Gerhard Schönknecht and Siegfried Scherer, “Too much coal for a young earth?” <http://www.answeringgenesis.org/tj/v11/i3/coal.asp> (Accessed 16 February 2008): “If, however, Scheven’s model of Carboniferous floating forests is applied, the following estimates of pre-Flood biomass result: Bituminous and sub-bituminous coals could have originated from the floating forests which might have covered 2% of the pre-Flood surface of the Earth.” This article was later criticized; <http://articlesuniverse.com/Article/The-Floating-Forest-Theory-Sinks/1043> (Accessed 16 February 2008). Today Scherer is supporting the old earth model; <http://www.siegfriedscherer.de> (Accessed 16 February 2008).

<sup>4</sup>“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 6:23). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the Holy Bible, New King James Version (NKJV).

<sup>5</sup>“Magnificent Medieval Cathedrals; The Bible in Stone,” <http://chi.gospelcom.net/GLIMPSEF/Glimpses/glimps117.shtml> (Accessed 19 February 2008).

found in various ecclesiological works but it should be sufficient to show that that church is a very dynamic organism, if it is a church according to the New Testament.

The living stones must somehow hold together and form a spiritual building. The question of this article is: What holds the living stones together? The unfinished project of the tower of Babylon reminds church planters and builders of two dangers: wrong material and wrong attitude. The church planter needs wisdom to find out which material he should use to build a church and which material he must not take. This can be difficult in an unfamiliar context when culture and worldview are not only different but in some ways opposite to biblical principles.<sup>6</sup> The church planter needs to be aware of proper worship as well. Who will be honored with this church: man, culture, or God?

## 2. The Church Connection

The New Testament explains the principle of mortar without, however, using the word. What does the church connection according to the New Testament look like?

So rid yourselves of all wickedness, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all slander. Like newborn infants, desire the unadulterated spiritual milk, so that you may grow by it in [your] salvation, since you have tasted that the Lord is good. Coming to Him, a living stone—rejected by men but chosen and valuable to God—you yourselves, as living stones, are being built into a spiritual house for a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet 2:1–5 HCSB).

This text is about the stability and strength of the church. The church has to get rid of that which is destroying its unity and stability and this is sin, described in verse one. It gets stability and strength not through black, sticky pitch but through unadulterated spiritual milk (v. 2). Since the house is spiritual (v. 5) the mortar is spiritual, too. Since the foundation, the cornerstone, was rejected (v. 7) the stones will face hostility in this world too (John 15:19).

The spiritual house of the church cannot be built with sin or the product of sin, that is, with worldly materials. This truth is the red flag when the cultural context is used to provide a connection in order to unite a church. Race, nationality, gender, caste, social status, preferences and so on cannot hold the spiritual stones together and build a house that is

<sup>6</sup>See 3.2 below..

stronger than the gates of Hades. The worldly context is determined to die. Some of these worldly characteristics will experience resurrection, but then it will be a spiritual version of it (1 Cor 15:50–57).

“Church” in the New Testament is described also as a body with different limbs (1 Cor 12:12–26; Rom 12:3–5; Eph 4:16; Col 2:19). The connection between the limbs is named in Ephesians 4:16 and Colossians 2:19 with the Greek word *συμβιβάζομενον*, “to hold together,” or “to instruct.” This word contains the Greek word for “walk” (*βαίνω*), so it can also be translated as “walking together.”<sup>7</sup> Church members hold together if they walk together. Here we see the topic of discipleship introduced. The opposite of walking together is disconnection or walking in different directions.

The church is a spiritual house, which is built with disciples of Jesus Christ. Since these disciples are still made of flesh and blood, which is part of this world, it is important to understand how this aspect is part of the church, too. The critical question is: Which worldly aspects can be integrated in the church and which aspects have to stay outside?

In the following section different worldly and spiritual connection factors will be identified and analyzed. To know and understand these factors will be helpful in building a strong church in any context.

### 3. Connection Components

Empirical techniques can observe and describe only what is referred as the “world”. A biblical understanding of the world after the Fall is that which is going to die (Isa 24; Rev 21:1). When talking about the church it is obvious that another aspect must be considered—eternal life (Rom 6:23). To describe the New Testament notion of church properly, it has to be described as in the world but not of the world (John 15:19). We are strangers in the world (1 Pet 2:11), walking on earth but dwelling in heaven (Eph 2:1–10).<sup>8</sup>

Through repentance and baptism a believer becomes part of the church (Acts 2:38). Baptism is dying to a dying world while participating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 6:4).<sup>9</sup> The identity of the believer is in Christ and in Him and through Him and under his Lordship he lives in the world.

<sup>7</sup>Gerhard Delling, “*συμβιβάζω*,” in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. 7, ed. Rudolf Kittel (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1964), 763–65.

<sup>8</sup>Michael Pocock, Gailyn van Rheenen, Douglas McConnell, *The Changing Face of World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 168.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article VII, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp> (Accessed 19 February 2008).

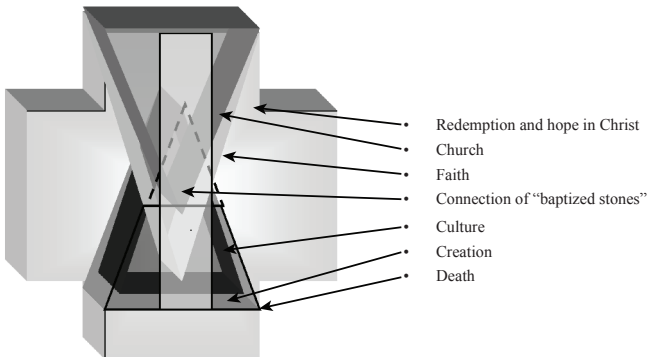
Unlike the New Testament, the history of the church is filled with examples of baptism without repentance. The application “baptism” to paganism describes the integration of non-Christian elements into the Christian church. For instance, “Gregory the Great advised Augustine of Canterbury to convert temples into churches and to substitute events on the Christian calendar in the place of their festivals.”<sup>10</sup> Things and places cannot repent but the people who are connected with them can. Since “no one puts new wine into old wineskins” (Matt 9:17 [HCSB]) the baptism of paganism must be questioned.

Especially for Baptists baptizing people without requiring personal repentance is a severe misunderstanding of Acts 2:38.<sup>11</sup> The baptism of Russia from the ninth and eleventh centuries, especially under Vladimir I in 988 AD should not provide the model for twenty-first century mission.<sup>12</sup>

Of course it is not easy to find out which parts of this world can be used in the church. Relabeling culture, including non-Christian religion, is simple but not sound theology.

Repenting before baptism, and ridding oneself of wickedness after it, is an essential part of the New Testament teaching of the church so that baptism is a reminder of separation from sin and of a new identity in Christ. What should such a cleansed connection of living stones or baptized stones look like?

The concept of church connection may be simplified with this illustration:<sup>13</sup>



<sup>10</sup>Scott Moreau, Gary Corwin, Gary McGee, *Introducing World Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 109

<sup>11</sup>See *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article VII.

<sup>12</sup>A History of the Russian church, <http://www.3saints.com/russchurchhistory.html#1> (Accessed 18 February 2008).

<sup>13</sup>This illustration and the following explanations are based on a thesis which was published in: Dietmar Schulze, “Baptisten,” in *Nordost Indien—Eine Mitgliederstudie, Baptismus-Studien 11* (Kassel: Oncken, 2006), 67–78.

This illustration contains two major spheres. The first sphere is all that stands under the paradigm of death, especially creation and the culture. This is the world after the Fall and under the paradigm of death. The crop can only grow if the seed died. This endangered creation is waiting. “For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.” (Rom 8:19). Culture has a variety of meanings but is limited to time and space. Culture is not eternal.

The second sphere extends beyond death. It is part of the new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:17; Rev 21:5) and is called faith and church. Creation and culture are threatened by death; nevertheless parts of the church and faith are threatened by death, too. Local churches may be forced to close and faith without works is dead (Jas 2:17). But in the end everything is under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He has conquered death (John 1:14; John 3:16; Phil 2:6–11; Col 1:15–20).

We will have to look closer at the different components of these two spheres in order to understand the connection of baptized stones.

### 3.1. Creation

The word “creation” refers to the Creator. “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.” (Col 1:16–17).

Creation is both the habitat and life itself. Creation is seed and earth. Creation is an expression of the divine design which brought order to the unshaped (Gen 1:2), but even the unshaped was created *ex nihilo*. Creation is chromosome as well as continent, quarks and quasars, water and wind, human being and animal, and tree and flower. Creation is coast and mainland, mountain range and marshland, nation group and family. Since the topic of creation and science is often discussed it must be sufficient to refer to two clear and short statements:

We affirm that Genesis 1–11 is factual, as is the rest of the book. We deny that the teachings of Genesis 1–11 are mythical and that scientific hypotheses about earth history or the origin of humanity may be invoked to overthrow what Scripture teaches about creation.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, Article XXII, [http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI\\_2.pdf](http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_2.pdf) (Accessed 21 February 2008).

Man is the special creation of God, made in His own image. He created them male and female as the crowning work of His creation.<sup>15</sup>

What is the application for the study of the connection of the living stones in the church? Creation is so diverse that every part is unique. This variety gives every individual part its individual purpose. Creation has a specific fingerprint. For instance, African Christians and German Christians have different ways to worship. The diversity of the creatures can be a challenge for a group but it reflects the creativity of the creator. We were not made with a cookie-cutter! A stonewall made out of stones of different sizes has more stability than a wall built with same-size bricks, if both walls were built without mortar. This principle of created diversity can be found in ecosystems. Monocultures are much more endangered. The church is the most diverse organization of human beings on earth with more people groups than any other organization. According to global research from the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention there are 11,578 people groups in the world. In February 2008 there were at least 8,238 (71%) people groups with an evangelical church.<sup>16</sup> Since every person is unique, every local church has diversity, even if all church members were siblings.

### 3.2. Culture

The word “culture” comes from the Latin word *colere*, which means “to cultivate.” It is the work of and with creation. Today this word has so many meanings that it has become a terminological Goliath. According to Princeton University there are seven major meanings of “culture.”<sup>17</sup>

1. Civilization; a particular society at a particular time and place.
2. The tastes in art and manners that are favored by a social group.
3. Acculturation; all the knowledge and values shared by a society.
4. Biological culture; the growing of microorganisms in a nutrient medium.
5. Polish, refinement, cultivation, finish; a highly developed state of perfection; having a flawless or impeccable quality.

<sup>15</sup>*Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article II.

<sup>16</sup><http://www.peoplegroups.org/Downloads/2008-02%20GSEC%20Country%20Analysis.pdf> (Accessed 21 February 2008).

<sup>17</sup><http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=culture> (Accessed 21 February, 2008).



6. The attitudes and behavior that are characteristic of a particular social group or organization.
7. The raising of plants or animals.

As we use it here, culture appears under a double aspect: On the one hand, it is the sum of human works; on the other hand, it is the human work itself. Culture has something to do with shaping, designing, arranging and constructing.<sup>18</sup> Culture is an anthropological term and it depends on the anthropology by which culture is explained. To understand one culture it is sometimes helpful to compare one culture with another. This cross-cultural comparison involves searching for similarities and differences. Cultures have factors in common that can be found everywhere. They have to meet the needs for food, give shelter and protection against forces of nature, and make use of technologies and economics. Cultures institutionalize male and female role behavior, building social groups like the family, meeting the need for reciprocity, and the balancing of social imbalances. Cultures have to find solutions for retaliation and justice. They display artistic expression through dance, poetry, music, and shapes. Religion can be found in every culture. Culture is often assumed to give answers as to how life really should be.<sup>19</sup> Since cultures find different solutions to these common issues a diversity of cultures can be found. In the age of globalization<sup>20</sup> we have a reduction of diversity through global economics, politics and value systems.

Since this article is about biblical principles for church planting the Bible must be examined in order to learn about culture. The word “culture” itself cannot be found in most English translations, only in a culturally “relevant” translation like the New Living Bible.<sup>21</sup> If we understand culture in the Latin meaning of *colere*, then, of course, the first biblical text is about dominion over animals (Gen 1:28) and plants (Gen 1:29). Many topics are related to this mandate but most important is good leadership. If culture is studied with this text the concept of leadership is the key to understanding it: Who is the leader? How is leading done? How is leading accepted?

<sup>18</sup>Cf. W.E. Mühlmann, *Kultur, Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3rd ed., vol. 4 (1960), col. 95.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup>A good introduction to globalization and its missiological implications can be found in Pocock et al., *The Changing Face of World Missions*, 21–44.

<sup>21</sup>Isa 13:19: “Babylon, the most glorious of kingdoms, the flower of Chaldean culture, will be devastated like Sodom and Gomorrah when God destroyed them” (NLT, 1996). Rom 1:14: “For I have a great sense of obligation to people in our culture and to people in other cultures, to the educated and uneducated alike” (NLT, 1996). Subsequent revisions of the NLT do not use the word “culture” in these places.

The interconnection between culture and leadership was analyzed by Edgar H. Schein. He defines culture as:

A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way you perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.<sup>22</sup>

After the Fall the Bible gives us two examples of dominion: Dominion over animals, which honored God, is represented in Abel. Dominion over plants, which did not honor God, is represented in Cain. Genesis 4 makes it clear that it is not about a certain part of culture, such that herding is better than farming, and it is not about certain methods of herding or doing agriculture. It is about worship and the relationship between creator and creation. What did Cain do wrong? Hebrews 11:4 gives the answer: "By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks." Honor and dishonor are determined by the presence or absence of faith.

The descendants of Cain "invented" other forms of culture. Genesis 4:19–21 describes them as polygamists, nomads, musicians, and craftsmen in bronze and iron. These new forms of culture brought new problems and demonstrated that culture is not neutral. If these descendants refused to honor God, like their ancestor Cain, then their culture was not pleasing to God. On the other hand, the people of Israel later adopted some of these cultural expressions to honor God (Jos 6:19; Ps 150).

The building of the Tower of Babylon describes culture in a negative way. And it introduces us to the relationship between culture and religion. The culture of the builders was supposed to serve as their religion. Because of this, believers have to be aware that culture may impact religion. And if this religion does not worship the God of the Bible, nor accept that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6), then such a culture cannot simply be adapted to the church.

If religion worships something other than the true God, it will be punished. Revelation 19 describes the worship of the Lamb and the worship of the beast and the eternal consequences of both. Therefore, culture does not simply face death and renewal from generation to generation. It faces eternal punishment if it does not worship Christ. Death and sin concern culture and religion equally.

<sup>22</sup>Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture & Leadership*, 1997, <http://www.tnellen.com/ed/tc/schein.html> (Accessed 25 February 2008).

Being embodied, culture is always part of the church until Jesus Christ's return. The main question for the correct use of culture in the church is the question of worship (Rom 12:1–2; 1 Tim 1:17): Does this or that cultural expression honor God? For instance, consider the cultural expression of leadership. If the leadership of a woman is accepted in a certain culture, the church cannot adapt this part of culture to the office of the pastor and the elder. Why? In the same letter in which Paul wrote about honoring God (1 Tim 1:17), he talked about the issue of female leadership in the church. "And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence" (1 Tim 2:12, HCSB). The church is honoring God when its leadership is according to God's word. It is not about Paul's personal opinion, but about the order which was installed by God: "For Adam was created first, then Eve" (v. 13).<sup>23</sup>

The church has great freedom to integrate culture and church, but there is a God-given limitation: "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify" (1 Cor 10:23). One of the mission strategies the apostle Paul used is described in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. It is obvious that Paul was aware of the different target groups, of cultural and religious settings so he adjusted his approach:

For although I am free from all people, I have made myself a slave to all, in order to win more people. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law to win those under the law. To those who are outside the law, like one outside the law—not being outside God's law, but under the law of Christ—to win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by all means save some. Now I do all this because of the gospel, that I may become a partner in its benefits (HCSB).

As Paul was under the law of Christ (v. 21) the church has to be under the law of Christ. This includes the way the church adapts culture. "Paul did not suggest that he lived as though there was no law by which he was compelled, but rather under the law in Christ."<sup>24</sup> To reach people in a specific cultural setting does not require that their worldview must

<sup>23</sup>*Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article VI. Cf. William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 1104.

<sup>24</sup>Paige Patterson, *The Troubled Triumphant Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1983), 150.

be shared. “Churches and seminaries have failed to adequately address the underlying worldviews of their members and students, often allowing competing ideas to coexist.”<sup>25</sup> To strengthen the church it will be necessary to address this issue and teach our church members a biblical worldview.

### 3.3. Death

Creation and thus culture are threatened by death. This threat leads to two different responses: “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Cor 7:10).

Death is everywhere on this earth. Even solar systems and galaxies are threatened (Rev 21:4).<sup>26</sup> Death was and is one of the constant factors which determine human life. There will be finite life as long there is death. Death is the end of a life long process that is perceived individually very differently in its duration and strength.<sup>27</sup> Some may ignore it as long as possible. The wise will realize it as soon as possible. “So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps 90:12). The threat of death does require a response by the living ones, and not only in a funeral celebration.

The subjective experience of the presence of death and dying varies in the course of the life of a human being. Certain life stages and situations intensify the consciousness that life will not always be the same. Such life stages are crises, confrontations with sorrow, and illness, as well as fear, adolescence, menopause, etc. These experiences refer to the restricted number of our days and loss of life, and they can lead to more intense quarrels with death in turn.

Presumably, every living being reacts against this threat to life. The human being responds through protection and defense mechanisms that are innate or learned. Eating, drinking, and sleeping, for instance, are important defense mechanisms. The longing for permanence is shown in habits and traditions as something reliable. The desire for descendants also expresses a hope for continuity of life. Finally, there is the search for eternity and the hope for redemption from the power of death. On the one hand, this is institutionalized in religions, and on the other, it is part of individual religiosity.

<sup>25</sup>Ronnie Fox, “The World Around Us,” in *Pursuing The Mission Of God In Church Planting* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Mission Board, 2007), 10.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Giles Sparrow, *The Stargazer’s Handbook, An Atlas Of The Night Sky* (London: Quercus, 2007), 154. “Nearby cannibal galaxy NGC 5128 is still clearly scarred by the struggle with its last victim—a dark gash across the centre of this elliptical ball of stars is all that remains of the spiral arms from a galaxy that has now been absorbed.”

<sup>27</sup>As long as the process of cell renewal is working the dying of cells is mostly not recognized by a person, but it is at least part of life.

People live under the influence of death and search for answers to this question of their existence. Their answers cannot easily be assigned to those protection mechanisms that are mentioned above. For instance, where is the boundary between religiosity and traditionalism? When is someone motivated by fear of death and by the will to live? It is questionable whether a human being can be conscious of his or her stratified motives in life. But it is helpful to study the answers that people give to the questioning of life. If someone is a church member and does not possess an answer, he or she has probably not understood the meaning of baptism: “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).

### 3.4. Church

The Bible distinguishes between the group and the individual but both also refer to one another. The tribes of Israel have their origin in the forefathers and are called by their names. First and Second Kings show how the king was responsible for the welfare of his nation. Paul treated the church as a body that consists of many members (1 Cor 12:12–26; Rom 12:3–5; Eph 4:16; Col 2:19). In the first place, please note that the church of Jesus Christ is an organism and not an organization. Hands, ears, and eyes are very lively. They have a function and do not belong to the body as useless appendages. In a Christian community it is necessary to ensure that each individual is treated as an indispensable link in a chain. Only when the smallest element is firm will the chain not break.<sup>28</sup>

It is part of Baptist identity to look at churches in the New Testament and learn from them. Most important is the relationship to Jesus Christ. Jesus invites men and women to follow him. Church means discipleship (Matt 28:19). Jesus Christ’s call for discipleship is described in Mark 8:34. Come to Jesus, deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him. Malcolm Yarnell refers to this verse and explains: “At the center of everything stands the Master whom free churches follow.”<sup>29</sup> In his book, he explains the foundation of the church and makes it clear that Baptists should not be identified by their five classical doctrines alone, but by their theological method.<sup>30</sup>

The church is influenced by other connection components. For example a factor is the life context of the “Third World.” It has been said that

<sup>28</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Gemeinsames Leben* (Munich: Kaiser, 1973), 80. In English: *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1954).

<sup>29</sup>Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 24.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

churches in the majority world had to find their indigenized expression of being a church according to the three or four self-principles.<sup>31</sup> It is an expression of independence that churches formerly planted by Western missionaries are now self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-theologizing. But it is questionable whether the word “self” is appropriate for a church which is supposed to be under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and associated with other churches. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth about the support between churches (2 Cor 8). These churches were located in different countries. In the New Testament self-control has a positive meaning (Titus 1:18), but other word-links with “self” have a negative meaning, like self-indulgence (Matt 23:25), self-seeking (Rom 2:8), self-imposed religion (Col 2:23), self-willed (Titus 1:7), and self-condemned (Titus 3:11). The Three-Self system was first introduced by John L. Nevius (1829–1893), a Presbyterian missionary to China.<sup>32</sup> Later it was very much influenced by the Communist ideology of China, especially in 1951 during a time of denunciation. The three-self system was used to draw the line between China and imperialism.<sup>33</sup> In light of this, it seems better to speak about indigenous churches rather than “three-self” churches.

The church can shape its environment, receive from its environment, improve its environment, or destroy its environment. In Scripture, the church influences both creation and culture; it has the obligation to seek the peace of the city (Jer 29:7), to pray for society and the government (1 Tim 2:1–2), and to be submissive to rulers and authorities (Titus 3:1).

In addition, culture and creation stand in eschatological relation to the church. The cultural variety evident between nations is shaped by the factors of creation. This variety will play a role in eternity (Rev 5:9–10; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). The city of Jerusalem is part of worldly culture now, but a renewed version of it will be the eternal dwelling place for God’s people (Rev 21:9–27).

Creation is waiting for the task of the church to be completed (Rom 8:19). The churches are the communities of the children of God and are the hope for a world that suffers transience. Its message is well known: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

<sup>31</sup>Moreau, *Introducing World Missions*, 12.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. John Mark Terry, “Indigenous Churches,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 484.

<sup>33</sup>Bob Whyte, *Unfinished Encounter, China and Christianity* (London: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1988), 228–33.

### 3.5. Faith

Faith is the most important component in the church's mortar. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (Rom 1:16–17). Without faith there would be no church, but there can be faith even outside a church. This is not to be understood in the meaning of Vatican II, when it was recognized that those who have not yet heard the gospel have a relationship to the "people of God" in some fashion.<sup>34</sup> "For there is no salvation apart from personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord."<sup>35</sup> Rather, it is to be understood in the meaning of the work of salvation of Jesus Christ in a single person that can begin outside of a church but will finally lead to a church. Evangelism and mission are the proclamation of the gospel outside the church walls in order to invite people to become followers of Jesus Christ and members of His church. Salvation is by grace through faith (Rom 3:28). Faith must precede baptism.

Faith is something that must not stay hidden. As "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" the disciples of Jesus are supposed to proclaim the gospel in this world (Matt 5:13–14). Faith is shown in a confession of faith, otherwise it is questionable (Rom 10:10). Faith is also very much related to the topic of death. In 1 Corinthians 15:12–14 it is written: "Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty."

Faith cannot be measured empirically. However, "faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:17). "And by their fruits you will know them" (Matt 7:20). Faith renews and leaves behind its traces. Since many Baptists consider the Anabaptists as their forefathers, Friesen's description of Anabaptists may refer to Baptists too. "In Anabaptism, community is faith active in love as a life of obedience to God."<sup>36</sup> A strong church evidences faith active in love as a life of obedience to God.

### 3.6. Redemption and Hope in Christ

God is the Creator and Sustainer of life (Gen 1–2; Pss 8, 104; John 1; Col 1). God is awesome and infinitely greater than His creation (Deut 7:21, 10:17; Neh 1:5; Pss 48:1, 77:13; Titus 2:13). God knows numbers

<sup>34</sup>Moreau, *Introducing World Missions*, 150.

<sup>35</sup>*Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article IV.

<sup>36</sup>John J. Friesen, "Review and discussion, Recent Studies on Anabaptist Spirituality," *Vision* 1 (2000): 88, <http://www.mennovision.org/friesen.pdf> (Accessed 27 February 2008).

which no information system could handle. He is aware of the actual numbers of hair of all people (Matt 10:30) and the number of all the stars (Ps 147:4). Since these numbers change, God has not only the most up-to-date numbers, he knows all numbers of every moment in history, present and future. He even names all the stars. It is commonly assumed that there are one billion galaxies with one billion stars each. The numbers that are given by scientists are 70 sextillion stars or 70,000 million million million, or 7 followed by 22 zeros. And this is “only” the number of visible stars within range of modern telescopes.<sup>37</sup> There are more stars than there are vocabularies in all the languages on this earth. From just the numerical perspective, God is great!<sup>38</sup> God is exalted and supreme. We agree that the goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God.<sup>39</sup>

And He is the God who came and comes near to his creation with His kingdom (Luke 10:9, 10:11, 21:31; Heb 7:19; Jas 4:8). He brought and brings hope and redemption in Jesus Christ (John 3:16). This God gives hope for a life without death. Even if death is a constant factor of life it is not the final frame. God is from eternity to eternity. But death itself is going to die (Rev 20:14).

God sets the final frame of reference. It would be presumptuous to illustrate the diverse ways in which God works even if we would focus “only” on the church. No creature would be able to provide such an analysis. God is always bigger than our biggest unit, criteria, and context. Since He builds the church and invented its “mortar,” we will never fully understand the connection of the living stones. But in His Word He gives us enough information as well as a commission to participate in the planting and building of strong churches in different cultures. And Jesus Christ gives the church His promise: “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

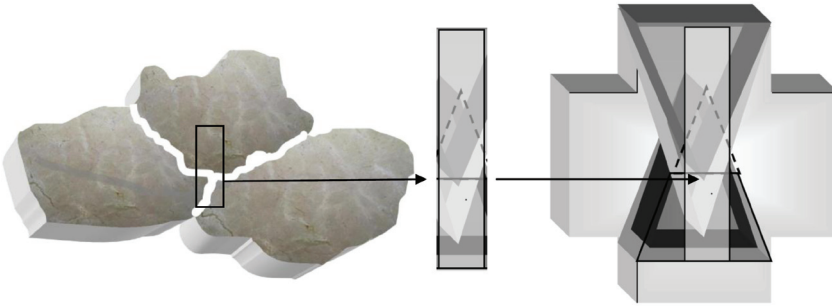
<sup>37</sup><http://www.cnn.com/2003/TECH/space/07/22/stars.survey> (Accessed 27 February 2008).

<sup>38</sup>Cf. *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, Article II.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. John Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 17.



**Churches in a Complex Context**



We have seen how the living stones hold together. Members of churches support their church in a certain relationship. The church in turn takes care of its members. A member is not influenced only by his or her church, but also by personal faith, creation, culture, death, and of course by God himself. These different fields overlap with every member in a characteristic kind and manner. Members with similar features form a feature group since they have more possibilities to connect. These connection possibilities define the church mortar. It is most important to understand which components of their connection guarantee the greatest strength. A distinction is to be made between the two groups of primary and secondary connection. The secondary connection is threatened by death and therefore much weaker. If a church puts too much emphasis on this connection it will be in trouble. The mortar of Babylon will not survive.

Strong connection



Weakened connection



This connection is weakened because the link in the middle emphasized the secondary connection more than the primary connection. According to Bonhoeffer, if the smallest element is weak the chain will break.<sup>40</sup>

A survey among Baptists in Northeast India in the year 2001 asked: “What is a Baptist?” The most important answer concerned a “personal relationship with Jesus.”<sup>41</sup> If a church is built out of stones that have a per-

<sup>40</sup>Bonhoeffer, *Gemeinsames Leben*, 80.

<sup>41</sup>Schulze, *Baptisten in Nordost Indien*, 177.

sonal relationship with Jesus it can be a strong church. In the 2001 survey the church members were asked to place fifteen statements about Baptists in the right order. In first place was a relationship with Jesus. But what was last? It was the answer: "To enjoy material blessing." These Baptists in Northeast India could not identify with wealth as part of being a Baptist. In a world that seems to be ruled by money we must resist baptizing fallen culture. Instead, we must inculcate a God-honoring culture. This is not an option.

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt 6:24). Money is both an instrument and a challenge for missions and evangelism. "Money is a two-edged sword—it can either empower or hinder missionary effort."<sup>42</sup> It seems that the question of wise stewardship is an important one for our day, a day in which culture is attempting to supplant Christ in His churches.

May the Lord grant wisdom to the churches as we use perishing things wisely in order to build eternal structures: the churches of Jesus Christ.

<sup>42</sup>Pocock, *The Changing Face of World Missions*, 279.