

THE ASTONISHED HEART, Ch 8
“The Church in the Marketplace of New Models”

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On, then, with a look at the new models of the church currently on the market. Once again, *context* is everything: in the present collapse of every form we've known, the next form or forms of the church will not drop down from heaven or be given to us directly by God. Nor will it or they be dredged up by a nostalgic return to the past: no one can go back; our true home always remains resolutely in front of us. Nor above all will any helpful model of our life be cooked up by a committee: what we need is the white horse of the Apocalypse that gallops in over the ruins we have made, not some lumpy camel put together by ecclesiastical management-consultants. Instead, we shall have to settle for being what we are:

a sacramental fellowship consisting entirely and only of human beings. We can think only of models that are already in the marketplace of our minds. A glorious future shape of the church will be achieved only if our hands and hearts can do better than the ones that gave it its less-than-glorious past.

Therefore the question we most need to ask ourselves is not some idle query about what the next model of the church will be. Rather, it's a twofold *contextual* question: What are the new models we're already trying on; and what other models are currently lying around that we might try out? Needless to say, in answering either part of that question we shall come up with both good and bad models — and, given my slightly choleric disposition, you will not be surprised if I find more bad ones than good. It's the price of hanging out with prophets. But I'm not alone: the "next form of the church" is a hot topic right now, as well it should be: the dreadfulness of all its forms — past, present, and future — has already been stigmatized by a host of experts. Accordingly, let me first give you a shopping list of the models that I think are currently in the showrooms and then have at them to see how many turn out to be *religious*, *institutional*, or *uncatholic* lemons. Here's the list.

MODELS WE'RE ALREADY BUYING:

The New Corporate Model;

The Mega-Church Model;

The Professionalism-of-the-Clergy Model;

*The Renewal Models, comprising the Church-Growth Movement, the
Spiritual/Charismatic Model, and the Cursillo/Marriage-Encounter Model;*

The Church-as-Advocacy-Group Model

MODELS WE HAVE YET TO CONSIDER:

The Alcoholics Anonymous Model;

The Marginal-Church Model

In the automotive jargon of the day, most of these models are "previously owned," but some still have a new-car smell about them. Let's kick some tires, slam some doors, compare the sticker prices, and test-drive everything on the lot.

The New Corporate Model (a Japanese import, though I'm told it was originally an American idea).

As I've already pointed out, even secular corporations have become disenchanted with the pyramidal, top-down structure of business institutions as we've known them. The almost military, chain-of-command hierarchy of most modern corporations has ended up making either bad decisions or no decisions at all. It involves too few minds; and the minds at the top, according to the Peter Principle, are usually not the best minds. So the latest bright idea for rescuing the corporate structure has been to chuck the vertical style of organization and put in its place something more horizontal — something more like a round-table process involving everybody in the outfit. This style has been given a number of buzzword names: "shared decision-making," "employee ownership," "dinner-table rather than boardroom management," "the corporation as family rather than army," and so on. All things considered, its not a bad idea; and the church (alert, for a change, to the drawbacks of its own corporate structure) has latched onto it with considerable enthusiasm. I would even admit that some aspects of it, particularly *the familial ones*, lie very close to what the church really is. But because it is, in the last analysis, a gambit designed to *save* corporations rather than put them out of business, I have to point out that the temptation of the church to ape the secular corporations *for that reason* is almost as insuperable as it is dangerous — and that to give into it will invariably be tragic.

Besides, there is a very large sleeper lying in the church's adoption of any seriously horizontal model of organization. The *ministry* of the church may seldom have been a thing of beauty and a joy forever, but it was always supposed to stand within the church as an authentic, even an *authoritative* voice for the proclamation of the Gospel. Shared decision-making is all well and good. But when the sharers decide, for example, that grace is for the birds, or that sinners can't be kept in the fold, or that the church is a club for those who can come up with the moral wherewithal to meet the dues, some apostolic voice is supposed to speak up and tell them all to get lost. The ordained ministry is not just a collection of Jacks and Jills who have been to seminary and, having gotten bravely over it, are now treasured for their skills as administrators, entertainers, amateur psychologists, and all-purpose handypersons. They have a duty and a right to say what is and isn't Gospel — and they have a solemn obligation to tell the church it will have to drop dead to all such anti-Gospel nonsense if it really wants to live.

I've spent the last twenty years of my theological career harping on the centrality of death and resurrection to the proclamation of the Gospel. I started down that road back in 1974, when I attended a clergy conference at which James Forbes (now the Senior Minister of Riverside Church in New York City) was the speaker. The conference was held, as I recall, at Grossingers — though it may have been at one or the other of the *glatt kosher* pleasure domes in the Catskills that the Diocese of Long Island seemed to prefer as a venue for the edification of its priests. In any case, Jim Forbes spent three days pounding away at one point: *The church can't rise because it refuses to drop dead*. The fact that it's *dying*, he said (I'm paraphrasing him, not quoting), is of no use to it whatsoever: dying is simply the

world's most uncomfortable way of remaining alive. If you are to be raised from the dead, the only thing that can make you a candidate is to go all the way into *death*. Death, not life, is God's recipe for fixing up the world. (See Jesus: "Those who save their life will lose it; those who lose their life for my sake and the Gospel will save it.")

I won't belabor the farther reaches to which I've pursued that insistence; suffice it to say that I've embodied it in every book I've written since. My point here, once again, is that while there's a great deal that's good about the "Japanese" model of corporate structure, it remains a model of something that still can't die of its own accord — and therefore is a model that the church can safely touch only with a twenty-foot pole. That we now sense the futility of the corporate model as received is all to the good. But if we rely on a new version simply to galvanize that model back to life, we're going to get burned. Because our sense of its failure has already been one of the driving forces behind many of the other irrelevant stabs we've made at resuscitating it. The corporate church on the right thinks that a "return to Christendom," or to "Christian family values," or to "law and order" is just what the doctor ordered. The church on the left imagines that the corporation will come alive if only it takes a stand against "racism" and "sexism" and for "multiculturalism." And the church in the middle doesn't know what it thinks — only that it's scared and wishes the whole war of buzzwords would go away.

But right, left, or center, the church's real need is not to save its life from the downward drift of the corporate model; it's to go with the flow all the way down into the death of that model itself. Only then can it rise. The corporate model is, hands down, the worst thing that ever happened to the church. And the angel of the corporation is the very thing now standing most in the way of our seeing that. As long as a national church judicatory, or a Methodist Conference, or a Presbyterian Session, or an Episcopal Vestry, or even the group-minded Official Board of a Michigan Mega-Church is an institution that cannot lay down its life in order to forgive what it can't condone, no version of the New Corporate Model will ever be more than a surreptitious device for teaching everyone a Heimlich maneuver to save something so far gone it would be better off dead. Because the angel of the corporation never sleeps. It can co-opt twelve hundred people as easily as twelve: unless it's actually destroyed, nothing new will happen. Which brings us, naturally enough, to:

The Mega-Church Model {meets California emission standards, but can't stop at the edge of a cliff}.

Like Jeremiah speaking to Israel before the Captivity, I have not a kind word to say for it. Its sheer size makes it corporately successful in the extreme — angelic to a fare-thee-well. Its consumerism is flagrant. It sells what the market demands: religion, not Gospel; goods and services, not confrontation; life enhancement, not redeeming death. Besides, it's far too close to being the entertainment industry at prayer. It provides prime-time nursery care (complete with big-screen TV messages to summon the parents of intractable children), gymnasiums for "Christian aerobics," mini-dramas and sitcoms during services, in-house bookstores and T-shirt marts ("the church-front store"), feel-good songs with sticky lyrics and marshmallow melodies — and, above all, the consolations of soda-pop theology. In short, it's Wal-Mart from start to finish: it stocks only what sells and doesn't give shelf-room to what doesn't. But size and numbers guarantee nothing except the lowest common denominator of everything. Remember television? When there were just three networks,

NBC had a symphony orchestra and CBS had Captain Kangaroo — and even then we called it a wasteland. Now we have fifty-odd channels, and *Melrose Place* is all over the place. So what do you think we're going to have when there are five hundred channels? Quality programming? Don't hold your breath. You haven't seen from wasteland yet.

But the last and saddest thing about the mega-church is the rest of the churches' rush to imitate it — and their almost universal unhappiness at not being able to. It may be the Home Shopping Network on its knees, but it's not the church. It may cater to a clientele large enough to make the mainline churches green with envy; but if you've got a good little restaurant, why should you waste your time being jealous of the fast-food chains? The mega-church isn't catholic, it's just big; it's no model for an outfit with a God who thinks small is the cat's meow — and who has regularly given flat tires to every stretch limo the church has historically tried to drive. So thank you very much, Mr. Dealer, but no thanks. Mega-church? No sale.

The Professionalism-of-the-Clergy Model (practically new, but spends a lot of time in the repair shop).

This, of course, is not so much a model of the church as it is of the ministry; but it's such a lemon that it deserves a resoundingly low rating all its own. There was once a time when the ministers of the church were free to be almost anything they liked as long as they took a reasonable stab at preaching the Word of God and administering the Sacraments. Bishops dabbled in politics, priests wrote endless volumes of theology, and English country parsons sought renown for compiling concordances or growing the largest vegetable marrows in the county. But with the advent of the business-corporation model of the church, such liberty became a thing of the past. Thenceforth they would be employees whose roles were defined not by God or their own human interests but by the passing whims of the corporation. Parish administration became a required subject in the seminaries, right up there with all its adjunct activities — like counseling (in spite of the fact that a great many ministers, like a great many non-ministers, can't counsel their way out of a broom closet); money-raising (though the reason given for raising the money is usually the support of the corporate budget, not the liberation of the faithful from the religion of money); and a host of other fringe competencies such as running computers, fax machines, copiers, youth programs, board meetings, Sunday schools, and parish fairs.

Moreover, because the clergy were often badly paid, they actually welcomed this professionalizing of their labors and went on to form clergy associations — unions, quite frankly — in order to raise the level of their remuneration for services rendered. But since mere employees rarely have the self-esteem needed to ask for big money, they modestly pegged their salaries to those of high-school teachers and police sergeants — fellow professionals one and all, to be sure, though not anybody's idea of people making out like bandits.

But four funny things happened on the way to professional-level pay. One was that as the corporate model marginalized more and more of its units — which couldn't even fix the roof, let alone raise salaries — the number of places that could support full-time professional clergy shrank alarmingly. The second was that at the same time, the rate of ordinations in many churches skyrocketed. Everybody and his sister, practically, wanted to be a minister. So as the number of corporately viable parishes went down, the number of persons to compete for them went up — and that in turn created a buyer's market for clergy services which insured that the corporation would still be in a position to get bargain help. It

was just another example of flameout before the collapse of a structure: the blaze of clergy professionalism isn't going to last much longer, but a lot of clergy are still going to get burned financially.

The third thing was that they also got burned personally — that is, *burned out* — as a result of all this pseudo-professionalism. It's often said that if either Jesus or Paul applied for the pastorate of a contemporary church, their names would be the first ones struck off the list. But in fact, *nobody* can tackle a job calling for such a lethal combination of omnicompetence and groveling without a lot of smoke and mirrors. To be masterful yet docile, authoritative yet deferential to everybody, powerful yet charming, and totally busy eighteen hours a day yet always available — this cannot be dignified as a paradox of the Gospel; it's a recipe for personal shipwreck.

Incidentally, I can say this because even though I have worked as a priest of the church for some forty-six years, I have never thought of myself as working *for* the church. As I've said in other places, I've had a *vacation* to the priesthood. What monies I was paid by the church were gravy to me. Uniformly thin gravy, admittedly; but then, if I wanted more I went and found it where I could (or couldn't, as the case might be). And there's one more thing: I have been "let go" (that's the polite word; "fired" is more like it) from every position I ever held in the church. This is true even of the job I now hold on sufferance until March of 1996. Unless the Angel of the Vestry unaccountably dozes off, I shall retire with my record of unacceptability to the corporate church intact. On God's grading system, I shall have gotten straight As in prophetic illegitimacy.

Be that as it may, the fourth thing that happened on the way to clergy professionalism was the ultimate irony. Because of the fear of lawsuits over sexual misbehavior, all the ministers who were so carefully trained in the arts of counseling, confidentiality, and warm personal relationships are now being told in no uncertain terms to see no one more than six times in a year, to keep the office door open and the secretary stationed in the next room, and to Refer! Refer! Refer! So much for professional status. The angel gave it as a carrot, and the angel took it away with a stick. I say, Good-bye and good riddance.

On, then, to the *Renewal Models* (nice cars, some of them, but they make lots of strange noises).

Take the church-growth movement. It sounds all right when it's idling, but when you get it on the road it runs like every other attempt to jump-start the corporate model. Its tacit assumption is that every church that isn't presently coming up to corporate scratch in terms of numbers, money, or program not only can but *should* improve its performance in those respects. And therefore, when it's taken seriously, nobody can hear the still small voice that may be suggesting just the opposite for most of them — namely, dropping dead to the corporate model — if they really want to be the church. I'll say a bit more about this when I come to the marginal-church model. Here, let me simply give you a variation on what I've already said about death and resurrection. If there are any places in the church that have death staring them in the face, it's precisely the marginal units of the corporate model. Every Diocese, every Presbytery, every District Conference has a baker's dozen or two of churches that the authorities would dearly love to see dry up and go away. But the church-growth hype just encourages them to fight the very death that will be their salvation if only they'll trust God and grab it with both hands. In the name of renewal, "church growth" may be preventing the very renewal it claims it wants to see.

I know. Those are not kind words. But.. ., etc, Jeremiah . . ., etc. And all that.

Take next the spiritual-charismatic version of the renewal model. I'm not about to beat up on the Holy Spirit, but I do have a large bone to pick with some of the "spirituality" types who currently like to blame their irrelevancies on him, her, or it. Selling spirituality to modern Christians is like selling patriotism to Americans or motherhood to June Cleaver: it's so simply and unarguably "a good thing" that the mind shuts down when it hears the word. Nevertheless, my choler is such that I for one find it a questionable thing indeed. If the church is committed to proclaiming the incarnation of God in all that is human, it seems odd to me that Christians should single out something that's only one aspect of human nature and make it the be-all and end-all of the church's renewal.

To be sure, Christians may work on their spirituality — their prayer lives, their meditations, their "higher faculties" — as much as they like. But they may just as legitimately work on their tennis backhand or their expertise with an omelet pan. When we die, we lose *everything*: body, soul, spirit, the works. (I've always considered the importation into Christianity of the Greek notion of an immortal soul to be a menace to the Gospel and a theological pain in the neck.) And when we rise, we are raised up with the whole package restored in a resurrection of *the body*. God, apparently, doesn't take as dim a view of the flesh as some of us do: we're not angels, and he doesn't want us to become angels. In fact, he seems to suggest that the whole spiritual realm (see the early chapters of Hebrews) can't hold a candle to the job he did in the all-too-human death of Jesus. So I will say my prayers when and as I choose, thank you very much; but I will not kid myself that they're going to do something more for my redemption, or my status as a member of the body of Christ, than Jesus has already done for me on the cross once and for all. Spirituality is nice, but it's not necessary for salvation.

Furthermore, the very fact that any kind of spirituality now sells like hotcakes makes me suspect that the lowest-common-denominator factor is at work here as well. Between the New Age religions, the interest in psychic phenomena, and the fascination with reincarnation, there's a thriving market for a world that in the long run doesn't look much like the world we actually have. It's an escape *from* the secular that runs clean contrary to the God who came *down into* the secular. And above all, it's *religion*, not Gospel. Precisely because it's something that people can get good at quite on their own, it will produce — indeed, it already *is* producing — the very same batch of undesirable extravagances that the church has had to put up with every time it's been tried before: confusion, elitism, the uncatholic imposition of one group's standards on everybody, and the creation of a "church within the church" that you'd better join, or else. That, for the record, is also my objection to such sub-versions of spirituality as Cursillo and Marriage Encounter. It's all I intend to say about them, but I can hear my popularity rating dropping as I write.

Nevertheless, I find the charismatic version of renewal no better. It picks and chooses among the more spectacular bits of Jesus' career — the occasional healings, the odd "nature miracles," the three people raised from the dead, the two multiplications of bread, and the one water-into-wine conversion at a wedding reception — and it makes those the centerpieces of its program, along with speaking in tongues and falling down flat. It promises, in other words, to deliver *signs* when all the while Jesus quite plainly says he gives no sign except the *sign of Jonah*, that is, of death (real *dead* death) and resurrection — the first of which is no readable sign at all, and the second, a sign that can only be *believed*, not known — and certainly not re-enacted by us. Like Paul, I'm willing to let anyone who thinks charismatic phenomena are the work of the Holy Spirit say so loud and clear. But I

won't sit still if they try to con the church into seeing such achievements as tests of whether it's really the church.

The last of the models we're currently test-driving is what I choose **to** call the *Church-as-Advocacy-Group Model*.

It's being bought primarily by the upper echelons of corporate church management — by the national churches in convention assembled — but its charms reach far down into the rank and file. Its specifications insist that the church, on any given divisive issue, must come down squarely on one side or the other. Both the right and the left delight in it. Is the question about abortion? The church must pass a resolution condemning it (or allowing it). Is the ordination of homosexuals the problem? Ditto. Is racism, or sexism, or euthanasia? Ditto, ditto, ditto — into the totally un-catholic gloom in which the church, by each vote, excommunicates approximately half its members.

What this is, of course, is *Pio Nono* all over again: the church as God's official question-answering machine spewing out definitive resolutions of every poser the world can throw at it. It is, to put it simply, confessionalism in drag — confessionalism a la mode. And we don't need it now any more than we ever did, especially since the world is no longer hanging with bated breath on our answers. The advocacy-group model is so obviously bad, and the world is so disinterested, that we ought to move as dexterously as possible to get rid of it. Every time one of these high-minded, catholicity-destroying resolutions comes up, it should be met with a carefully crafted counter-motion that will permit the assembly involved to debate the question to its hearts content — and then produce a compromise which straddles the issue so perfectly that it commits the church to nothing whatsoever. Anglicans, if they haven't forgotten their stock-in-trade, might even be of some assistance in achieving that state of grace.

Time now to turn to the last of the new models on my list — the ones that no one has seriously tried yet because the first thing they will call for is the death of the corporate church. *The Alcoholics Anonymous Model* is perhaps the most immediately appealing. What I have in mind here is not the twelve-step aspect of the program but the "Twelve Traditions" that spell out the organizational and operational features of the group. These traditions set forth an entity that's astonishingly like the Jerusalem church. It has no established hierarchy, no ministerial offices, no budget, no local paid staff, no endowments, no governing boards, and no real estate. It meets in other peoples buildings, uses other peoples coffeepots, and gets its own members **to** spring for the doughnuts. There is no way for anyone to sue AA over the malfeasance of its personnel because nobody can find AA to litigate against it: it's just not a legal persona.

That sounds like the very thing we've been looking for, right? Yes indeed; but it's not likely to be bought by any corporate church, large or small. The only possible buyers would be totally defunct marginal churches (see below) who, having no status to lose, might be willing to give it a whirl. Maybe someday, though . . . and what a nice day that would be. It would see a church that doesn't condemn sinners any more than AA condemns drunks. It would see recidivist sinners welcomed back whenever they showed up instead of being given the one-strike-and-you're-out treatment currently in vogue. It would see grace and forgiveness, that's what. It would see *the church*.

Finally, therefore, the *Marginal-Church Model*.

Of all the places where renewal can really begin, this is the most likely; there's just too much corporate baggage everywhere else. However, since I find that when I spoke earlier

about death and resurrection I said everything I had to say in principle about the marginal church (*only a dead church can rise*), let me simply add a word here about how such a church might achieve that happy outcome in practice.

My program would be this. Whoever was in command over the dying institution at the next highest level of the corporate church — the Diocese, the Presbytery, whatever — would take the bull by the horns and kill it: close the church, dissolve its board, sequester its endowments, and sell off its property, putting the proceeds in escrow just in case the corpse ever rises and finds a use for them. Then the managers would explain to the remaining members of those churches that they were free to do anything they could think of (or nothing at all, if they so chose). A suggestion would be made, however, that they might think about holding a kind of wake on the next Sunday, perhaps in one of their homes, or in a restaurant **or** bowling alley that didn't open until 1:00 p.m. And if they took that suggestion . . .

Well, they might sit and stare blankly at each other to begin with. But with any luck, some free spirit (young or old) among them would break the ice with the questions they had never before been able to ask — namely: "Who are we?" "Why on earth are we here?" And, most important of all, "What do we think we'd actually *like* to do?" Having no model at all to meet the upkeep on and no known shape to whip themselves into, they would for the first time be open to looking for really new answers — honest answers — that could range anywhere from "We haven't the foggiest notion, but let's get together again next Sunday and see if anything's occurred to us in the meantime," to "We're here to be the church, I suppose — whatever that means," to "How about for openers we just try to stick with fellowship, breaking bread, and saying prayers? — maybe God will take care of the rest, if he wants any."

Those answers wouldn't sound like much of a start, of course; but then, a bunch of Galileans twiddling their thumbs in Jerusalem for nine days after the Ascension didn't seem like a grand opening, either. The operative fact is that a start can only occur after a stop. As Isaiah reminded Israel, the church's strength is to sit still: all the power, all the resources, and all the hope of the **defunctly** marginal lie hidden in the terrifying reality of their death. Only out of that can they live. But, having accepted that, they can model their life in any way that strikes their fancy: **AA** style, family style, support-group style, whatever. The only thing they need to guard against is the temptation to stop being dead, the longing to be alive and kicking again. Alive and kicking may be nice, but it's not astonishing. *Dead and kicking*, though . . . that's astonishing. That, in fact, is resurrection — and it's the only thing that can bring out the best in the church.

You're tempted, naturally, to shrug all of this off with "It'll never happen; it's just wishful thinking. Who could ever just drop dead like that?" The first answer is, you could (and you will) because you're a plain old human being who's going to end up stone cold anyway. But the second answer is that if you happen to believe that Jesus is your resurrection, you might even get a kick out of being allowed to be nothing for a change. So it's not exactly wishful thinking: in either case, death is the closest thing to a vacation you're ever going to get.

But, on the other hand, you're right: It'll never happen, at least not as long as a single shred of the angelic, corporate mentality is left. I'll even prove it to you. Your life and my

life can be good, bad, or indifferent; but we can afford to relax because we know we're going to lose it all anyway. But the angels can't relax because the only thing that matters to them is that *they shouldn't die*. If you know a train is coming, you don't have to think about it: you can go get a beer, eat a sandwich, or take a nap. But if your biggest concern is that a train *shouldn't come*, then you stand on the platform and keep yourself wide awake to the danger. *The corporate church can never admit the train is coming*: it's always on the lookout for even the tiniest threat, however far down the track, to the life it doesn't dare lose. Therefore, since renewal comes only out of death, it's impossible for the corporate church to be renewed. Q.E.D.