

The Para-Church Organisation

Origins, Failures, Biblical Model & Pitfalls

Ephesians 4:11–12 *"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, ¹²for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ,"*

Introduction

The para-church organisation is one of the most debated structures in modern Christianity. The word itself comes from the **Greek prefix para — meaning "alongside"** — suggesting an entity that works beside the church rather than as the church.

From mission societies and student fellowships to relief organisations, broadcast ministries, and publishing houses, the para-church world is vast, influential, and, in many respects, deeply ambiguous.

This study examines four essential questions:

Why did the para-church come into existence?

What does history reveal about its track record?

What does Scripture actually say about the proper structure for ministry?

What are the recurring pitfalls that have caused so many para-church organisations to drift, weaken, or cause harm to the very body of Christ they claimed to serve?

The goal is not to condemn what God has genuinely used, nor to baptise what has too often operated in independence from the local church. The goal is to think biblically about structures of ministry, so that every work done in the name of Christ is truly done in the way of Christ.

Why did the Para-Church come into existence?

A. The failure of the institutional Church to obey the Great Commission.

The most honest answer to the question of why para-church organisations arose is also the most uncomfortable one: *in large measure, they arose because the church stopped doing what Christ commanded it to do.*

After the Emperor **Constantine's Edict of Milan in AD 313** effectively made Christianity the favoured religion of the Roman Empire, the church underwent a dramatic transformation.

From a persecuted, mission-minded movement of disciples, it became an institution embedded in state power.

Mission gave way to maintenance.

The Great Commission — go into all the world and make disciples — was increasingly left to specialised orders rather than practised by the whole body.

Matthew 28:19–20, "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and

on earth. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen."

This command was not addressed to a specialised class but to the whole church. Yet within centuries of Constantine, the missional energy of the church had largely been transferred to monastic orders the **Benedictines, Dominicans, and Franciscans** which functioned, in effect, as the first para-church organisations.

They arose precisely because the institutional church had ceased to function as a missionary movement.

B. The Protestant Reformation and its Missionary Blind Spot.

The **sixteenth-century Reformation** recovered the great doctrines of grace — *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia* — but it was largely silent on world mission.

The Reformers were so occupied with correcting the theological errors of Rome that they gave little attention to the evangelisation of the un-evangelised world.

When the **Dutch theologian Adrianus Saravia (1531–1613)** argued that the Great Commission was binding on the whole church in every generation, he was largely dismissed.

It was not until **William Carey (1761–1834)** challenged this theological silence with his landmark **1792 pamphlet** — *"An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the*

Conversion of the Heathens" — that the modern missionary movement was born.

Crucially, Carey's vehicle was not the local church. It was a voluntary society, the Particular **Baptist Missionary Society**, which became the template for nearly every major mission organisation that followed.

"Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." — **William Carey, 1792**

The para-church mission society was born, in part, as a work-around for a church that lacked either the vision or the structural flexibility to mobilise itself for world mission.

This is an important historical judgment: ***the parachurch arose not because the church was irrelevant, but because the church was disobedient.***

C. The 18th and 19th Century Awakenings.

The great revivals the **First Great Awakening** under **George Whitefield** and **Jonathan Edwards** in the **1730s–40s**, the **Second Great Awakening** in the **early 1800s**, and the **Welsh Revival of 1904–05** produced explosions of evangelical energy that existing church structures were often too slow or too rigid to channel.

The result was a proliferation of voluntary societies, benevolent associations, and evangelistic organisations that worked outside the normal structures of denominational churches.

By the mid-nineteenth century, organisations like the **YMCA (1844)**, the **China Inland Mission (1865)**, and the **Salvation Army (1865)** had emerged.

Each addressing a genuine gap.

- urban youth,
- unreached peoples, and
- the urban poor

That the established church had largely ignored.

The parachurch was, in each case, the church's conscience in structural form.

D. The 20th century: Fragmentation and Specialisation.

The twentieth century saw an explosion of para-church organisations unprecedented in Christian history.

- **Campus Crusade for Christ (1951),**
- **InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (1941),**
- **Youth for Christ (1944),**
- **World Vision (1950),**
- **Focus on the Family (1977),**

and thousands of others emerged to address specific segments, needs, or populations that no single church could reach alone.

Sociologically, this mirrored broader trends in Western society toward specialisation and consumer choice.

Theologically, it reflected a growing confidence in functional effectiveness over ecclesiological fidelity.

The parachurch could raise money, mobilise volunteers, deploy personnel, and produce measurable outcomes more efficiently than most denominational structures.

The question that was rarely asked was: **at what cost to the church?**

"The parachurch did not replace the church — but it often behaved as if it had." — Paraphrase of a critique common among ecclesialogists.

A History of the Para-Church Movement

A. The Pre-Reformation Forerunners (AD 300–1500)

The earliest recognisable para-church structures were the monastic orders that emerged from the third century onward.

Anthony of Egypt (c.251–356) pioneered desert monasticism.

Benedict of Nursia (480–547) established the Rule that shaped Western monasticism for centuries.

These communities were not local churches in the New Testament sense, but they were specialist communities of believers pursuing holiness, scholarship, and eventually mission, alongside the institutional church.

The **Franciscans and Dominicans** of the thirteenth century pushed the monastic model into urban mission, preaching in city squares, establishing schools, and reaching populations the parish system had neglected.

They were, unmistakably, parachurch in function: organised, purposeful, mission-oriented bodies operating alongside but not as the local church.

Their long-term trajectory, however, illustrates a recurring pattern: over time, the orders accumulated wealth, political influence, and institutional self-interest that frequently placed them in conflict with both the papacy and the local church.

What began in poverty and mission ended, in many cases, in privilege and power.

B. The Modern Mission Movement (1792–1900)

The founding of William Carey's Particular **Baptist Missionary Society in 1792** marks the beginning of the modern parachurch mission movement. Within decades, dozens of similar societies had been established:

- **London Missionary Society (1795)**
- **Church Missionary Society (1799)**
- **British and Foreign Bible Society (1804)**
- **American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810)**
- **China Inland Mission — Hudson Taylor (1865)**
- **Africa Inland Mission (1895)**

These organisations were, in many cases, the primary vehicle through which the Gospel reached the unreached peoples of **Africa, Asia, and the Pacific**.

They produced remarkable missionaries **Carey, Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone, Adoniram Judson, Amy Carmichael** whose legacy is inestimable.

Yet even in this golden age of mission, the seeds of ecclesiological dysfunction were present.

Many mission societies sent missionaries who planted communities of believers without clear connections to any sending church, without structures of eldership or accountability, and without a theology of the local church that would sustain healthy indigenous congregations.

The result was, in many regions, a harvest of converts without a harvest of churches.

C. The Student Movement and Evangelical Parachurch (1877–1945)

The Student Volunteer Movement, founded in **1886** at **D.L. Moody's Northfield Conference**, mobilised over **20,000 students** for foreign mission under the watchword "*the evangelisation of the world in this generation*." It represented perhaps the most remarkable para-church mobilisation in history — and also one of the most instructive cautionary tales.

By the **1920s**, the **SVM** had been captured by liberal theology.

Its leadership had moved from evangelical conviction to social gospel accommodationism.

Without the doctrinal accountability structures of a confessional church, the organisation could not resist the drift.

What began as a fire of evangelical passion ended as a vessel of theological compromise. It collapsed into irrelevance by the 1930s.

"Organisations built on vision can be rebuilt around a different vision. Only the church, built on the unchanging Word, has the resources to resist perpetual reinvention." —
Observation on the SVM's decline

The collapse of the SVM directly led to the founding of **InterVarsity Christian Fellowship** and similar explicitly evangelical student organisations — which were themselves, in time, to face their own battles with theological drift.

D. The Post-War Para-Church Explosion (1945–Present)

The **post-Second World War** period saw an unprecedented proliferation of para-church organisations, driven by several converging factors:

- evangelical renewal,
- mass communication technologies (radio, then television, then the internet),
- the Cold War context that framed world mission in terms of urgency, and
- a generation of Christian leaders impatient with denominational bureaucracy.

Billy Graham's **Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (1950)**,
Bill Bright's Campus Crusade for Christ (1951), and

Jim Elliot's martyrdom in Ecuador (1956) all shaped a generation's imagination about ministry.

The para-church model was not merely accepted — it became the default expectation for "serious" Christian ministry.

By the end of the twentieth century, **the para-church sector in the United States alone represented billions of dollars in annual revenue**, employed hundreds of thousands of workers, and wielded cultural influence that dwarfed most denominations.

Its accountability structures, however, lagged far behind its scale. A disproportion that would produce a series of high-profile scandals, collapses, and controversies that damaged the credibility of evangelical Christianity at large.

How has the Parachurch failed the Church?

A. The Substitution Error: Replacing rather than serving the Church.

The most fundamental failure of the para-church movement has been its tendency.

Sometimes gradual, sometimes deliberate to position itself as a functional substitute for the local church rather than as a servant of it.

When a Christian's primary community is a para-church organisation, when their giving primarily flows to a para-church cause, when their sense of spiritual identity is rooted in a para-church brand rather than a local congregation.

The parachurch has not served the church but displaced it.

Ephesians 3:10–11, "to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places,"¹¹ according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord,"

Paul's statement is startling in its specificity.

It is the church, not the parachurch, not the mission agency, not the media ministry through which the manifold wisdom of God is declared to the heavenly realm.

The church is not one strategy among many.

It is the chosen vehicle of God's eternal purpose. Any structure that diminishes, bypasses, or replaces the local church is, however good its intentions, working against the grain of God's redemptive design.

B. The Accountability Vacuum.

The local church, in the New Testament model, is a community of mutual accountability.

Elders watching over the flock, the congregation practising discipline, members submitting to one another in love.

The para-church organisation, by contrast, is typically accountable to a board of directors, a donor base, and a founder's vision — structures that lack the pastoral, relational, and covenantal depth of the local church.

Hebrews 13:17, *"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you."*

The accountability envisaged in this verse is not corporate governance it is pastoral oversight, rooted in relationship, responsibility, and the care of souls.

Para-church organisations have repeatedly demonstrated that without this kind of accountability, leaders become vulnerable to pride, financial mismanagement, and moral failure.

The catalogues of fallen para-church leaders' men and women who wielded enormous influence with minimal pastoral accountability is one of the most sobering indictments of the movement.

C. The Drain of Resources from the Local Church.

The parachurch competes with the local church for three finite resources:

- Money,
- Time, and
- Gifted people.

When the most energetic, capable, and spiritually gifted members of a congregation devote their primary time and financial investment to a para-church cause, the local church is depleted.

The pattern is visible across evangelical culture: the church is populated by passive consumers while the parachurch attracts the activists.

1 Corinthians 12:27–28, " Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. ²⁸ And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues."

The gifts listed here apostles, prophets, teachers, administrators are given to the church, not to independent organisations.

When those gifted in administration and leadership are overwhelmingly deployed in para-church structures, the local church is left without the administrative and strategic leadership it needs to function as a healthy body.

The parachurch has, in many contexts, harvested the gifts God gave to the church.

D. Theological drift without Ecclesiological Roots.

History demonstrates repeatedly that para-church organisations, operating without the doctrinal accountability structures of a confessional church, are uniquely vulnerable to theological drift.

The **Student Volunteer Movement, the YMCA**, many of the historic mainline mission societies, and numerous contemporary organisations have followed the same trajectory:

Founding evangelical conviction, then gradual theological broadening, then the embrace of positions that would have been unrecognisable to their founders.

1 Timothy 6:20–21, " O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge—²¹by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace be with you. Amen."

The local church has, historically, been more resilient against theological drift because it is accountable to a congregation, a confession, a tradition, and a set of ordained leaders who are themselves accountable to the body.

The parachurch has no such natural brake.

When its founder departs or its donor culture shifts, the theological rudder is lost.

E. The Neglect of Sacramental and Covenantal Life.

The parachurch, by definition, cannot administer the sacraments.

- It cannot baptise.
- It cannot celebrate the Lord's Supper.
- It cannot exercise formal church discipline.
- It cannot perform marriages or conduct funerals with the authority of Christ's gathered body.

These are not peripheral matters, but they are the covenantal markers of the community Christ established.

Acts 2:42, *"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers."*

The early church was characterised by four marks:

- ✓ Doctrine,
- ✓ Fellowship,
- ✓ Breaking of bread, and
- ✓ Prayer.

Three of these four: fellowship, breaking of bread, and corporate prayer are inherently communal practices that require the gathered congregation.

A para-church organisation can teach doctrine and facilitate prayer, but it cannot provide what the gathered, covenanted, sacramental community of believers provides.

Christians who substitute para-church involvement for local church membership are spiritually impoverished, however much they may benefit from the para-church's programmes.

The Biblical Model for Para-Church Organisations

A. Does the New Testament sanction Para-Church structures?

The question of whether the New Testament provides a precedent for para-church organisations requires careful exegetical honesty.

The answer is: **partially and conditionally.**

The New Testament does not describe anything exactly equivalent to a modern mission agency or para-church ministry.

What it does describe is a rich diversity of ministry structures that operated alongside, in conjunction with, and accountable to the local churches from which they were sent.

B. The Antioch model: The Church as the sending base.

The most instructive New Testament precedent for what might be called "para-church" ministry is the missionary team of Paul and Barnabas, sent from Antioch.

Acts 13:1–3, " Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ²As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away."

Several features of this model are critical.

First, the sending was initiated by the Holy Spirit within the gathered worship of the local church not by the personal vision of an entrepreneurial individual.

Second, the church formally commissioned and sent the missionary team that they were not self-appointed.

Third, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and reported back maintaining their accountability to the sending church.

Acts 14:26–27, *"From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles."*

This is the biblical template:

The church sends, the missionary team serves, the church receives the report, and the whole work remains accountable to the local congregation from which it was sent.

The missionary band was not independent of the church rather it was an extension of the church.

C. The Jerusalem Council: Accountability and Doctrinal Oversight.

Acts 15 records that when doctrinal controversy arose from the missionary work (the question of circumcision and Gentile salvation), the matter was not resolved by the missionary team alone, nor by a mission society board.

It was brought before the gathered council of apostles and elders in Jerusalem, the church in its corporate authority.

Acts 15:2, *"Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question."*

The principle is plain:

When those engaged in para-church-style ministry face theological controversy, they submit to the church's doctrinal authority.

They do not resolve it internally and proceed.

This is the accountability structure that has been most consistently absent from modern para-church organisations, and its absence has been most consistently destructive.

D. The Pauline Apostolic Band: A legitimate specialist team.

Paul's missionary team which at various points included **Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Luke, Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos**, and others did function as a kind of specialist task force operating across multiple church communities.

This is the closest New Testament parallel to a modern para-church organisation.

Its key features provide the biblical criteria by which modern para-church organisations should be evaluated:

- It was **church based in origin**. Its members were drawn from and sent by local congregations.
- It was **Gospel-centred in purpose**. Its singular aim was the planting of churches and the proclamation of the Gospel.
- It was **church producing in outcome**. It planted local congregations with appointed elders, not independent mission stations.
- It was **doctrinally accountable**. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus show that the team operated under a body of sound doctrine that could not be compromised.
- It was **relationally submitted**. Team members were accountable to Paul and Paul to the sending churches and ultimately to the apostolic council.

Titus 1:5, *"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you."*

Paul's para-church activity was always in service of producing and strengthening local churches not bypassing them, not competing with them, not substituting for them.

Every city that his missionary band visited became the home of a local church with ordained, accountable elders.

The mission produced ecclesiology.

The parachurch served the church.

E. The Biblical criteria for a legitimate Para-Church Ministry.

Drawing from the Antioch model, the Jerusalem Council, and the Pauline apostolic band, we can identify five biblical criteria that distinguish a legitimate para-church ministry from an illegitimate one:

1. *Church-sent, not self-appointed.*

A legitimate para-church ministry originates from the formal sending and commissioning of a local church or plurality of churches. Its leaders are not self-appointed visionaries, but they are people recognised, tested, and sent by the body of Christ.

Romans 10:15, *"And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!'"*

2. *Church-serving, not church-replacing.*

Its purpose is to serve the local church, extend its reach, and strengthen its mission. Not to compete with it, drain it of resources, or function as an alternative to it.

Every activity of the parachurch should be measurable against the question: **Does this ultimately strengthen or weaken the local church?**

3. Church-producing in its outcomes.

Where the parachurch is engaged in evangelism and mission, its fruit should be disciples who are planted into local churches. Not merely decisions catalogued in a database.

The goal is not simply converts, but "members added to the church".

Acts 2:47, *"praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved."*

4. Doctrinally accountable to a confessional standard.

The para-church organisation must maintain formal accountability to a body of sound doctrine, tested and overseen by qualified elders or a confessing church community.

Not merely to the personal theological convictions of its founder or the preferences of its donors.

2 Timothy 1:13–14, *" Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁴That good thing which was committed to you, keep by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us."*

5. Financially and structurally transparent to the church.

The financial and governance structures of the parachurch must be transparent and accountable not merely to secular regulators or donor expectations, but to the church community it claims to serve.

Stewardship of resources given in Christ's name is a matter of ecclesial accountability, not merely legal compliance.

2 Corinthians 8:21, *"providing honourable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men."*

The Pitfalls of Para-Church Organisations

Pitfall 1: The Founder's Syndrome.

The most common structural weakness of para-church organisations is what organisational theorists call "founder's syndrome".

The excessive concentration of vision, authority, and identity in a single founding personality.

When the founder is a person of genuine gifting and godliness, this can produce remarkable fruit in the short term. But it creates an organisation that is structurally dependent on that person's continued health, wisdom, and integrity.

Warning: *When a para-church organisation's identity is indistinguishable from its founder's personality, it is one moral failure, one theological shift, or one death away from collapse.*

The New Testament model is always plural leadership.

A plurality of elders, a team of co-workers, a community of mutual accountability.

Paul's missionary team was never "Paul's ministry" in the proprietary sense it was a community of gifted servants submitted to one another and to the churches they served.

Acts 20:28, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."*

Pitfall 2: Mission Drift — Means becoming ends

Para-church organisations are founded with a specific, often urgent, missional purpose.

Over time, institutional survival tends to become the de facto mission. The organisation that was founded to evangelise students begins to exist primarily to sustain itself. Fundraising, staff retention, brand management, and programme perpetuation gradually displace the founding mission.

Revelation 2:4–5, *“Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent.”*

This charge, addressed to the church at Ephesus, applies with equal force to any Christian organisation.

The departure from "first love" the passionate, sacrificial, Christ-centred focus that drove the founding vision is not always dramatic.

It is usually incremental, often invisible, and frequently rationalised as maturity or sustainability.

Pitfall 3: Financial Independence from the Church

The modern para-church organisation typically raises its funds through direct appeals to individual donors, bypassing the local church entirely. This creates a structural incentive to cultivate a direct relationship with donors rather than with churches and to craft messaging that appeals to individual passion rather than corporate discernment.

The consequences are significant.

The organisation becomes accountable to donor preferences rather than to ecclesial wisdom. It must maintain its appeal to its donor base, which means avoiding theological positions, pastoral challenges, or missional priorities that might reduce giving.

The donor-driven parachurch is not free, but it is enslaved to the tastes of its financial supporters.

1 Timothy 6:10, *"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."*

Warning: *When a para-church organisation's theology is shaped by what its donors will fund rather than what Scripture teaches, it has ceased to be a ministry and become a business.*

Pitfall 4: The Celebrity Culture

The parachurch has been the primary incubator of evangelical celebrity culture the phenomenon of individual Christian leaders who accumulate massive platforms, enormous influence, and devoted personal followings that are effectively independent of any local church accountability.

The celebrity speaker, the prominent author, the widely broadcast preacher these are almost always products of the para-church ecosystem rather than the local church.

1 Corinthians 1:12–13, *"Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?"*

The factionalism Paul rebuked in Corinth — "I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos" is structurally reproduced in a para-church culture where individuals build personal brands, cultivate personal followings, and accumulate influence that makes genuine accountability virtually impossible.

The fallen celebrity pastor is almost never someone who lacked gifting he is almost always someone who lacked accountability.

Pitfall 5: Converts without Community

Evangelistic para-church organisations are structurally incentivised to measure decisions rather than disciples.

A crusade counted by decisions made, a campus ministry measured by students attending, a media ministry evaluated by audience size.

All of these metrics miss the fundamental question: **are these people being knit into the life of a local church where they will grow to maturity?**

Matthew 28:19, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*

The command is to make disciples, not to register decisions. Baptism the public, communal act that initiates a believer into the covenant community of the local church is inseparable from the Great Commission.

An evangelism that does not result in baptism and incorporation into the local church has produced converts who

are disconnected from the very community Christ designed for their maturation.

"The parachurch can lead a person to the door of the kingdom. Only the local church can take them inside and help them grow up." — **Principle of ecclesiological evangelism**

Pitfall 6: Bypassing Eldership and Pastoral authority

Many para-church organisations operate in a manner that implicitly or explicitly undermines the authority of local elders.

When a para-church speaker teaches doctrines in a local church that are at odds with that church's pastoral leadership and the congregation follows the external speaker rather than their own elders. The parachurch has not served the church but destabilised it.

1 Peter 5:1–3, " *The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: ²Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; ³nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;*"

The shepherd of the local flock, the elder who knows the names, faces, marriages, griefs, and temptations of his congregation is the primary spiritual authority over that community.

No visiting speaker, no parachurch programme, no media personality can substitute for this pastoral relationship.

When para-church ministry elevates itself above or alongside local eldership, it has exceeded its legitimate mandate.

Pitfall 7: Pragmatism Over Principle

The parachurch tends to be results-oriented.

A tendency that, unchecked, produces a pragmatism that is willing to sacrifice biblical principle for measurable effectiveness.

Ecumenical alliances formed for the sake of a common cause, theological compromises made to broaden a coalition, methodologies adopted because they "work" regardless of their compatibility with Scripture.

These are the characteristic failures of a movement defined by outcomes rather than obedience.

Romans 3:8, *"And why not say, 'Let us do evil that good may come'? — as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just."*

The end does not justify the means in God's economy.

A ministry that produces impressive numbers through methods that compromise the integrity of the Gospel has not advanced the kingdom, but it has built on sand.

The history of para-church evangelism includes countless examples of mass "decisions" that produced no lasting fruit

because the methods employed bypassed the Spirit-empowered proclamation of the whole counsel of God.

1 Corinthians 2:1–2, *"And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."*

A Path Forward — Parachurch in proper relationship to the Church

A. Repentance and Re-Alignment.

For para-church organisations that have operated in independence from the local church, the path forward begins not with structural reform but with theological repentance.

An honest reckoning with the ways in which the organisation has competed with, drained, or bypassed the local church is the necessary first step.

This is not whipping or physically punishing one's own body. It is the kind of honest self-examination that genuine ministry requires.

2 Corinthians 13:5, *"Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you are disqualified."*

B. Structural Submission to the Church.

Practically, this means establishing formal accountability relationships with local churches.

Not merely advisory boards of prominent individuals, but genuine submission to the pastoral oversight of a community of elders who know the organisation's leaders personally and are willing to exercise discipline when necessary.

It means redirecting financial giving to flow through local churches where possible. It means measuring success not by organisational metrics but by the health and growth of local congregations.

C. The Integrated Model: Church-based Mission.

The most theologically coherent and historically effective model of para-church ministry is one that is explicitly integrated with the local church. Where the church is the sending base, the para-church function is the specialised extension, and the fruit returns to the church in the form of new members, strengthened congregations, and disciplined believers.

Ephesians 4:15–16, " *but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.*"

The picture Paul paints is of a body in which every part serves the whole.

The parachurch, in its proper place, is one of those parts valuable, necessary, but always serving the growth of the body, never existing for its own sake.

The genius of the church is that it is the only institution in human history that exists entirely for those who are not yet members of it.

The parachurch serves that genius best when it submits itself most completely to the church's life and mission.

Conclusion:

The Church — God's Unchanging Strategy

The parachurch arose, in large measure, because the church failed.

It has achieved remarkable things,

- the translation of Scripture into thousands of languages,
- the evangelisation of unreached peoples,
- the care of millions of the world's poorest,
- the education of generations of Christian leaders.

These are genuine gifts to the kingdom of God, and those who gave their lives in these causes deserve the church's deep gratitude.

But the parachurch also accumulated a record of drift, scandal, financial abuse, theological compromise, and ecclesiological displacement that should give every thoughtful Christian pause.

The repeated pattern founding evangelical fire, gradual institutional consolidation, eventual theological accommodation is not accidental. It is the predictable consequence of ministry conducted outside the accountability structures that Christ ordained for His church.

The local church remains God's primary strategy for the redemption of the world.

It is the only community that can baptise, celebrate the Lord's Supper, exercise formal discipline, ordain leaders, and provide the covenantal community in which disciples are truly formed.

No para-church organisation, however gifted its leadership or however impressive its programmes, can substitute for what Christ gave His life to build.

Matthew 16:18, *""And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.""*

Christ did not say He would build His mission agency.

He did not say He would build His media ministry or His campus movement or His relief organisation.

He said: *I will build My church.*

Every structure of Christian ministry parachurch included exists to serve that promise, or it has no lasting reason to exist at all.

"The church is the only institution in the world that exists for the benefit of those who are not yet members of it. Everything else — including the para-church — exists to serve her." — **Adapted from William Temple**

Summary:

Key Biblical criteria for evaluating a para-church ministry.

- Is it church-sent — formally commissioned and accountable to a local church?
- Is it church-serving — does it strengthen rather than compete with the local church?
- Is it church-producing — does its evangelism result in people planted in local congregations?
- Is it doctrinally accountable — to a confessional standard overseen by qualified elders?
- Is it financially transparent — to the church community it claims to serve?
- Does it resist the celebrity culture and maintain plural, humble leadership?
- Does it measure success by the Great Commission's standard — disciples, not merely decisions?
- Does it submit to the authority of local elders rather than bypassing them?