Effective churches have a sense of purpose. They know why they exist.

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4/ Form and Function: A Distinction that Matters

Consider the apple. Round and firm. Red (or green or yellow) skin. Stem poking out of one dimpled end. To examine an apple more closely, all that is needed is a paring knife. Cut through its diameter. Observe the white and moist flesh, seed pod holding brown and hardened orbs. By dissecting an apple in this way, it is possible to grasp the form of an apple—its morphology.

But there is more than one way to skin an apple, for there is more to this fruit than its form. Our understanding of apple is also determined by the functions it fulfills and the purposes it serves. An apple is part of the reproductive system of the apple tree: by means of the seed wrapped within this fruit, the tree propagates itself and its species. We make use of the apple for food: it is a featured ingredient in pies, pastries and other desserts, keeping the doctor (if not the dentist) away. Apples are traditionally used as gifts for teachers, to express affection and, one would suppose, curry favor. When rotten, the apple can be thrown to show disapproval.

Skinning the apple in this way requires a different kind of sharp instrument. It requires the “knife of logic,” to use Robert Pirsig’s memorable phrase. By going beyond morphology to
probe the utility of an apple, we are able to think past skin and flesh and stem to consider what functions this fruit performs. The knife of logic allows us to focus on questions of purpose, utility, and, ultimately, value.

Skinning the Church

The restoration plea has fallen victim to people wielding paring knives. They have dissected the ancient church down to its smallest components, creating along the way a morphology of God's people. They have described in detail how the first-century church was organized, the rituals and ceremonies it observed, the modes of its worship, the manner in which it operated. They have catalogued the role of evangelists, elders and deacons; the observance of the Supper; styles of singing, prayer and preaching; where the church met; how funds were collected and used; what ministries the church engaged in; what standards of morality were inculcated. And they have imagined that replicating those details in today's church is what restoration is all about.

Assuming for the moment that their observations about the early church have been accurate (an assumption I do not accept, as we will see in subsequent chapters), their great mistake has been in thinking that there is no other way to "skin" the ancient church. But there is much more to the church than its forms. Like the apple, the church has a functional aspect that must also inform our understanding of it. Having exhausted ourselves with measurement and definition and categorization, it yet remains for us to ask, "What was the mission of the New Testament church? What ends did it pursue? What purposes defined its identity and shaped its existence? What implications does all of that have for us?"

To answer such questions will require a different kind of sharp instrument than the one we have been using. We will need a logical knife that takes us past the morphology of the New Testament church to probe questions of purpose, utility, and value. But in that probing, I see promise of understanding better what the ancient church was about, and hope that the modern church can rediscover what it is we are to restore.

Toward a Definition of Form and Function

Definitions are rarely fun but often necessary. So grit your teeth and let's think more precisely about the meaning of form and function as these terms relate to the church.

By "form," I mean those methods, behaviors, and rituals through which the people of God give expression to their life under God—the means they use to carry out the spiritual business to which God has called them. By "function," I intend to denote the spiritual business itself—those ends that are definitional, fundamental, and central to our identity as God's people. "Function" addresses mission; "form" has to do with methodology. "Function" is about purpose; "form" addresses the means by which purpose is accomplished. "Function" asks what; "form" asks how. "Function" is concerned about which mountains we climb; "form" wonders by which route we should travel.

My dictionary defines function as the "duty, occupation, or role of a person," while one of the definitions listed for form is "procedure." That captures the distinction nicely. Functions have to do with "big picture" items on the church's plate—the "roles" God's people are called to fulfill. They define the reasons why we exist and the uses to which God puts us. Forms, on the other hand, describe the "pragmatics" in which the people of God engage—the tasks and "procedures" by which the church carries out its roles. Forms are the tangible methods by which the church conducts its mission.

As an example, you will soon read that I consider worship to be a primary function of God's people. Whether we talk about the Patriarchs, Moses, or the church—people who claim to be in relationship with God are always called to worship him. In particular, Christians have a responsibility to magnify, adore, and praise their Father and Savior—it is part of our God-given "business." Whether we should be a worshipping people is not
debateable. It is one of the necessary "roles" to which we have been called.

How we are to worship, on the other hand, is open to much debate and variation. By asking "how," we have stopped talking about function and entered a discussion of form. In Corinth, Paul encouraged the church to worship by having women cover their heads (1 Cor. 11:5), honoring the Lord's Supper by sharing food with those in need (1 Cor. 11:20ff), giving preference to prophecy over tongues in the assembly (1 Cor. 14, especially 23-25), and ensuring that their open and highly participatory services were conducted in an orderly fashion (1 Cor. 14:26ff). These were some of the forms through which the Corinthian Christians gave expression to the "worship" function.

But there is more to the function of worship than the particular forms practiced at Corinth. Identifying and imitating Corinthian forms will not necessarily ensure that the modern church functions as a worshipping community (any more than crafting wings in the shape of a bird's will guarantee that you can fly). Indeed, the commitment of the modern church to worship in "spirit and in truth" may lead it to devise forms that would never have occurred to the ancient Corinthians.

The church needs forms—means, methods, mechanisms—in order to exhibit the functions to which God has called us. Just as words are required to articulate thoughts, so forms are necessary to accomplish function—they are the idiom in which we express religious purposes.

But to say that forms are necessary to function is not to say they are synonymous. The distinction between forms and functions in religious life, between the means for doing business and the essential business itself, is an important one. Failure to make such a distinction—to so confuse form and function that they become indistinguishable—is the source of much mischief in Churches of Christ today. Clarifying this distinction can lead us to new insights about the church and how it should conduct itself.

Biblical Distinctions between Form and Function

Though the words "function" and "form" do not occur together in Scripture to define the religious life of God's people, the distinction is very much in evidence.

Take, for example, the idea of "covenant" and "sign." When God made a covenant with Noah never to destroy the earth with water again, he set a sign in the heavens—a rainbow (Gen. 9:9-17). The same thing occurred when God established a covenant relationship with Abraham; he instituted a "sign of the covenant"—circumcision (Gen. 17:1-14). The Sabbath Day is also called a "sign," symbolizing the covenant God made with Israel (Ex. 31:12-17).

But the sign was not itself the covenant. It pointed to the covenant. It symbolized the covenant. It was the form God chose to signify a covenant with his people. But the sign always pointed beyond itself to the ways in which God and his people were to function. In the end, it was the covenant, not the sign, that was vital.

Form and Function in the Prophets

This same distinction becomes evident in the prophetic writings. Israel had a hard time telling the difference between form and function. In the course of time, animal sacrifice became synonymous with holy living. Praying in the temple was the same as behaving in righteous ways. Evidently, Israel had fooled herself into believing that, so long as she observed the forms of a godly people, actually functioning as a godly people was not required. (We'll say more about this in Chapters Seven and Eight.)

The prophets begged to differ. One of their most important tasks was to re-educate Israel to the difference between religious ceremony and righteous living, between the forms of religion and its true functions. To do that, they often played one against the other, minimizing temple and cultus and ceremony in order to emphasize justice, mercy and faithfulness.
“The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the LORD. “I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. When you come to appear before me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies... Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!” (Isa. 1:10-17)

Rend your heart and not your garments. (Joel 2:13)

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6, 8)

The Israelites had managed to blur the line between religious forms (temple worship and sacrifice) and a religious function (holy living). They had succeeded in making the former synonymous with the latter. They had becomemeticulous about means and careless about ends. For our present purposes, it is important to see not that the prophets condemned such confusion (we will come back to this point later), but that they made a clear distinction between the methods used to interact with God and the lifestyle lived in submission to him. You find the same kind of language in the writings of David (“You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit”—Ps. 51:17), Jeremiah (“Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury...and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe?’”—Jer. 7:9-10), and Hosea (“I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings”—Hos. 6:6).

Each of these writers makes it clear that there is a meaningful difference between the condition of a worshipper’s heart and the methods he uses to express himself to God. Proper ceremony is no substitute for a yielded life.

Form and Function in Paul
This distinction was very much on Paul’s mind. As someone who had once “put confidence in the flesh” only to throw it all away for the “surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:4-8), Paul felt he had already wasted too much of his life on peripheral issues while missing the core of relationship with God. He developed a ruthless instinct for that which was “of Christ” and that which was “rubbish” in comparison, expending a great deal of energy teaching others to differentiate between “the form of godliness” and “the power” of it (2 Tim. 3:5).

Plow through his writings and you will turn up any number of references to this distinction between the essential business of the people of God and the particular (and transitory) ways in which that business is conducted.

Take, for instance, when he speaks to the Colossians of “shadows” and “reality”: “Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Col. 2:16-17). Here Paul points to religious forms (that are being urged on the Colossians by Jewish Christians), and distinguishes between them and the hard kernel of Christian faith. He recognizes a difference between religious behaviors (some of which were God-ordained) and the essence of religious life. Even in Old Testament times, such forms were a “shadow” of Christ. They themselves were not the point, but mere illustrations of the point. To focus on the shadow and miss the reality is (for Paul) the characteristic flaw of his ancestral people.
Paul makes the same distinction between form and function when he comments to the Romans on how to treat the weaker brother. What should they do about members of the church who have convictions about food laws and the observance of special days? Paul tells them not to judge each other. He reminds them to act out of love about such matters. But then he makes a pronouncement on the matter, indicating that (when all is said and done) there is a distinction to be made between what is central and peripheral in the kingdom. “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

To the Galatians, Paul (emphatically) makes the same distinction: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6).

Here again, Paul recognizes a difference between the trappings of religion (the forms—food laws, special days, circumcision) and essential religious business (the functions—Christ-centeredness, righteousness, faith). For Paul, the ability to see this difference is the necessary starting place for determining proper conduct as a Christian.

Form and Function in the Teachings of Jesus

It is in the teachings of Jesus, however, that this distinction between form and function is most evident. When accused of failing to encourage fasting among his disciples, Jesus responded that the fermenting functions of the kingdom of God would need new forms to contain them. “No one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins” (Mk. 2:22).

Notice that Jesus does not argue for a “wineskin-less” religion (a religion without forms). He simply states that (in time) forms harden and habituate. When that happens, such forms are no longer fit containers for the bubbling presence of the gospel. New wineskins (i.e., new forms) must be found to hold the essence of the kingdom.

According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus was consistently enraged by the Pharisees’ tendency to cling to their forms at the expense of divinely mandated functions. Now it is true that the Gospels consistently represent the Pharisees in the bleakest light. Perhaps their portrayal of these religious figures is overly negative, colored by the polemics of another time (the time at which the Gospels were written, decades after the events they recount). Not all Pharisees were apprentices to the Devil (e.g., Nicodemus). But—at their worst—the Pharisees were capable of some shocking confusion over the relative importance of religious forms and functions.

They obsessed about food laws and what went into their stomachs when they should have paid more attention to what came out of their mouths and hearts (Mk. 7:1-23). They worried about proper etiquette on the Sabbath while ignoring God’s demand that his people show mercy (Mt. 12:9-14). They dissected the Scriptures but missed entirely the living Word of God (Jn. 5:39-40). They went to the temple to boasts of their righteousness yet returned home unpentant and unforgiven (Lk. 18:9-14). They wrangled over marriage and divorce, temple worship, and handwashing—while missing the fundamental nature of God. They were deeply worried about entering Pilate’s presence and becoming unclean for the Passover, but not at all concerned about falsely accusing and murdering the Son of God. Each instance was further evidence to Jesus that these men had placed the forms of religion above its functions.

When Jesus distinguished between what was inside a man and what was on the outside, he was addressing ideas very similar to function and form. He touched on this idea in settling the great “hand-washing controversy,” insisting that uncleanness results not from dirty hands (failing to observe the “washing” form) but from a dirty heart (failing to understand the holiness function—Mt. 15:17-20). He decried using external “acts of righteousness” (giving, praying, and fasting) as a means of gaining glory from
men, but divorcing those actions from their intended religious purposes (Mt. 6:1-18).

Most of the “woes” pronounced in Matthew 23 against the religious leaders of his day focused on this inclination to major in external forms and minor in the change of heart that is the essential business of true religion. The Pharisees preached a good message but would not practice it. They had the words right but missed the meaning (Mt 23:2-4). They were fastidious about the form that oaths took but quite careless about honoring their commitments (Mt 23:16-22). They were very concerned about external appearances but neglectful of the internal transformations the Law was intended to foster.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. (Mt. 23:25-28)

Echoing the language of the prophets, Jesus included in these “woes” a statement that is, surely, his sharpest distinction between form and function: “You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness” (Mt. 23:23).

Once again, Jesus draws a line between what is peripheral and what is central, between lesser matters and “the more important matters,” between the forms we use to interact with God and the basic functions to which God has called us.

Whether Jesus is discussing wine and wineskins, commands and traditions, heart-worship and ceremony, the desire to please God and external acts, the inside and the outside, or faithfulness and tithing, he is making a consistent distinction between the functions of religion and its forms.

The Patriarchs. The Prophets. Paul. Jesus. The sources are many. The issues are diverse. The language is varied. But the message in all these biblical references is consistent. When it comes to religion and our life before God, there are principles and there are practices; there are ends and there are means. It is this distinction I am trying to get at by using the terms “form” and “function.”

And Now, A Word From Our Sponsors
A restoration slogan hints to us of the same distinction: “Doing Bible things in Bible ways.” “Bible things” suggests the same ends and purposes, the essential spiritual business, that I am calling “function.” “Bible ways” alludes to the means and methods I have designated “form.” Our movement has tended to focus on the latter, concluding that what was most needed for the church of our day was a closer scrutiny of how the early church attended to its business. So out came the paring knife to begin the meticulous dissection of church practices in Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, etc.

Perhaps we took for granted that we understood what “Bible things” are called for, that we grasped fully the business they (and we) should be about. Perhaps we thought such issues to be so basic as to need no comparable and careful study. Or, perhaps, we so completely confused form and function that we failed to note any difference between “things” and “ways”—and, thus, failed to draw a distinction that could have made a real difference for us.

The result is that we have never found, hardly even looked for, that logical knife which would allow us to probe the New Testament church for signs of its purpose and function. We can tell you how often early churches took the Supper, whether they cooperated with other congregations in benevolence and mission efforts, what
role deacons played, and why they did not have basketball hoops in their multi-purpose auditoriums. But sit us down and ask us to tell you not what they did but who they were, what they valued, the purposes that drove them, the goals they pursued—and we are likely to give you a blank stare.

Yet there is a great deal to learn about this aspect of church life. For it is precisely the issue of function in the New Testament church that bears greatest promise for teaching us who they were and who we, today, are meant to be. In fact, as I will suggest, it is the focus on function that can breathe new life into the restoration plea. We need to be busy restoring the New Testament church. But not the ways in which it conducted business. We need to restore the business itself.