The Free Church

The New Covenant Ekklesia & Community

R.L. Faber

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*The Free Church: The New Covenant Ekklesia & Community by R.L Faber

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Dedication

To my wife, Maria Ediana.

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Preface

This is one of those *forbidden books* that most churches would ban. Most Christian leaders would probably consider this book dangerous and suggest you not read it. There are many similar books from authors like Jon Zens, Robert Banks, David Norrington, David Dyer, Steven Atkerson, John Kuyper Liberty, Frank Viola, Watchman Nee, etc. Our favorite of these authors is Steven Atkerson, though some on this list we have barely read. Good Christian scholars like D.A. Carson read these books,[1] but ordinary Christians are discouraged from reading them. This book will probably not help you feel good. I am writing to Christian men, and I have hard words to say. Most of you will reject these ideas, and I understand why. I know it is good to "accentuate the positives", and I will try, but I feel a bit like Ezekiel[2] or like Micaiah facing the 400 prophets.[3]

However, if you are an unusual Christian who thinks independently, and knows your Bible well, understands good hermeneutics, and is careful to test the teachers you listen to, then you might be ready for this book. If you care about following the original Apostles, and care less about modern church traditions that may conflict, then you may be ready. If you think the modern sermon does not fit with 1 Corinthians 14, you are warm. If you are patriarchal or complementarian, you may be warm. If you think John 17's prayer for unity is significant, you are warm. If you hold to Classical Cessationism (Soft Cessationism) you are warm. If you agree with Douglas Moo, that Romans 7 is about the Jew under the Law and not Paul struggling as a Christian, you are warm. If you appreciate New Covenant Theology or Progressive Covenantalism, you are warm. If all these things are true, and you are concerned about the modern idea of church membership not being biblical, you are getting warmer. If all these are true and you are a young-earth creationist, then you are quite warm and almost hot. If you think all these things are true, and you agree with John Piper's view of divorce and remarriage, I'd say you are hot, and very ready for this book.

So based on that, very few are ready for this book. But if you are brave, read on. We are not saying that all these things need to be true for you to be a godly Christian. These are simply some of our presuppositions so you know them before you read. Most of our friends do not accept half of these points, yet we remain good friends. We can learn from each other if we can overlook our differences and remain in conversation. Discussion with another Christian who thinks differently, but loves God's Word is a good place to be.

One of our highest hopes is to see the church in each town set aside barriers of communication, while maintaining their convictions, and begin to make friends. Our dream is for unbelievers to witness a transformation in the Christian community. We would love to see a visible unity so clear that unbelievers notice—not a visible unity of uniformity, but a unity around the Gospel, with men in discussion and friendly conversation. One good way to start is for men to gather in small groups of about four or so, for breakfast, coffee, their Bibles and perhaps some good books.[4]

[1] D. A. Carson, Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1987), 135.

[2] Ezekiel was told: "Be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks" … Behold, I have made your face as hard as their faces, and your forehead as hard as their foreheads… I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of the LORD being strong on me (Ezekiel 2:6,8,14).

[3] "And the messenger who went to summon Micaiah said to him, 'Behold, the words of the prophets with one mouth are favorable to the king. Let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.' But Micaiah said, 'As the Lord lives, what the Lord says to me, that I will speak'" (1 Kings 22:13-14).

[4] The number four was set as an ideal by Merle Stoltzfus, but the practice of breakfast, the Bible, and coffee, with some good books has been tested with friends since 2010.

Introduction

Jesus is the King of kings. He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb 1:3). We are his unworthy servants, and he grants us the privilege of serving in his kingdom. The Bible presents Jesus Christ as the best news for mankind and the central figure of all time. It tells the story of the early Christian community that grew out of this encounter with Jesus. They gathered together regularly and cared deeply for each other.

I discovered the deep riches of God's grace when I was around nine years old at a boarding school in Africa. I experienced a special Christian community both at home and at school. Since then, I have been observing the church in America. I continue to attend traditional churches, but I am always on the lookout for any church willing to break with cultural traditions and follow the Apostles' traditions.[1] I am also looking for a mindset of unity with true Christians that is willing to reach across denominational barriers.[2]

This book is about the church, and even more so, the *ekklesia*-church. This book is a test of the modern church, because God tells us to test everything.[3] This book is primarily written to men. Women may be interested, but our challenge is related to the violence done against God's Word by men concerning men. We don't have all the answers, but we have observations from over 50 years. We hold Scripture to have the final authority. Church traditions and confessions may be helpful information, but they are not the authority. One concern we have is how divided the church has become, to the point that every unbeliever can see it.[4] When there is talk about unity, there are calls to join known error.[5] We should be opinionated in our doctrine, but Gospel loving Christians don't need to divide in each city or town based *ekklesia*. If divisions happen, let us divide for the right reasons, not just because of church history and abstract theological systems that are not well understood. We encourage a visible form of unity at the city or town level on occasion and active channels of communication instead of our current model of complete separation. You cannot even honestly claim to follow Matthew 18's model of church discipline if there are five churches in town and the disciplined member will just attend one of the other four. Many of us have blindly accepted theological systems without comparing them with other options (when the system itself is the reason for the division). Our secondary priority doctrinal differences have kept us divided for centuries. There are important issues from creation to eschatology, from Apostolic church order to views on divorce and remarriage. We get so opinionated about our preferred systematic theology, yet fail to love our brothers in town. Our modern spiritual elites have held to good doctrines even while they have allowed feminism to grow and have blocked men from the proper *ekklesia* order. Modern church traditions, denominations, and theological systems often go against the traditions of the Apostles. We boldly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ even while we allow the clergy-laity system to continue, ignore the proper *ekklesia* model, and justify denominational divisions.

In making our point, we will naturally lean strongly on Scripture. We will also quote from Christian leaders and books to strengthen our case. Besides Scripture, we stand on the wisdom of godly men and women who have cared deeply for the church. Paul says: "They are all yours" (1 Cor 3:22), so we will often reference leaders from various perspectives. Each person we quote makes a point that contributes to a larger, unified case. We can easily divide ourselves into groups of Paul, Apollos, or Cephas, but we would be wiser to band together as the one true church.[6]

Another important thing to understand up front is what we mean when we say "we" or "our" in these pages. I am writing this way on purpose. A small part of this book will tell my story and will use the terms "I" and "my," but for most of the book, I will speak on behalf of a large body of believers who read the Bible in simplicity and want to avoid institutionalism. So when you read "we see," think of it either as an invitation for you to look at the raw Bible text right alongside me, or as a statement of what our shared community holds to be true.

When we look at the New Testament church, we find a community that is foreign to us. We read of a church that is not a building or an institution. We see ordinary men who changed the world after being with Jesus. We read of a community where every member was important. The men were called on to speak (in the home setting) and the women were encouraged to manage their homes (Titus 2:5). Our modern church does not encourage these things. If we try to apply these ideas, we hit a wall of confusion and misunderstanding.[7]

The church today is a far cry from the original *ekklesia*. Think of the first-century church in Jerusalem, a city-wide church of passionate Christians who loved each other, met in each other's homes, and were respected by the people. They relied on the Holy Spirit and the Spirit working through ordinary men. Our modern church instead relies on the professional clergy, seminary training, and 501(c)(3) institutional structures.[8]

We need God's Spirit and Life from above. Jesus says, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Later, Paul says, "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Corinthians 3:5-6). There is a joy in being set free and a danger in returning to the old way.[9] Jesus makes his New Covenant announcement like this, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [10] This corresponds to the man under the law in Romans 7. Paul describes this man, who like David in Psalm 119, loved God's Law, but found himself, "captive to the law of sin" (Rom 7:23), and needing the "law of the Spirit of life" to be set "free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin" (Rom 8:2).[11]

The first priority is the freedom found in the good news of Jesus the Messiah, who sets us free from sin (Rom 6:7,18,22). Christians are free because of Christ and the "Spirit of life" (Rom 8:2). Christians are released from bondage and the Law of Moses into New Covenant freedom and peace with God. Believers are now free to serve in the new way of the Spirit (Romans 7:6). Let me say that again, because of Christ, we are free from the Law of Moses.[12] We are now under the law of Christ.[13] This new freedom is explained in Romans, Galatians, and 2 Corinthians.[14] Among popular theological systems, New Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism best explain this freedom. If you are only familiar with Reformed Covenant Theology or Dispensational Theology, we recommend learning about New Covenant Theology for its highly biblical focus. A simple reading of Scripture should also lead you to the same place.

The church is also free in various practical ways. For example, the church is free from the state. The state may try to control it, but the kingdom of God is far above earthly kingdoms. The church does not need to submit to government rules and regulations for the Body of Christ to discuss spiritual things. A church may choose to put itself under IRS 501(c)(3) rules, but that is a voluntary choice.

Another freedom is association within a geographic area. A believer is free to associate with any nearby Christian gathering. There is no such thing as church hopping within the local geographic area.[15] If a gathering is nearby, it is your church. If they are too full, and you are new, the loving thing may be to find another assembly.

Another freedom is in giving. We are free to give, and it does not need to be a tithe. The Old Testament giving was around 23 percent and having a king added an additional tax. In the New Testament, the principle is generous giving, but not to a temple system. We are free to give to the poor, mission work or any good Christian cause. There is no obligation to give to a particular ministry or church. With a government Social Security system, we are more free, so we can be more generous with other needs. We ought to be generous, and God does encourage us to be so. But just because we don't have the financial problems of the first-century church does not mean there aren't glaring needs around the world or in poor communities even in our own country.

You do not need to fund the needs of a church building. Others may focus on that, but it may not be your interest. You can gather in a home if you feel burdened by the cost of church buildings. You can meet in a rented building

if your group does not want to buy. You and your group are also free to purchase a traditional church building. You can go church hopping as much as you like, but it is usually best to frequent one gathering to know the people better. One way to think of a modern 501(c)(3) church is that it is a ministry and not the real *ekklesia*. As we will learn, an *ekklesia* is a bit different, and meets at the city or town level. So you may want to put all your energy into supporting your local church ministry or you may be active in other ministies. Just follow your conscience within the Law of Christ and love your neighbor.

The church is free in many behavioral ways, yet the Apostles do hold authority. We are not free to care more about ourselves or pursue selfish ambition. Intead, we have a lot of freedom, and the Old Testament is useful for wisdom. Even though we are free, we may deny ourselves for a higher cause. For example, I am free to drink alcohol, but I have chosen not to do so. When I was younger, many churches seemed to frown on alcohol consumption. Even if they were wrong, it was their conscience conviction. A second reason to refrain from something is to make a point to any Christian who lacks self-control. We should all be encouraging each other to godly faithfulness. Refraining can be a way to encourage the honoring of Scripture, even as you deny yourself a freedom. You can have freedom, and yet deny yourself. You are free to love God and your Christian brothers.

We all have presuppositions. Here are some of mine.[16] My assumptions include the priority of the Apostles' traditions over modern church traditions. I hold to the Classical Cessationism (Soft Cessationism) view of spiritual gifts. This view appreciates open-but-cautious scholars, but is more cessationist.[17] I hold to the priority of the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting over the modern church service. I assume the first-century churches create a pattern for today. My assumptions about the roles of elder, pastor, and teacher fit with 1 Corinthians 14 and the original nature of *ekklesia*. I consider *ordination* a continuation of the institutional *clergy system*. The Bible shows elders to be responsible at the city or town level (Titus 1:5, etc).[18] I look to the Bible for truth and not to creeds. New Covenant Theology seems more biblically faithful than Covenant or Dispensational Theology[19] The modern church is way too formal, professional, and performance-driven. I used to be a complementarian, but now I am traditional and patriarchal.[20] Zachary Garris explains how complementarianism has shifted toward egalitarianism. The traditional and patriarchal view follows the plain biblical text on the respective roles of men and women. For some of you, these presuppositions are enough to end the conversation. But I hope you will read on.

Many of us who look at Scripture have come to appreciate a new, clarifying overview of the Bible known as New Covenant Theology.[21] This will be an underlying assumption throughout these pages. If you are not familiar with NCT, just know that it focuses deeply on the Bible (sola scriptura) and keeps Jesus central. But the label itself is not important. Many Christians have read the Bible and come to the same basic conclusions without any theological system to guide them. Even though NCT as a formal system is relatively new, scholars have understood the problems with Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism for years. Sometimes they just observed these truths directly from the Scripture without knowing or preferring the NCT label. I know, because I learned this from a gifted Greek professor years before hearing about NCT.[22]

I first learned the Bible without the institutional church. I had a wonderful Christian community, but no *church*. There was authority but no pastor. Sometimes our church traditions can blind us to what the Bible is saying. For most of my adult life, I have lived in the traditional church system, and I understand the comfort of it. I can see why no one wants to look too seriously at the early church. But over the years, my convictions and awareness of these issues have grown.

As I see it, the reforming impulse of the Reformation has stopped. I am not looking for change sake. I am looking for what honors Jesus. I am always wondering about today’s church and how it has strayed into ways that work contrary to New Covenant principles. Jesus said that we love him if we obey his commandments.

When the Bible uses words like "church", we have to know a little more about the etymology. The Christian community is too important to abandon to any form of controlling influence. We can easily misunderstand Jesus if we go too fast. Jesus said that he would build his *ekklesia*-church, "And the gates of hell shall not prevail

against it" (Matt 16:18). The standard translation of *ekklesia* is 'church', but we want to know why some people prefer to translate it as 'assembly', 'community', 'gathering' or 'called out ones.'

Martin Luther translated 'ekklesia' as 'Gemeinde' (community), never 'Kirke.' Tyndale translated it as 'congregation' which contributed to his being burned at the stake.[23] The King James Version translated *ekklesia* as 'church' with the express purpose of strengthening the institution.[24] The best simple translation is probably 'assembly', 'community' or 'gathering.'[25] But since we are so familiar with translating *ekklesia* as 'church', please forgive us for frequently doing the same.

Jesus shows his active role in the churches in Revelation 1-3. We could have said the *ekklesias* of Revelation, or the *communities* of Revelation, but words get stuck in our minds. The word *church* is powerfully planted in our minds, even if it is not the best translation. In these *churches*, some are spoken of as conquering, and others are failing. Some are more noble than others. What matters to Jesus is behavior and character in each *church* and in each *church member*. Later, we will discuss how the simple idea of *church member* has led to a great misunderstanding. Thankfully, Jesus is in complete control, and he is watching us.

What does Jesus mean when he says, "the kingdom of God is in the midst of you," or "within you?" (Luke 17:21) Paul makes it very clear when he says, "Do you not know that you *(plural)* are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? *(plural)* (1 Cor 3:16)[26] God, who is all powerful, actually lives in us! As we go about life, Jesus says: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus gave us these parting instructions: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

The task we are given is great, yet very few of us are focused on it. Sometimes we claim success and build up our denominational or theological system, but any real success is brough about by the Spirit. The real *ekklesia* -church is not organizational, but is centered on likemindedness (Phil 2:2) and love (1 Cor 13).

Obeying Jesus and his commands is important, but the New Covenant includes doing everything in love. We are called to more than good behavior, and we are called to more than being a witness to our immediate neighborhood. Jesus calls us to a visible *ekklesia*, to visible love, and to make disciples of all nations (sharing the Good News broadly). Jesus has dramatic, world changing plans. Amazingly, he chooses to work through us instead of doing everything directly himself. It is like a parent wanting to teach a child to do a task that the parent could much more easily do alone, but the training has a purpose.

In the process of the Christian life, we can be found worthy or unworthy, faithful or unfaithful.[27] It depends on whether we are living like Timothy or Demas. The Kingdom advances as the true *ekklesia*-church advances. Our churches do well if we have courage like the faithful in the Revelation churches. But if we entertain our lifes away, we are weakening ourselves. If we push our church and denomination to the point of ignoring the division, we are not building. Jesus is watching everything, and remains in control, but we are responsible. Jesus chooses when to prune the vines. He wants growth. I have seen this in my own backyard. All my unpruned trees are completely useless. They are ready to be cut down. My fruit trees are doing nothing. Likewise, some churches may be growing outwardly while Jesus is thinking of pruning. He knows the heart. There is no value in trying to look good.

The main idea in this book is to show the New Covenant joy of the Lord based on freedom from the Law. With that foundation, we think this leads to imitating the founders, and we should then see the attractiveness of the original first-century *ekklesia*-church. With a healthy New Covenant joy, we can proceed to building on the foundation of the Apostles, who set up the original *ekklesia* communities and recorded how we should continue building. Our failures generally are tied to preferring our ways over God's ways. When it comes to the *ekklesia* -church, we want to follow the foundation builders, who hold the genuine authority to say what should happen in all the churches.

[1] Many people claim to follow the teachings of the apostles, but we like to test to see if this is true. My goal is to follow Paul's traditions rather than our own traditions, especially if they conflict. The Apostles are our guide to proper traditions. Following and imitating the Apostles is quite challenging because of the 2,000 years of history and church tradition (some of our tradition is really man's tradition, or tradition inherited through Reformation history originally from Roman Catholicism). See 2 Thess 2:15, 1 Corinthians 11, 14, Colossians 3, Ephesians 4, Galatians 5, etc.

[2] This takes wisdom to unite with the true and separate from the false. Ecumenism that blindly unites is evil. Jesus prays for unity in John 17, but he was not afraid to let half of his disciples walk away. Paul argues for unity like this: "May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus," (Romans 15:5). And he adds: "complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (Phil 2:2).

[3] God's Word calls us to "test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5:20-22). See also: 1 John 4:1, Romans 12:2, Eph 5:8-10, 1 Tim 1:3, 4:16, 6:3-4.

[4] D. A. Carson, The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 10.

[5] Iain H. Murray, Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 21.

[6] David W. Dyer, The One True Church (Clackamas, OR: A Grain of Wheat Ministries, 2007), 152.

[7] Modern church is vastly different from the original ekklesia. Tradition, liturgy, and performance define our sit-in-the-pew experience each week. Denominations divide us. Behind the scenes, every church is voluntarily tied to the government with 501(c)(3) status. There is very little concern for the traditions of the Apostles. Sometimes Old Covenant theology leaks into New Covenant life. Other times we go beyond Scripture to human logic and philosophy. We often follow cultural expectations. The traditions of history are powerful.

[8] Even the best books on the topic are flawed. Here are two examples of good books, but that are fundamentally flawed in how they unquestioningly support the institutional church. Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership: Restoring the Eldership to Its Rightful Place in the Local Church, rev. ed. (Littleton, CO: Biblical Eldership Resources, 2024), 308-309; and Piper starts out well with a study on "worship", but yet deviates. If you know Tom Wadsworth's study, you can see Piper's institutionalism as he shifts from biblical thoughts to practical "worship service" thoughts. John Piper, Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002), 238-240.

[9] Some abstract systematic theological systems can blind our eyes to the New Covenant freedom, and pull us back to the Law of Moses. Cross To Crown Ministries warns about the danger of abstract systematic theology. Sometimes liturgy, creed and confession distract from Scripture or incite division. https://crosstocrown.org/

[10] When some theologians discuss this, I can trust them. Blake White describes this announcment of Jesus with a theological foundation that is careful to accent this freedom we have in Christ. A. Blake White, God's Chosen People: Promised to Israel, Fulfilled in the Church (Colorado Springs: Cross to Crown Ministries, 2017), 83. With others you may need to read carefully to see if they are leaving out this huge announcement when this idea doesn't suit their theological system. This may be the case with, Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "The Theology of Pentecost," in Perspectives on Pentecost: Studies in the New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1979), 13-41.

[11] See Doug Moo's Romans commentary (2nd Edition). See also CrossToCrown's YouTube Flesh/Spirit study on Romans 7: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ocZhS4_MPM&list=PL5Yobt1jZDd8BHCdQxAXI7vObWGjrEDrt CrossToCrown.org: https://crosstocrown.org/ We also have an article on Romans 7: https://rfaber.com/romans7.html

[12] 2 Cor 3:17, Gal 5:18, Rom 7:4,6, Heb 8:13, and the context of these and other passages.

[13] God calls us to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). Jesus says to obey his commandments, and speaks about love. 1 John speaks about the importance of love. Romans 14 shows love by caring about the conscience. James speaks about the perfect law, the law of liberty. This is not a complete list, but it serves to illustrate the idea.

[14] Rom 8, 2 Cor 3, Gal 5

[15] Joshua Harris, Stop Dating the Church! Fall in Love with the Family of God (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2004), 17.

[16] I want to be honest with your time by letting you know some of my convictions before you spend the time to read this book. Leviticus says, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him" (Lev 19:17).

[17] D.A. Carson, Showing the Spirit, Wayne Grudem, The Gift Of Prophecy, Sam Storms, Understanding Spirital Gifts

[18] Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership, 1st ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 143.

[19] We recommend New Covenant Theology and its close relative, Progressive Covenantalism, over Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology.

[20] Complementarianism has compromised 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. See Zachary Garris, Honor Thy Fathers: Recovering the Anti-Feminist Theology of the Reformers (Dallas: New Christendom Press, 2024). Garris shows how 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 stands on its own as a binding command. See, John MacArthur, ed., The MacArthur Study Bible, English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, n.

[21] New Covenant Theology and Progressive Covenantalism, are like brothers. NCT is a bit older and served as the initial framework for developing this improved theological system. PC is more recent in academia, and tries to avoid some of the false accusations often leveled against NCT. There are also those who see the same biblical ideas but avoid the labels altogether.

[22] I am thinking of Dr. Ferris L. McDaniel, from the 1986 era at Northeastern Bible College, which was located in New Jersey.

[23] See Tyndale's defense, "An Answer unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue"

[24] "Tyndale's preferment of words like 'congregation' for ekklesia and 'elder' for priest was radical and provocative… By avoiding 'church,' the reformers sought to break the monopoly of the institutional hierarchy." - Daniell, David. The Bible in English: Its History and Influence. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.

[25] https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/54140/in-matthew-1618-how-should-ekklesia-be-translated-and-understood

[26] (But there are other ideas. Behold, He Comes with the Clouds (Rev. 1:7))

[27] Faithful: 1 Cor 4:17, Eph 6:21, Col 1:7, 4:7, 4:9, 1 Peter 5:12, 3 John 5, Rev 2:13

1

My Church Story

I grew up in Africa on a mission station. I also attended a boarding school for missionary kids. I stayed at the boarding school for three to four months at a time. At school, I never went to a church service and I never heard a sermon. This was probably the most spiritually meaningful time in my life, because I met God. I enjoyed being part of the Christian community aspect at my school. This is where I read the Bible, learned to love God, and participated in the community. Two other kids ran away from school. They could not handle the rules. Spankings were given for talking during midday quiet time. God used this for good in my life. I have only good memories of this time in my life.

When I was home at the mission station, I often attended the missionary-led prayer meetings and church services. This was a proper church service, but I did not understand the preacher. He spoke in a language called Kikaonde. I would attend Sunday school with other Zambian children who barely spoke English. So, my most foundational thoughts about God and His church happened at boarding school. At boarding school, we never attended *church*, but it often felt like we *lived church.* Each day was school, play, and this kind of *church.* On many days, we had a small-group singing time with a British-lady teacher. At the end of the day, a man would lead a Bible reading time in the boys' dorm. We regularly ate together in a dining hall.

Part of the boarding school routine was a mandatory quiet time around noon each day. This was a strictly enforced quiet time, with serious consequences if you did not comply. In the morning, we had required devotional readings using a "Scripture Union" devotional. But during the mid-day quiet time, I found myself with nothing else to do, and became interested in reading my KJV Bible. Reading the Bible during quiet time was not required, but the quiet time was a no-distraction time. There was nothing to do, so the Bible reading became a serious interest for me. By the time I was 10, I had covered most of the Bible with a strong emphasis on the New Testament.

This boarding school experience was a very special Christian community, yet we never 'met in homes' or attended a church 'service.' Of course, there is nothing wrong with meeting in homes. And it probably makes the most sense if you want to obey the Apostles in the most obvious way. There is wisdom in following the 1 Corinthians 14 style meeting and the 1 Corinthians 11 full-meal Lord’s Supper. But this boarding school experience showed that an institution can create an environment that is an early church like community.

The Zambian church where I lived was started by missionaries in the 1930s. I recall the full Bible being translated into Kikaonde around 1975. The church was unified in the early days. The church was growing. It wasn’t until much later that I noticed the denominations creeping into the area. I think of the early days of the evangelical church in Zambia as special times, where the church trusted the missionaries in how to setup churches. Many good things were learned. But the Zambian church had to do it on its own, and today, it is good to see the church being a witness and a light to the world.

The early church in Jerusalem was very relational, a strong witness for God, home-based, city-based, and a whole lot more. My African church experience showed me church did not need formality. If the African church became a bit formal, it was because they were taught to be that way by the missionaries. The natural Zambian way of spending time together is in a circular gathering. The missionaries, however, showed the Africans how to sit in pews and listen to the preacher.

In America, when I did *go to church*, I started to develop concerns as I compared our church experience with

Scripture. During most of my teenage years, our family attended a small "Bible church" in Pennsylvania. We also visited a larger conservative Baptist church and an Evangelical Free church in New Jersey. Because of my father's connections, we also visited many other churches on occasion. Attending these American churches helped me evaluate the simple African church, my no-church experience, and the more formal-complex American church system. As I read my Bible, I had thoughts and concerns. Teenagers are not consulted about these things, so I kept the thoughts to myself.

I had very few Christian friends at church or at school. I did not know any Christians in public school and this was tested when a couple teachers asked the Christians to raise their hands. There was little encouragment from our little church that was so small and hardly had any teenage youth. My two brothers and one other family were the main part of the 'youth group.' Our little church tried, but being small is hard. If I read in the Bible about the feasts of Israel, or the huge Jerusalem church, I knew there was something odd about our modern independent isolated church practice. There were very few young people at the Wednesday prayer meeting. These times taught patience, trust, and faithfulness. There is good when things are hard and you struggle through it, but God's way is patterned in the New Testament. All churches in the New Testament were city/town churches. But God works in spite of circumstances, and my difficult days in my public school drew me to the Psalms as I recall. I often read my Bible on my own in the evenings. In these years, questions started to form about what I would later learn is a more interesting *ekklesia* design. I pondered these things, but no one else seemed interested. In those days there was no internet and information was difficult. So, I kept the thoughts to myself.

Many years later, clarity came through a friend and a book. I was working in software engineering at Reuters, my second professional job, when I met a friend, Dan Holsopple. He was interested in talking about Christian things even at the job (at appropriate times). At one point he mentioned a ministry called NTRF. Dan was very different from most Christians in a good way. His ideas about the church were different. He was more into discussion, home based meeting and generally more relationally involved than the usual Christian guy. He loved people and had a group of friends that met regularly apart from church activities. He was not perfect, and he recently died, but I have good memories of Dan. As I read an NTRF book by Steve Atkerson, I started to see an author who had seriously been observing the New Testament ways for a while. His book, "Toward a House Church Theology", was refreshing, bold, and biblical.[1] This book was clearly looking to the Bible and the Apostle's traditions for how to do church. In his first book, Steve was a passionate man on a mission to restore the New Testament church to the original ways of the Apostles. He was a pastor, who had gotten into house churches, and he had many biblical insights and practical experiences. This drew me in to read other "forbidden books." on the topic.[2]

Even though the ideas were good, there is great resistance to a biblical church model. Two things have stopped the advancement of what I might call a biblical-relational church. The one issue is of course the traditional church doesn't like it. But the other is an embracing of the "house church" idea in a wrong way. Years later, I have seen the "house church movement", become so egalitarian that I cannot support it. Another danger with this movement is isolation. One solution for our times is to do what my friend Dan did. He had his circle of friends, but he also stayed involved in a traditional church. A successful house church on its own is not the biblical model. The Jerusalem church added 3000 in one day, and this must have grown the house churches, but they were still one church in Jerusalem. But our modern way is that every church is independent. Any house church with this mindset is still failing to follow the biblical model. We recommend staying connected with the traditional church, not just for old friends sake, but also to follow the biblical model. Modern house churches tend to be isolated, Charismatic and egalitarian. The result of this resistance to following Scripture is a non-biblical form of house church and no NTRF style church. NTRF does focus on the healthy house church model, but even NTRF needs to be reminded about the importance of the visible church at the city. In the end, I have rejected the current house church movement, but I hope for a biblical church movement, someday.[3] Over time, my friend Steve Atkerson softened his approach, lost some of his cutting edge biblical-house-church passion, and started to promote "small churches" and assisting small traditional churches. He apparently wanted to mend relationships with many of his Southern Baptist small church friends that he had grown up with. But he still kept

writing, carefully and thoughtfully. And perhaps for him, this was wisdom, to make friends, as Jesus would say. To keep a positive encouraging path forward for the many small churches he knew.

Among the "forbidden books" there were writers like Jon Zens and Robert Banks. D.A. Carson mentions these writers in the footnotes of his "Showing the Spirit."[4] As a scholar, D.A. Carson reads books like these, but does not seem free to say much about it. For most Christians, these are "forbidden books" that challenge the status quo. Some of these books really are problematic, like obsessive egalitarianism, but they also ask some good questions that should be asked. In church sermons, I have heard warnings about "bloggers", sermons end with sermons. There is no discussion or dialog, even when a sermon is controversial. Most Christians have no interest in the "structure" of the chruch, or Apostolic "traditions", but to me, these authors inspire thought. They are a continual source of both encouragement and frustration depending on their approach. It often comes down to what they are saying and how they honor Scripture. At times, some of these authors are brilliant. At other times they are lacking.[5]

As I mention some things in my story, I am sure some readers will see things differently. My closest friends see things differently. But the differences should be discovered. Good conversation can happen if we know and experience and share in spite of our differences. Love is seen when we interact in spite of strong convictions. If you see something that bothers you, you should pause to find out why another person believes the Bible that way. In the end, after you have considered, you must follow your own convictions. But sometimes you will change your ideas when you get a bit older. Each of us will stand before God someday, and we do well to listen to each other. Think of it like this. I have spent 50 years listening to the preachers and teachers in the church.[6] Now, before I die, I feel the need to share a few thoughts. When you get old, you may also want to share some thoughts. You may discover something important and say, "Hey. Listen. There is something in the Bible that I found interesting."

[1] Steve Atkerson, ed., Toward a House Church Theology (Atlanta: New Testament Reformation Fellowship, 2003).

[2] Forbidden books, meaning books that are generally avoided by most Christians, and frowned on my most pastors. These books talk about alternative ideas following the Apostles that are radical. Like home based churches. These are generally not appreciated by modern church leaders.

[3] I would rather continue attending a traditional church with a senior paster preaching sermons, a male eldership and a silent laity than to attend the typical current house church that is usually egalitarian. I don't see any good in the current-modern house church movement that encourages equality-participation (contradicting Scripture). I would rather that we all sit quietly listening to the one man show. I hold to the traditional interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35. If there is no choice, I am on the side of the traditional church that silences everyone. This simple following of the plain reading of Scripture has been my understanding since the mid 1970s when I was a child and read the Bible and the New Testament more carefully, at age 9. I am not be swayed by the modern scholars. Zachary Garris does a good service to the Christians community to revive this mindset on this controversial topic with his book on honoring the Reformed church 'Fathers.'

[4] D. A. Carson's Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987)

[5] Some YouTube authors are dangerous of course. This is where dialog should happen. But if a sermon warns about "bloggers" and there is no discussion or dialog, we have missed the geniune ekklesia in 1 Corinthians 14. Geninine ekklesia includes analysis and testing.

[6] I continue to attend the traditional church. I like to see the Christian community in action, and join in the singing, listen to the sermon, hear the prayers, and look for good conversation. Many times I can think of the day as a perfect Sunday at church. Our family likes church. But, at the same time, I have concerns about the modern church. I am perplexed when as I compare the modern church to what the Bible says. I am forced to question it. I wonder about the building-temple concept, the role of the pastor, the singing, the conversations. I can't talk about it with anyone, but I question almost everything.

2

The Meaning Of Ekklesia

The word 'church' is rooted in Kyriakon (the Lord's House, a building), but the actual Greek word used is *ekklesia* (the called-out ones, people). In ancient secular Greek culture, an *ekklesia* was not a religious building or institution. It referred to a political or civic assembly of citizens called out to deliberate, govern, or handle community affairs."[1] It is shocking to think that this mistranslation has persisted in most English translations for so many years.

Jesus chose this word for called-out ones to describe the foundational gathering and assembly meeting of His Kingdom. The concept of the *ekklesia* (a town council) is similar and yet different from the religious word *synagogue* (a religious assembly). The early church knew the word *ekklesia* well, because there were *ekklesias* all around. Most towns were governed this way, with Roman rule over the city-based *ekklesia* authority. Amazingly, the secular word *ekklesia* fits perfectly with the early church gatherings as described in 1 Corinthians 14. The Greek meaning for the word *ekklesia* does not fit the modern church because it strongly avoids anything spontaneous and any kind of open deliberation.

A significant aspect of the *ekklesia* is its city domain. *Ekklesias* were city based. The domain of an *ekklesia* (both in the Bible and in the origins of the word) was the city ('polis'). "In ancient Greece-most notably in classical Athens-the *ekklesia* was explicitly rooted in the *polis* (the city-state). You did not join this civic assembly through a broad application, election, or religious initiation. Instead, membership was an automatic right and duty granted exclusively to the adult male citizens of that specific city-state."[2]

The Old Testament was also governed at the city level by elders. Deuturonomy 21 shows the need for the elders and judges to come to an incident and measure the distance to the surrounding cities. Then it says, "the elders of that city that is nearest" will be responsible (Deut 21:1-7). In another case with a stubbon and rebellious son who is old enough to be a drunkard, but will not "obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother" causes the "elders of the city" to get involved. Then the "men of the city" also get involved. The issue in initiated by the "elders of the city" and implemented by the "men of the city." This clearly shows *ekklesia* characteristics. The city elders met at the city gate *pylē* and the future Athenian *ekklesia* met at the *Pnynx*(a hill) or the *agora* (marketplace). They did not meet in a hidden private club. The deliberations were a public, localized, geographic event. The New Testament *ekklesia*, the secular *ekklesia* and the Old Testament city elders were all the same for being at the city level and making the adult males responsible at the city level.

As we consider citizenship in God's *ekklesia*, this membership idea is clarified by understanding these roots. Do you have to join in membership to be part of God's *ekklesia*? How do you get into God's Kingdom and His *ekklesia*? Entrance is simply by faith in Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:27 says, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Any modern church that wants to restrict *church membership* and add additional rules of entry is going against the root of *ekklesia*. There is a lot of confusion with church membership these days. [3] [4] If we abandon the responsibility of adult males at the city level, we have abandoned Old Testament heritage used by the New Testament and rooted in the secular word Jesus chose, *ekklesia*. We can abandon whatever we want, but just like the *ekklesias* in Revelation, Jesus may or may not approve.

If modern churches create little churches smaller than the city domain are they diverging from God's Word? Are they diverging from the root meaning and history of *ekklesia*? The burden of proof is on the ones diverging from Scripture and the history of *ekklesia*. But we will dig into this later. This is just mentioned because church is

based on the Greek word *ekklesia* and the context of *ekklesia* was always the city.

Being a member of an *ekklesia* was significant. As a citizen of the city, and a qualified member, you had value based on your participation. "In the ancient secular Greek world, a true citizen was defined entirely by his voice and participation in governance: 'He who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizen of that state.'"[5]

But how did the *ekklesia* manage participation by all its citizens? How could a man speak to the assembly and maintain order? What was done to ensure good and decent order for the speakers? Keep in mind, this relates to the very significant chapter in the Bible on church assembly order, 1 Corinthians 14. Amazingly, the secular *ekklesia* put a lot of effort into allowing an open opportunity for any qualified citizen to speak. "The democratic nature of the assembly ensured that elites could not monopolize the platform: "The herald… does not exclude from the platform the man whose ancestors have not held a general's office, nor even the man who earns his daily bread by working at a trade; nay, these men he most heartily welcomes, and for this reason he repeats again and again the invitation, 'Who wishes to address the Assembly?'"[6] Did you catch the significance of that? The common man was encouraged to participate and speak in the assembly. This is exactly the model in the early church in 1 Corinthians 14. Unfortunately, this model is prohibited in our modern churches. "In the secular Greek *ekklesia*, order was maintained not by dictatorial rulers, but by designated chairmen like the epistatēs (the daily overseer) and the proedroi (the committee of front-row presiders)."[7] In our modern churches only the ordained can speak. This is an Old Testament concept where priests were ordained. In the New Testament, elders were appointed. The Old Testament clergy-laity distinction has ended. The New Testament doesn't say how the elders were supposed to maintain order in the church assembly. But we know from 1 Corinthians 14 they also had to follow the order prescribed. In the New Testament, pastors and elders were not allowed to stand up and speak out of order. If a non Christian visitor interrupted the meeting, and the other men did not deal with it, then everyone would expect the elders to immediately deal with the situation. This is not clearly stated, but this is assumed when the church is told to maintain order. We can get more clarity by learning about the secular *ekklesia* along with 1 Corinthians 14.

Let's be very clear. Men were allowed to speak for the benefit of the *ekklesia* (the community gathered). What is the situation today? In our modern churches no one can speak except the ordained clergy. The idea of *ekklesia* has always been clear, but we have modified the original intent. Today, no ordinary man, even if he is a *church member*, is allowed to speak. We have turned the New Testament *ekklesia* into an Old Testament tabernacle experience with an ordained orator. Perhaps, you say, it is good as it is and doesn't really matter. Why does it matter if we are preaching the Gospel and worshipping God?[8] John Piper is convinced we are doing it right when there is faithful teaching. He says, "We preach not only for their growth, but because if they don't grow, they perish."[9] He doesn't mention 1 Corinthians 14, nor does he notice how many churches have men nodding off. The best way to learn, grow, and encourage one another, is simply to follow the Apostles and their way of doing the *ekklesia*. I have strong reservations about what we are doing. We may think that preaching is meant for believers, but the Greek meaning of the New Testament *preaching* was really evangelism to unbelievers. The Christian gathering of believers is more like 1 Corinthians where the Apostles assumed speaking and teaching for the encouragement of the body. C.H. Dodd says it well, "The New Testament writers draw a clear distinction between preaching and teaching… Preaching (kerygma) is the public proclamation of Christianity to the non-Christian world. … Teaching (didache) is the ethical instruction, explanation, and localized grounding of believers."[10]

It is very interesting that both the secular and biblical *ekklesia* had overseers. But the secular *ekklesia* overseers were different. "Rather than dictating policy or silencing citizens, these secular overseers exercised a non-invasive, procedural stewardship, safeguarding the legal order of the meeting so that every eligible citizen could freely exercise his democratic right to speak."[11] "This structural role directly parallels the New Testament model of the elder or overseer (episkopos), who stands before the congregation to protect the relational peace and order of the community rather than to dominate individual voices."[12] The true *ekklesia*, both secular and biblical, does

not elevate the solo speaker (*preaching*), but rather, protects the rights of all men to speak (1 Corinthians 14).

There is also something fascinating about the word *church* that I have learned from history. As I read the Bible as a 9 year old, using the KJV, I did not know the interesting history of the word *church* in the KJV. I did not know that the KJV had not only taken much of its translation text from Tyndale, but also had promoted institutionalism by using the word *church*. Tyndale explained it like this, "Therefore, I use this word 'congregation' because it expresses the nature of the thing, and avoids the word 'church' which the people have been taught to understand only as the clergy."[13] I did not know that King James had forced the translation of *church* against the will of the translators, "The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, viz.: as the word 'Church' not to be translated 'Congregation' etc."[14] King James was very successful in getting the whole Christian world to think of the *ekklesia* as an institution led by the clergy.

It is quite amazing that Jesus would choose such a democratic secular word like *ekklesia* as the basic concept for building His Kingdom. The real meaning of *ekklesia* directly translates into a properly functioning New Testament community like 1 Corinthians 14. God's new community is a core idea of his Kingdom and Jesus is the head of the *ekklesia*.[15] Our Christian behavior in the *ekklesia* matters greatly even if our gatherings are more like the King James's idea of the institution 'church' and there is no proper functioning. Order matters, but we can be responsible for our behavior, as Paul says, that "you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the *ekklesia* of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

[1] See BDAG, 3rd ed., s.v. "□κκλησία"; and Karl Ludwig Schmidt, "□κκλησία," in TDNT, 3:513.

[2] (1). Tara Caudle, "The Ekklesia as an Assembly That Invokes Response," Liberty University Journal of Statesmanship & Public Policy 1, no. 1 (2020): Article 12. (2). Mogens Herman Hansen, The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 125–128; cf. Aristotle, Politics 3.1275a.

[3] 1

[4] membership

[5] Aristotle, Politics 3.1275b.

[6] Aeschines, Against Timarchus 1.27.

[7] See Mogens Herman Hansen, The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 140–141, 250.

[8] worship

[9] John Piper, Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry, rev. ed. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 111.

[10] C. H. Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936), 7.

[11] Cf. Aristotle, Constitution of the Athenians 44.1–3.

[12] See P. J. Rhodes, A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 530–533.

[13] An Answer unto Sir Thomas More's Dialogue (1531)

[14] Rules to be Observed in the Translation of the Bible (1604), Rule 3

[15] (Eph 5:23, 1:22-23, 4:14, Col 1:18, 2:19)

3

The Modern Church System

The modern church system is very different from the 1st century *ekklesia*. It is hard to compare a church that emphasizes the Old Testament style "worship service" to the early church participatory meeting (1 Corinthians 14). It is hard to compare the token meal to a Passover inspired Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11. The modern preacher and sermon is very different from the taking turns to speak and the dialog-*preaching* that Paul did when Eutychcus fell out of the window (Acts 20:9). The early church met in homes which allowed them to add 3000 in one day. Today's modern church would spend millions of dollars to prepare space for that many new members. How can you compare the great burden of the 501(c)(3) and formal worship service model to the early church that was free of these burdens. The 1st century church could add 3000 in one day, but our modern church can get nervous when there are too many people. These are some basic differences. But the real question is, does it matter?

The modern church almost exclusively hires professional pastors with seminary training and excellent speaking abilities. This is completely different from the 1st century *ekklesia* led by fishermen and ordinary men. The first century church had no seminary-like training. Instead it had man-to-man training as described in 2 Timothy 2:2. The 1st century church was led by the Holy Spirit and worked at the city/town level. In Antioch, for example, it says, "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:2). The church was also led by the Apostles like this command from Paul, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). The modern church is very different. Generally, there is no agreement at the city/town level. We have our denominations and associations. But every town has its own groups that do things as they see fit. The modern church does not look for agreement at the town level. These are significant differences.

If we focus on the institutional modern church, the organization becomes an important characteristic and in the USA, it is managed under the IRS 501(c)(3) rules. The modern church seems to think that the organization is required. The purpose may be primarily to save a lot on taxes, but churches consistently choose the 501(c)(3) organization which includes the 14 Part guidelines. With this model, there is an expectation of a senior pastor and a staff, even for a small church. With the modern system, a "worship service" is expected, and defined by the rules. Great effort goes into the Sunday "worship service" planning. This is a quality event so the attenders and members have a good experience. The people sitting in the pews are sometimes called the "consumers." Sometimes they are called the laity. The "pastor" is often called the "clergy." The "senior pastor" is focused on delivering a sermon with crafted oratory skill. The 1st century church had no such thing.

The typical modern church will have a board of elders and deacons, besides the senior pastor. Some of the elders may be pastors. There may be a director, an administrative assitant, assistant pastor(s), young adult leader(s), administrative roles for children, facilities, calendar, website, etc. There may be a trustee board with a chair person. Often, there will be effort put into maintaining the sermons being filmed and uploaded. There are many other roles and tasks. The modern church system is complex. The 1st century *ekklesia* was very different. The early church was city/town based, they met in homes, and the leaders were not the focus of the weekly meeting. The leaders did not dominate the speaking time. The leaders were expected to maintain order, but not to dominate the speaking time (1 Cor 14). Because the 1st century church met at the city/town level and met in homes, adding 3000 new members in one day was possible. The church could be large at the city level, but at the same time, all the members knew their neighbors from their home meetings. These differences are significant.

The modern church tends to spend most of its money on buildings and staff. According to a quick AI search, about 50% goes for staff salaries and about 25% on buildings. There is another 25% for everything else, with about 11% for missions and evangelistic efforts, and 10% for programs and local ministry. Networks and denominational commitments take another 6%. This is a big contrast with the 1st century *ekklesia* that prioritized helping the poor and assisting traveling missionaries. In the early church, you were more likely to be put up in a home if you were a traveling minister, but today, you would be more likely to be provided a hotel. In the modern church, you sit and hear the sermon and don't interact with the preacher. But, like Paul, in the 1st century *ekklesia*, you might talk interactively, even all night on some occasions. There was no bulletin, so the meetings were not program and schedule driven. No planning was needed in the 1st century speaking, but today, much planning goes into the weekly meeting. In the early church, no money was needed for the "building and staff", so all the money could be spent on the poor and evangelism/missions. The elders who had to be able to teach in a home setting, were probably all completely unpaid in many towns. Later on in church history, they started looking for money. But the 1st century church, other than giving to the poor and missions, did not really need money. Food was brought by all, or by the more well to do, in some cases. Homes were volunteered. Money for basic operating expenses (building/staff) was not needed.

We usually point to Hebrews 10:25 to show that we ought to "go to church", "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another" The main question is what kind of going to church was intended by the author of Hebrews? For some Christians the modern church is so completely unlike the New Testament church that they don't even see it as church. Are we providing opportunities for people who want to meet in the way of the New Testament guidelines? Many towns in America will have no opportunities. The only churches in town will be the traditional church organizations.

Some Christians are bothered by the organization aspect of the modern church. But the traditional church is really a 501(c)(3) organization with strong connections to the government. The IRS Form 1023 and the 14 part guidelines have strict rules controlling a church. These guidelines actually break New Testament unified-body ideas at the city/town level. Usually no one asks about what was said in the IRS Form 1023 describing your church. There is usually just a quiet omission or justification for submitting to 501(c)(3) rules for the tax advantage. But some Christians may question voluntarily submitting to the IRS's system. The 14 characteristics of a church questionarie is quite invasive if you fill it out in detail. The ordinary person does not know what is filled out, and when he or she is submitting to if submitting to this second membership (The first being part of the body of Christ). We see conflict and formality when we look at the questions. The focus should be faithfulness to the teaching of the Apostles, but instead we see overlooking of biblical ideas.

Are we doing church right? Does God approve of our IRS compliant, consumer oriented, and formal church meetings? Are we doing right to sit in the pew, listen to the sermon and leave after a little conversation. (Note: If you talk long afterward, you are doing well. You are the exception and your church may be the exception). If you attend a Sunday School or a "small group" meeting how do the meetings compare with 1 Cor 14? Is there an effort to follow the ways of the Apostles? Sometimes modern church can become a religious duty that we impose on ourselves. Jesus was offended at the Pharasees making life hard on the common folk. In the best case, however, we go to church with friends and enjoy going. If we do this, and try to make friends, not only at church, we do well, and follow Jesus who said, "make friends for yourselves" (Luke 16:9). But there are more questions. Is church more about worship or encouraging one another? [1] Does the church have a meaningful impact on our non-Christian community? How do we relate to other churches in town? How are we obeying the "Great Commission?" (Matt 28:19-20)

There is no gathering on earth that is more important than the New Testament 'ekklesia'/church. This gathering is special even when it is ordinary. Jesus is the head of the church, we are the body.

Jesus is very concerned about the priority of his headship. He is our Teacher (Matt 23:8-22). All others must be careful if you are a teacher or instructor (Matt 23:8-22). In 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, 3:1-9 Paul warns us about

becoming too enamored with particular leaders. Some of the Corinthians were willing to follow "Paul" or "Apollos" or "Cephas" to the point of division. Paul explains in chapter 3, "So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future - all are yours, and you are Christ's and Chris is God's." This is a powerful explanation that says that we can appreciate many different men or groups or systems of thinking, but we don't need to give any of these too much honor and respect. When there are divisions, as there are, we need to be more careful about our leaders. We can appreciate something about a man of God, but we also should "test the spirits" (1 John 4:1). To be biblical, we should listen to what other leaders say, and not follow one religious path without testing. The Bible warns us about following Paul, Apollos or Cephas and says we should test, because our inclinations are to follow to the point of division.

When I read God's Word as a teenager and into my 20s, I started to observe that the church today does not follow the Bible in some surprising ways. I observed how the Lord's Supper as a full meal was dismissed. I observed the collection plate of most churches being important when it was not so in Corinthians (thankfully, this practice is fading). I noticed the modern church preacher and sermon, even though it is not a New Testament practice. I observed churches calling their church meeting place a "temple", even though that is Old Testament language and the *ekklesia* is about *people* (the called-out-ones), not a really *church* (Kirke / building). I noticed the participatory meetings in the early church and the lack of participation in our modern church. I observed various books of the Bible showing the assembly meeting, like, 1 Corinthians 14, Colossians, Timothy, Titus and more. I noticed the early church normally met in homes and operated at the city/town level. I noticed the Jerusalem church worked smoothly, even with 1000s of members. I noticed that even if there was a whole host of home based meetings, but the *ekklesia* was always considered at the city level. I noticed when there were issues, there was a gathering at the city/town level to discuss the issue (Acts 15). I noticed that sub-groups at the city/town level and personalities within the city-based church, were not God's way (1 Corinthians 1).

Now, 35 years later, I still notice these things. There is still no church in town where I can come and feel good about the biblical fidelity. The Gospel is preached, but our churches go their own way. We have a different definition of imitating. The net effect is division in every city and town. Every town has a few independent groups that won't talk to each other or work together and consider themselves properly separate. The unbelievers look at our churches and see nothing interesting. But, at the same time, there is kind of biblical faithfulness. I am thankful for all the godly and faithful Christians in town. There is a real and meaningful service to God. God is still doing great things in our churches. Jesus says he will build his *ekklesia* and our failings will not stop it. The church is the ultimate truth in our confused world. Paul says, that "you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

[1] (See Tom Wadsworth on YouTube)

4

The New Priesthood

The New Testament reveals a New Covenant with surprising freedom, joy and a new priesthood. With the proper theological foundation, or even with a simple reading of Scripture, you can see that Romans 8 is glorious and a new priesthood in 1 Peter is radical. Many Christians still like to live in the Old Covenant with one foot in the New and one foot in the Old. There is still massive confusion in Romans 7 for example. This confusion may be a lingering history from the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, the confusion of the Reformers, and their Covenant Theology. This doctrine of confusion has influenced many. Most people actually believe that the Apostle Paul was a struggler, and that sin mastered him so dramatically, that he becomes their primary encouragement even though they misunderstand Paul. Most Christians are defeated like Paul, when they should be conquering like Revelation 1-3. I am not going to explain this now,[1] but as a new priest, there should be a marked improvement with the "new creation" and the Holy Spirit in you.

The New Testament reveals that believers are 'priests' to God. This is a radical idea that everone knows, but no one seems to *know* (experience). We may be priests, but we don't treat each other like priests. We don't experience being a priest as we *go to church*, because we may not really believe it. We know about our priesthood theoretically, but we don't understand it to be something real enough to actually affect our life. And there may be a confusion why this is the case.

The problem is that God said the same thing to Israel. In Exodus 19:6, God calls the whole nation a "kingdom of priests." On the surface this could be confusing. We know there was a legitimate clergy-laity distinction in the Old Testament. So some might argue that we should have it today also. So, if there were priests in the Old Testament, there should be priest today. And I have heard the pastor say that clearly from the pulpit in a Protestant church. But this is wrong. The way Israel was supposed to be a priesthood was more on the national level, to influence the surrounding nations. We are in a totally different situation. Now, God actually means it for us as the people, to be priests. The New Testament changes priesthood from national to *ekklesia* and individually. God says, believers are made a "kingdom and priests" in 1 Peter 2:9-10, Revelation 1:6, and 5:10. We are no longer a kingdom of priests like Exodus 19:6, where there was a laity, be we are all clergy and all laity. In the Old Covenant, only the Levites were *klēros* (clergy). But in the New Covenant we are all *klēron* (clergy) (1 Peter 5:3). The New Testament shifts the ultimate "Priest" and "Clergy" to Jesus (Hebrews 4:14). Pastors/elders exist in the New Testament, but they are not a class or status, but rather functional roles (shepherds, teachers, leaders). And the leaders have strict warnings about taking on titles (Matt 23:8-10).

Of the New Covenant priesthood, Peter says, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10). Ordinary believers are being built up as a "holy priesthood" to offer spiritual sacrifices to God. Peter says that we are a "royal priesthood, a holy nation", so what does that mean? It is true that we are priests, and the Old Testament is surely a guide for us about what it means to be a priest. But the Old Covenant is obsolete (Heb 8:13), so we navigate these learnings filtered by the New Covenant and being a guide, a light, showing love, etc. We know the Old Covenant priestly service has been fulfilled in Christ, so we primarily look to Jesus to help us understand this new priesthood. Jesus says, "If you love me you will obey my commandments", but he is the new lawgiver. We are not under the Old Covenant law, we live by the law of Christ. There are many things that can be gleaned from the Old Testament that might inform our concept of being priests. But the clergy-laity class divide has ended. If you notice a clergy class of

people who are acting separate, like the Old Covenant priests did, then you know something is wrong. We can't have a clergy-laity divide. If priests were ordained in the Old Testament, then all Christians are ordained for service and ministry. If we ordained some to ministry, then we are creating a clergy-laity division and hurting the priesthood.

Let us test this idea of priest to show what we mean in more detail. If you recall 1 Cor 6 that speaks of judging in the Christian community, there is a somewhat surprising authority granted to ordinary believers. Paul says, "Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!" (1 Cor 6:2-3). This shows Paul has higher than expected assumptions of Christians acting like judges within the Christian community. Now compare that with Deuteronomy and the Old Testament priests. Deuteronomy says, "And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the Lord will choose. And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you. According to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left. The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the Lord your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall purge the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again (Deut 17:9-13). Ezekiel says, "In a dispute, they shall act as judges, and they shall judge it according to my judgments (Ezek 44:24). So these ideas are not always considered of the New Testament Christian, but Romans says, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction" (Rom 15:4). If you understand the Old Testament priesthood as Peter is describing, you are not trying to go back in time, but instead you are living under the New Covenant, under the "Law of Christ", and you are looking for wisdom.[2] You see the authority that God has given the priesthood in the Old Testament, but now Paul says all of you in the New Covenant have that same kind of authority.[3] Paul basically is saying, why would you ever think of going before unbelievers to settle your disputes? What a shameful thing to do! But this is just one idea of priesthood. Christians are given a high spiritual position and all of the Old Testament is pointing to the New Covenant meaning.

There should be no clergy-laity distinction in the priesthood. Christians should be serving each other, but there is a kind of serving that perpetuates the separation of an authority and professional gild within the church system. Remember the one pastor I mentioned who clearly stated that he was a priest by his pastoring role. This is horrible Old Covenant thinking in a New Covenant time. In the Old Testament, there was a legitimate laity (the common man) and the priesthood. The priest would serve and be respected with extra authority. Today, we sometimes fall into that trap and allow men to stand up in front and act like a priest. All the ordinary people sit in pews and act like the laity. When we do that regularly in the primary gathering, we are saying to Peter, no, I am happy with the Old Covenant way. To be more blunt, you are saying, I am happy with the "letter kills" covenant (2 Cor 3:6). I am happy with the "captive under the law" era (Gal 3:23). You are saying, I want to go back to Egypt. I want some of the "obsolete" covenant back (Heb 8:13). You are saying, don't ask me to speak up in a home-size gathering and teach even though Hebrews says, "by this time you ought to be teachers" (Heb 5:12). You are saying, "I would rather sit in the large church gathering and never be an *oikos ekklēsia* (home church) teacher." You are saying, "I always want someone teach me", and I am willing to pay for it, even though I have been a Christian for many years.

For the most part, the clergy-laity problem is still part of our institutional church system and very much alive. There is blame with the laity, because they like the comfortable. It is sometimes called the consumer mindset. The Bible encourages interaction, dialog and heading toward teaching, but the consumer likes the easy way. It is very easy to do almost nothing like the servant Jesus said did not invest (Luke 19:11-27). Colossians pictures an important one-anothering activity of, "teaching and admonishing one another" (Col 3:16), but instead the consumer remains in a pew without raising questions found in Scripture. But it is more the clergy that perpetuate the system. The institutional system is guarded by the formal membership rules and secondarily by the eldership

requirements. The institution continues with human bylaws and church traditions. The respect for the new creation 2 Cor 5:17 is minimized and the respect for the speaker in 1 Cor 14:31 is missing.

For the most part, the priesthood is just a theoretical idea. Everyone is a priest, but now sit down and listen. Sure you might like to speak five words with your mind (1 Cor 14:19), according to New Testament assembly rules. Or you might have something to say like Jahaziel "in the midst of the assembly" (2 Chron 20:14-17), but we don't give you the freedom like the Jewish synagoges. The rulers of the synagoge did not control the speach, the just maintained order. They said, "Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it" (Acts 13:15). After Paul spoke, then they tested what was said like in the *ekklesia* (1 Cor 14:29).

Thankfully the priesthood is real to God, even if the visible church system does not honor priests as priests. We might not have the visible priesthood, but there is a real priesthood. Always look for the genuine priesthood and remember that Jesus says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Matt 18:20). Under the New Covenant, Jesus is the High Priest, and every believer is an ordained priest.

[1] 1. Douglas Moo Commentary on Romans. 2. Doug Goodin's online explanations 3. Even N.T. Wright understands this, even though we don't agree with most of his other ideas. Paul is simply thinking of the Jew in the Old Realm, still in bondage to the Law of Moses

[2] (See Brian Rosner, D.A. Carson and Doug Moo on this topic)

[3] Priestly authority is given to all Christians similar to the priestly authority in the Old Testament. A young child of a priest, was not a judge, he had to mature. But he was of the class, heading toward more authority and respect as he matured. The same is true of New Covenant Christians. All New Covenant believers are priests, but there are other factors. Within the New Covenant priesthood, there are different roles just like there were different roles with the Old Testament priests. In the Christian assembly, for example, godly older men are selected to maintain order (1 Cor 14). Men who are humble and godly have authority accordingly. Men are not more authoritative based on seminary education or knowledge of systematic theology. Church organization based ordination is not ekklesia authority. Men who cause divisions do not have much authority. Men who know Scripture but do not follow Scripture do not have much authority. Gifted preachers do not have more authority. They may have less authority in God's eyes. It depends on how the person behaves according to God's Word and ultimately, sometimes, only God knows. We should always remember that Jesus was hard on the religious elite. Visible authority is not true authority. Popularity is not assurance of authority. D.A. Carson explains it well in his essay, "Defining Elders." He says, "Thus, the administration of authority in the church is not so much bound up with office, or merely manipulation of administrative leaders, although in any large organization there are various needs for and kinds of administration. Rather, the fount of authority is the Word. And out of this framework come teachers who explain that Word well and apply it well, so that believers say, 'Yes, this is the mind of God.'"

5

Church Membership

What does the Bible say about 'church membership?' This is complicated because both terms are loaded. The basic meaning is different between the Bible and modern church ideas of membership. First, the Bible uses *ekklesia*, fundamentally meaning called-out people, but the word 'church' historically roots itself in a building (the 'house of the Lord'). The word 'member' is used in a different way in the Bible compared to the common idea of 'church membership.' The Bible means a Christian is a part of the body of Christ. But, the modern church idea has more to do with someone 'joining' a congregation that is, in reality, an institutonal ministry organization. The meanings are different. There is lots of confusion.

One of the most confused books I have read on the topic is the 9Marks book on "Church Membership" by Johnathan Leeman. This book has so many problems, I don't know where to start.[1] I have written much on this topic in another article, but I will give a short outline here. The main idea that the Bible describes is that all Christians are members of the *ekklesia*. They are instantly members in the body of Christ. There is usually about a day needed in the Bible for Christians to be recognized. Jerusalem was a large church, considered an *ekklesia* at the city level, and in one case, 3000 were added in a day. The short time needed to be recognized and the instant assumtion of membership was typical in the New Testament. It is not typical at all in most of our modern churches.

The modern church idea of membership is related to being part of the congregation and joined to a ministry organization. It does not usually meet at the city or town level, nor does it think of itself as needing to care about the rest of the body of Christ in the town. It does have to submit to the IRS 14 part guidelines, and rule #6 restricts the membership. This church, is really a ministry organization, and is a sub-group-part-of-the-ekklesia. The members of this organization are the formal-institutional-organization kind, not the biblical kind.

Modern churches claim no responsibility for some members in the body of Christ, but accept responsibility for others. Mark Dever's philosophy is typical of the modern pastor. "Mark will say that he is responsible to God on Judgment Day for the 700 people who are members of the church, but he is not responsible for the 300 who come but refuse to join."[2] This modern church membership mindset is also willing to call members in the body of Christ "outsiders." They wrongly claim, "Paul clearly draws a boundary between those 'inside' the church and those 'outside' the church. That boundary is 'membership,' it separates the church from the world."[3] Both of these are serious issues.

But has anyone asked these members in the body of Christ why are they not institutional church members? Has the church made obstacles? In the early church, 3000 were added in one day. The 1st century *ekklesia* had near instant membership and it fit perfectly with the biblical body of Christ idea. The biblical meaning is that all true Christians are members of the *ekklesia* based on belief if Jesus.

These are a short summary of the 9 points I have made in the expanded article.[4]

1. The word "member" is used in 1 Corinthians 12 of someone who is part of the body of Christ. Any other use of the word member, like the modern use, causes confusion. The Bible is saying we are members. The modern sense is you can join our church and become a member. Do you see the difference? The modern sense is you have to jump through some hoops to become a member or else are an 'outsider.'
2. The very idea of creating a separate membership of the body of Christ, causes division. Just think about how

God's Word talks about division in 1 Corinthians 1-3. If you introduce modern 'church membership', you suddenly create division. Churches that do not have this modern church membership avoid this form of division. Anthony Thiselton raises this as a concern saysing, "The obsession with groups and with status tears and splits the body of Christ, limb from limb and organ from organ."[5]

3. There is a major misunderstanding of Scripture where attenders can actually be called 'outsiders', which in context actually refers to unbelievers. This is unfriendly, but is also a distortion of Scripture. The idea of church membership and mere attenders is sometimes applied to 1 Corinthians 5:12-13. The verse is discussing 'insiders' and 'outsiders.' The Bible means Christians are insiders and non-Christians are outsiders, but the promoters of modern church membership often attribute this to their idea of church membership and call those unwilling to join, 'outsiders.' This is like calling Christians "unbelievers" only because they are not agreeing to your idea of 'church membership.' David Garland understands the passage well in his commentary. [6]

4. Some Christians are sensitive about oaths and vows. Some Christians want to honor the words of Jesus about avoiding oaths/vows/promises and are concerned in their conscience by the typical membership oaths. Jesus said, "But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all… Jesus says, "Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil" (Matthew 5:34,37). These Christians have a sensitive conscience about with the typical 'church membership' oaths and promises. You may not care. You may be used to easily making promises. But for Amish, Mennonite and many others, going against Jesus words is not safe. D.A. Carson is confused to refer back to Old Testament practice to justify oath taking when he should know better.[7]

5. Another concern with the idea of modern church membership is the boundary of the responsibility of elders. The Old and New Testament speak about elders having town based authority. Modern churches do not operate at the town level. So the elders of a sub-group, not in association with other elders in town is operating on its own. Elders who limit their responsibility to some do not go along with 1 Peter 5:1-4 that speaks about shepherding the flock of God that is "among you." And this also relates to "willingly" and "eagerly" in the same passage. A person is not willing or eager, if one is complaining about the overburdening difficulty and responsibility of the full number who is "among you." Eldership that is distracted with the 501(c)(3) model, may start to look like the distracted shepherd in Ezekiel 34:4.[8]

6. The formal nature of the modern church membership process is a concern. The early church added 3000 in one day. But for some today, the process extends over months. There is the membership training meetings. There is the pastor visit. The oaths and vows ceremony. This is so completely opposite to the informal nature seen in the Bible. Bible's idea of membership that is simply based on belief (making one a member of the body of Christ).

7. Another issue of modern church membership is the temporary nature of it. If you move to another church in town you have to start the whole process again. In the New Testament church of Jerusalem, with 1000s of church members, they did not have to do this. Their membership was permanent. If you moved to another part of the *ekklesia* in Jerusalem you remained a member. If you moved further away to another town, you only had to be recognized. If membership was done in a day, recognition would also be very fast. It was not really a matter of becoming a church member, but only an issue of determining if you are a Christian.

8. Modern church membership is tied to the government. The 501(c)(3) government regulations is a problem for some Christians. Some people do not even realize that the 501(c)(3) model requires a distinct membership in the same town. This violates a New Testament *ekklesia* principle. Some Christians are not ok with the mixing of government and the spiritual. If you applied the modern rule to the Jerusalem church, it instantly be a membership violation. Most of the 14 Part government rules would be a problem with a typical 1st century *ekklesia* like Jerusalem. Some Christians are not ok with this, and the idea seems to be avoided for financial reasons.

9. Does modern church membership show Christians love? We do not think so. There is the case of some leaders calling those who don't join, "outside the church." There is almost no discussion about the issues.

> There is only pressure, sermons, and church formality. Christians who choose to avoid the modern church membership idea are sometimes asked to leave the main assembly, called "unspiritual/uncommitted/lone-rangers/etc." This is not love. In contrast this statement by CARM.org is much nicer, "Inclusion in the Body of Christ is not by membership in a denomination, nor by baptism, nor or by dedication. It is not received by ritual, or by ceremony, or by natural birth. It is received by faith (Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:8). The invisible church is the church made up of true believers. The visible church consists of those who say they are Christian but may or may not be truly saved. Being a member of a church on earth guarantees nothing. Being a member of the Body of Christ guarantees salvation."

You can read more about our 9 points in the full length article.[9]

[1] "Church Membership", but Johnathan Leeman is so confused, it would be a full length article to respond to all the distortions. Here are a few of the issues; confusion with obey vs persuasion, p 46. confusion with insiders vs outsiders, p 47. assuming practice, p 47 confusion with church discipline, p 50 confusion with formal judicial role, p 50 confusion on local church definition, p 52 confusion on border patrol, p 55 confusion on the new creation, p 57 confusion on authority, p 57-62 confusion on ordinances, p 61 confusion on marriage, p 63 confusion on ekklesia,worship,preaching, p 63 confusion on ekklesia/institutionalism, p 64 confusion on ekklesia/church, p 65-66,69 confusion on local/universal, p 70 confusion on who needs to repent, p 74 Jonathan Leeman, Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus, 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 46, 47, 50, 52, 55, 57-62, 63, 64, 65-66, 69, 70, 74.

[2] Jonathan Leeman, "How Mark Dever Passes Out Authority," The Gospel Coalition, January 6, 2014, thegospelcoalition.org.

[3] Jonathan Leeman, "Two Prooftexts for Church Membership," 9Marks, May 7, 2019, www.9marks.org/article/two-prooftexts-for-church-membership/.

[4] https://rfaber.com/membership.html

[5] Anthony C. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1011.

[6] David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 190.

[7] Carson is a primary architect of Progressive Covenantalism (which shares a lot with New Covenant Theology). He understands that the Mosaic Law has been abrogated and fulfilled in Christ. Yet, when he discusses the Matthew 5:33-37 text on oaths in his commentary, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, he defaults right back to classic Covenant Theology (CT) thinking. D. A. Carson, Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: A Study of Matthew 5-10 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 50.

[8] "The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them"

[9] https://rfaber.com/membership.html

6

Passover And The Lord’s Supper

"The current practice of the Lord’s Supper as a symbolic meal consisting of token bread and wine cannot be supported by Scripture or early church history. Instead, the Lord’s Supper in the NT consisted of a full meal, a single loaf of bread and a single cup of wine. Nor is this setting unimportant theologically. On the contrary, the setting of the Lord’s Supper in the NT was, in fact, an expression of apostolic theology."[1]

When I was a teenager, I can recall a strong feeling of disappointment in how the modern church does not follow the Lord’s Supper example and pattern in 1 Corinthians 11. I was impressed at how the warning to the Corinthians had turned into a complete dismissal of the meal. I may have read this and wondered about this at age 9-10, but as a teenager, the feelings of disappointment grew. Today, if I read the top commentaries on 1 Corinthians, scholars agree that the Lord’s Supper is tied to the Passover.[2]

It is shocking that Paul said the Corinthians were not actually celebrating the Lord’s Supper. They were not respectful of the poor. In 2 Corinthians, Paul commends the Corinthians for listening and responding to his correction. So the Corinthians began to wait for the poor and as a result, they began to actually celebrate the Lord’s Supper, in the eyes of God. But do we care for the poor in our Lord’s Supper? If we observe the Lord’s Supper a certain way and export that formal-ceremonial way in our mission efforts, are we responsible for ignoring the poor? The church in Africa where I grew up learned a lot from our ways. They sit in pews and listen to sermons even that is not in the Bible. They don’t have the Lord’s Supper in a proper way like 2 Corinthians, only because of us and our traditions. I wonder if God might have thoughts as in 1 Corinthians that we, "are not actually celebrating the Lord’s Supper." When the Corinthians listened, in 2 Corinthians, they brought enough food for the poor, and each one had enough. Then according to Paul, they began to actually celebrate the Lord’s Supper in the eyes of Jesus. However, imagine if the weathier Corinthians reacted like us by saying, "Let’s just skip the meal to simplify our worship service."

I have had a Jewish co-worker at work and we sometimes get talking about Christianity and Judaism. I am fascinated by one thing he told me about the Jewish Passover. Apparently, there is a strong emphasis on children in the Passover 'Seder' meal. Children are a focus in the tradition with teaching focused on them to help them appreciate the meaning of the feast. The Passover meal was always a family meal eaten in a home, not a performance and not a formal ceremony for a large assembly. This is where it gets interesting when we think of Christianity and the Lord’s Supper that replaces the Passover. Jesus fulfilled all things and that includes the Passover. He was the Lamb.

The interesting thing in the Christian Lord’s Supper is how we deny the children of Christian families in a good number of churches. Many churches, especially in the Reformed camp, have such a formal and ceremonial understanding that they actually believe the are doing right to deny children participation in the Lord’s Supper. Jesus usually said things about children that surprised the adults. Jesus rebuked the disciples when they wanted to keep children from Jesus. Jesus elevates the children, but we let them starve in the Passover feast replacement (The Lord’s Supper). We have invented theological requirements based on distorted traditions that children must be "baptized" and "church members" to participate in something that should be assumed inclusion. The Lord’s Supper should be an *ekklesia* community meal with joy and fellowship a little bit like the Jewish feasts.

Jesus also cares about the poor in spirit. Imagine looking through the eyes of a little child, looking with longing as the cracker passes by, and wondering why you are not allowed. There is no logical explaination for this

attitude toward children. We have our theological systems to support our tradition. But do we have Jesus on our side? The disciples thought they were doing right to keep the children away, but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me" (Matt 19:13). The surprising thing is the feeling Jesus had toward their action. Scripture says, "But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant" (Mark 10:13). If all the Old Testament children could participate in their feasts, then why do we deny our children from our feast? And the second question is so obvious, why do we avoid a real feast if the original Lord's Supper is based on the Passover meal?

Some of the Corinthians had died because they ignored the poor, but perhaps God overlooks our way because we are doing it in ignorance. I am sure the Lord's Supper is designed by God to be a fellowship blessing in the church, and to be a continuation of the Passover meal along with the fellowship, food, joy and the usual aspects of a feast. Our systematic theology and historical traditions have made us blind and convinced us that we are doing right to no longer have a real meal. In reality, it is the institutional church (and building) rather than the community *ekklesia* that is probably holding us back. Our traditions are strong and following the Apostles is weak.

There is a misunderstanding with "discerning the body." 1 Corinthians 11:29-30 says, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement on himself. That is why many of you are ill, and some have died." The Reformation Study Bible says, "The warning in v. 29 about 'discerning the body' almost surely refers to this failure to maintain the unity of the church as the body of Christ". The amazing trick that we have done is we have exempted ourself. But by our slight of hand, we have made this verse of none effect. Now, with our modern way, we have made it impossible to violate this verse! By simply omitting the food from the Lord's Supper, we have simplified our life and excaped from the danger. The institutional church cannot violate this passage because it is now just a token meal. Our ceremonial sacriment made legitimate through systematic theology has protected us from error. But does Jesus see it that way?

As a teenager and even to this day, I am amazed at how stubborn our modern institutional church is to not even discuss the possibility of going back to the biblical pattern of a feast like Lord's Supper. It reminds me of Jesus talking about human traditions in Matthew 15:3-9. Jesus said, "And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or mother, "What you have gained from me is given to God," he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God." And then Jesus quotes Isaiah, "'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"

I have no direct word from God about all these concerns. It does seem that our traditions have had a powerful effect on us. We have ended the Lord's Supper meal and made it a token meal. We took away the home-family context and restricted the children. The modern sentiment is, 'We have freedom, don't we?' We can change anything about church to fit our modern culture. There is no verse that says we can't. It also works much better to have a token Lord's Supper in the larger modern formal church structure. To most, meeting in homes is out of the question. That is such a strange way of doing church. The only reason early Christians met in homes is supposedly because of persection. This is not completely true because at times the Christians had the favor of the non-Christians in town, but it is a common excuse. Our modern church tradition is strong and following the Apostles is weak.

The early church observed the Lord's Supper as a true meal along with the bread and cup. But sometime in history, things changed. The original commentary in the Geneva Bible of 1599 says, "The Apostle thinketh it good to take away the love feasts, for their abuse, although they had been a long time, and with commendation used in Churches, and were appointed and instituted by the Apostles."[3] We think Steve Atkerson responds well, "To this we wonder, would Paul single-handedly overturn something established by Jesus Himself, taught by the other apostles and practiced in all the churches? Though in humble disagreement with those who penned the commentary, their acknowledgement that the Lord's Supper and the love feast were celebrated together and

instituted by the apostles is appreciated. It has been said that the best antidote to abuse is not disuse, but proper use."[4]

[1] Eric Svendson, The Table of the Lord (Publisher, Year), 3.

[2] "the cup of blessing coheres precisely with the context of the Passover meal as the framework for the interpretation of the Lord's Supper…" page 756, 758, 759. Thiselton, Anthony C. The First Epistle to the Corinthians. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

[3] Stephen E. Atkerson, New Testament Church Dynamics: Help for Bi-Vocational, House Church, and Small-Church Pastors Drawn from Early Church Practice (Atlanta: New Testament Reformation Fellowship, 2018), 5

[4] Atkerson, New Testament Church Dynamics, 5.

7

Church and State

Currently our churches are linked to the government more than most people realize. Americans know about the separation of church and state and we think we are separated. This is a point of confusion. It is true we are not organized into a "state church" like in the Reformation in Germany, Switzerland and England. But our churches are tied to the IRS 501(c)(3) rules and the "14 part church guidelines." These are very invasive rules.

Most people know about the IRS 501(c)(3) but do not know about the IRS "14-Point church guidelines." These guidelines are used to determine if a church is a valid IRS church, and qualified to receive the IRS 501(c)(3) benefits. Some Christians may want their church to be free from government interference, but most people have resigned to these IRS 501(c)(3) regulations.

To better understand how these 14 part IRS guidelines affect us, we will compare a church under these rules to the 1st century church in Jerusalem. How would the 14 part rules affect the Jerusalem church?

Rule #1: Distinct legal existence: This rule would conflict with the Jerusalem church, in Acts, because the Jerusalem church had no legal recognition. It was viewed by the Roman Empire and local authorities either as a sect of Judaism or as an illegal, unauthorized assembly.

Rule #2: Recognized creed and form of worship: The church in Jerusalem held a clear faith: Jesus is the resurrected Messiah, expressed through breaking bread and prayer. But there was no formal creed requirement. The form of worship was participation by men in homes and a full-meal Lord’s Supper, very different from our smooth and crafted sermon-based form of worship.

Rule #3: Definite and distinct ecclesiastical government: This is not the same today, but is not in conflict. The Apostles guided the church and began the appointing of elders which is what we have today.

Rule #4: Formal code of doctrine and discipline: This would seem to not conflict, until you look at the details of modern church bylaws and the independent groups in each town expressing differing doctrines. The early church in Jerusalem held to a unified doctrine because the Apostles were still alive and involved. Today, there is a wild variety of doctrines by each independent church in town, and this idea does conflict.

Rule #5: Distinct religious history: This rule is of little significance.

Rule #6: Membership not associated with any other church: This would be a huge conflict with the Jerusalem church. Membership in the church in Jerusalem was based you being a Christian and living in Jerusalem. The modern church concept of "church hopping" did not exist in Jerusalem because it was all one big church in the city. So the conflict is our splitting up into a whole bunch of little groups in each city/town.

Rule #7: Organization of ordained ministers: This would be a conflict with the Jerusalem church because there was no clergy-laity distinction in the early church. Any man was permitted to address the assembly and elders were appointed, but not ordained as the Old Testament priests were separated from the ordinary people. The ordination concept goes back to the Old Testament, but the New Testament has the priesthood of all believers. In the New Testament, leaders were not supposed to be monopolizing the assembly (1 Cor 14:23) or calling themselves "teacher" (Matthew 23:8) but were to be humble like a child (Matt 18:3-4).

Rule #8: Ordained ministers who completed prescribed studies: This rule would conflict with the Jerusalem church because there were no ordained ministers who had completed any formal studies. The Apostles were famously noted by local authorities as being "uneducated and untrained men" (Acts 4:13). They had no formal academic credentials.

Rule #9: Literature of its own: This rule would conflict because the church in Jerusalem had no literature of its own. It had the Old Testament and the words of the Apostles. The oral teaching of the Apostles was eventually written down and shared with other churches. There was a common set of literature. The early churches did not have individual sets of particular or unique literature.

Rule #10: Established places of worship: This rule would conflict because the early church did not own real estate or dedicated church buildings. They utilized borrowed public spaces (the Temple courts) and private homes.

Rule #11: Regular congregations: This rule does not seem to contradict, but the gathering into assemblies worked in very different ways. They met in homes and probably gather very locally so they would often be neighbors. Our modern churches tend to ignore locality because we can easily drive 30 minutes to a church 2-3 towns away. For us this is normal. So the way they met for the "Regular congregation" differed greatly, but both had regular congregations.

Rule #12: Regular religious services: This rule also does not seem to contradict. But the Jerusalem church was more regular, sometimes meeting "day by day."

Rule #13: Schools of religious instruction of the young: This rule would conflict because the church in Jerusalem had no schools for religious instruction of the young. Formal "Sunday Schools" or youth ministry departments are a modern invention (dating primarily to the 19th century). Children in the 1st century were educated in the faith structurally through family units and the house based church gatherings.

Rule #14: Schools for the preparation of its ministers: This rule conflicts as the church in Jerusalem had no seminaries or Bible colleges. Nor was there any sign of interest in this formal kind of training. Ministry preparation was entirely based on an apprenticeship and mentorship model (e.g., sitting under the Apostles' daily teaching and working under the authority of an Apostle.)

So the early Jerusalem church differed greatly and there are significant conflicts with the IRS 14 part guidelines.

8

Participation in the Ekklesia

The idea of 1 Corinthians 14 is that of men sharing for the building up of the church. This is strongly resisted in our modern church. I know very few Christians who do this. There are some, but many of these Christian groups are considered alternative. I want to be part of a church that is somewhat local and is faithful to God's Word. The idea here is that we will never sort out all the issues between Christian groups, but God calls us to pursue likemindedness (John 17, Phil 1,2,etc). So ideally, if we have groups within the church, these groups should be in discussion and dialog. If we refrain being in dialog with each other, we may be creating division. 1 Corinthians 1 warns about having groups that become too distinct and separate. Are we officially shunning each other? If so, that is serious. Our view is that we can shun for certain biblical reasons, but even then we should not shut down communication completely. We can exclude from association and assembly, but we should not block channels of communication toward reconcilation. Sometimes we avoid all communication with others churches in our same town, and act as if the indepenent nature of church warrants this. Where is that supported in Scripture? That is fundmentally against Christian love. Christian love is a basic requirement for approval with God (1 John). Something is wrong with most of our American evangelical/Reformed churches. Most will never talk to each other and only warn the members about "church hopping." We assume there was massive church hopping in the Jerusalem church because the church was defined at the city level.

Assuming you have your Christian friends understood, and the churche(s) in your town, then what should be done about 1 Corinthians 14? If you are a complete cessationist, and believe that even prophecy has ceased, you are taking a great risk. If the meaning of prophecy is mainly "speaking forth", then you are taking a daring move to eliminate this chapter from the Bible. Does your denomination suggest that "prophecy" has ceased? What does it mean for today? If you do believe in the prophetic cessationist idea, then most of 1 Corinthians 14 can be ignored and we think that is a risky interpretation.[1] But if prophetic can be translated "speaking forth", [2] then we can continue on to the important 1 Corinthians 14. We will will translate "prophecy" as "speaking." We will say the same of the modern preacher today, he is "speaking."

Overall, 1 Corinthians 14 is difficult to explain because of tongues, *prophecy* and the men's and women's roles. There is much difficulty in this chapter, but the difficulty is only if you don't follow and accept the plain meaning of the text. We do follow the plain words of the text. For the modern Christian, the conclusions are difficult, but the understanding can be rather simple (if you accept the authority of God's Word and avoid looking for a itching ears teacher). I have heard many preachers suggest that 1 Corinthians is one of their least favorite books. For me, it is one of my favorite, because it deals with so many core behavioral and and practical issues. I love it because of its help for the church.

So of course I am patriarchal/traditonal, not complimentarian or egaltarian. So if you don't agree on that, please lets not dwell on that too much. Yes, I think the passage is talking about men speaking and women being silent, just like the tongues speakers without an interpreter must remain silent. For me this is so simple to read and understand. I don't fight the text, I just read it and understand it.

But the tongues issue is another issue for some. For me, I think tongues have ceased, but I could be proven wrong. It is completely up to God, but my guess is that 1 Corinthians 14:21 which says, "By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people, and even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.", refers to Israel. In other words, God is using the tongues miracle as a testimony to stubborn Israel unbelievers and it has very little to do with our modern day. If I ever truly saw the miracle of tongues as a true

miracle, then I would simply say, ok, God has a continued use for it. But as it stands I see 100% of its use breaking the order guidelines of the Bible (1 Corinthians 14:27-28). I do believe tongues are actual languages based on 1 Corinthians 14:10 which says, "There are doubtless many different languages in the world, and none is without meaning." So the only rule I would make if anyone claimed to speak in a tongue is that it must be an actual language, supernaturally ocurring, and follow the rule of requiring an interpreter as the text says. From my understanding, every case of speaking in tongues today is a violation of these biblical guidelines. Also, the text says tongues is not for believers. So it is not the main thing to expect in a Christian gathering.

So the primary issue and question is "prophecy." What does "prophecy" mean in the context of 1 Corinthians and what does it meant for today? There is a clash of two main views that are plausible and a third we reject. If anyone thinks prophecy is a supernatural gift of Old Testament style, pattering after Elijah the prophet, we do not think that applies to 1 Corinthians and these New Testament days. The two main plausible possibilities are that prophecy has ceased or that it continues in a limited New Testament form, that is tested, and that it means nothing more than speaking for God. In other words, it is often attributed to what a preacher does speaking to the people for their building up, encouragement and consolation. Prophecy in 1 Corinthians is defined in verse 3 as someone speaking to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation. So our translation of the word would simply be "speaking", with the rest of the meaning assumed and defined as we just said.

So if you are willing to understand the word that way, simply following 1 Corinthians 14:3, then the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14 is simplified. So assuming only men can speak, assuming tongues have ceased, assuming prophecy has not ceased, but is limited and partial as 1 Corinthians 13:9 suggests, and assuming this "speaking" must be tested by the others (assuming men who would speak up with their testing evaluations), then the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14 becomes more simple. But there are other questions. Some would be strict about the number of speakers when 1 Corinthians 14:29 says, "let two or three [prophets] speak", or we could say it "let two or three men speak" (trying to simplify). But we don't think that is what the author is meaning. If you take that completely literally, that is fine. We could live with it. But before this verse in the same chapter it says, this men speaking is "for believers" and "if all [speak]" (or literally "if all prophecy") 1 Corinthians 14:24. And right after the "two or three" in 1 Corinthians 14:29, it says, "For you can all [speak] (prophecy) one by one, so that you may learn and all be encouraged, (1 Corinthians 14:31). This is why we think it means, lets get started with two or three, and if this satisfies, then good enough. And since tongues do not apply any more, those "only two or at most three" can be replaced by 2 or 3 prophets, since that is the primary focus of the chapter. So in summary, our interpretation is, 'let 2 or 3 men speak', and let 2 or 3 more speak (since tongues have ceased). And if you are still not satisfied, perhaps a few more, perhaps not, depending on the opionions and sentiments of the people. We would be open to a few more.

So this is our understanding. On each day of gathering, come expecting to share in a full-meal to celebrate the Lord's Supper. And let the men expect to have an opportunity to speak for the upbuilding and encouraging and consolation of the people. And let the men be free to give a lesson, or a thought, or a short teaching. But any lessor or thought or short teaching must be something where you are sensitive to someone else who feels led to say something. The idea is that as you are speaking, you are watching the other men. You can easily see if someone else wants to say something. So the meeting is organized, with one man speaking at a time. When someone says something and sits down, there should be a pause for testing thoughts that may follow. Other than testing thoughts, the next man who wants to encourage or build up with a thought, or offer consolation thoughts is free to stand up and speak.

If a woman want to say something, the idea stated is that she can ask her husband at home. This of course implies she will not speak during this special time in the meeting. But as this time of the meeting ends, if there is the food and extended fellowship time, the woman might talk freely with men and women, but not on the same topic. If she has a serious question about something a man said, she can ask her husband at home. However, during the food and fellowship time, men and women would generally be free to talk about almost anything. There is a need to guard the time when men are permitted to speak, but there is not a strict silence after this time

has ended.

Why would there be such a strange rule? Well, it only appears strange with our culture of women speaking as freely as men in most situations, like Sunday school. But our idea is that God wants the men to have an opportunity to lead, and interact with men. The women being silent allows the men to lead. If they are not silent, the men will never have this opportunity. They can subsitute some learning by gathering as men only, but it will not be as strong of a training in leadership as having the opportunity to speak in front of other men ready to test them, and women ready to question them when they get home with their husbands. Of course we would think the single women are just as restricted. If they are younger women living in their father's house, they can ask their fathers at home. This idea is not stated, but based on all of Scripture, we assume this is what is meant.

Ok, so we have just explained 1 Corinthians 14, and now we need to listen to the testing. There is more we could say, but we have said our "five words" (1 Corinthians 14:19)

[1] We suggest reading good scholars on the topic: See D.A. Carson, Wayne Grudem, Anthony Thisselton, etc. We warn about complete cessationists like Richard Gaffin, some in Presbyterianism and some in the Reformed Baptist tradition.

[2] This word literally means "speaking forth" or "proclaiming publicly," to which the connotation of prediction was added sometime in the Middle Ages. In the NT, it did not always refer to foretelling the future, but rather to proclaiming the truth of God. MacArthur, MacArthur Study Bible, 1 Cor. 12:10, n.

9

The Home based Ekklesia

The context of men speaking in church only makes sense in a home setting. The Lord's Supper as a full-meal only makes sense in a home setting. We are not going to convince anyone who resists us, and we will not try.

We will just say that the design of the church order set up by the Apostles only works in a home or small setting.

The temple was destroyed in 70 AD, because that was not God's plan for the church assembly. The temple was an Old Testament plan and God had a clearly stated plan to destroy the temple. This was a judgement on Israel. We should never say, the church met at the temple. Of course they did because there was an overlap time when the new Jewish Christians were granted freedom to continue to observe the Law even if they were being freed from the Law.

But for us to linger on the temple is not right. And the church met in home universally for centuries. It was not till around 300 AD with Constantine that the church went back to "temples" following the pagan mindset.

No, the temple idea was completely not what the early church did. They always met in homes. Every book of the New Testament that mentions a Christian gathering on the Lord's Day, was set in a home setting.

This worked better or the Lord's Supper meal. This worked better for men speaking to encourage the church.

What if there were 3000 added in one day? Well, that meant a whole bunch of homes just got more busy focused on Christian meetings.

How does that affect us today? Well today, in our town, no one meets in homes. I would say we are so affluent and formal stuffy types, that we only have "temples" and "tabernacles", which are really Old Testament concepts. Ideally, we should stop using those terms. We do not need to stop using our church buildings, but they are expensive. We should certainly not guilt trip Christians into supporting your church ministry as if the building needs to continue.

At the same time, if we do have a Christian church building, it will need a stead up-keep of maintenance and funding. So if you choose to support this kind of ministry, it is best to make it known that this "church" is really a particular ministry that is assuming a church building but it is not fundamentally an ekklesia. The true ekklesia should happen in a small gathering in a home or possibly in a room of a larger Christian church building.

The modern church building can easily accomodate a ministry of evangelistic preaching as an outreach to the community and for those who do not want to abandon the pew sitting experience.

But Christians should be encouraged to attend a primary ekklesia meeting which would be giving men an opportunity to speak in the 1 Corinthians 14 style and a context for a natural full-meal Lord's Supper so that there can be a joyous and celebratory theme with the Lord's Supper meal. If the Passover really is a pattern (and we believe it is), then there needs to be a mini feast (with simple food), and a celebratory mindset to the Lord's Supper.

Christians will continue to like their traditional church experience just the way it is. And we would not stop them. But we want to encourage a mind and a thought about the patterns set up by the Apostles. The New Testament mentions home based meetings, but there are two possibilities. Either these home based meetings are

so important that the narrative assumptions was considered sufficient. Or because the home meetings really don't matter. We should not blindly assume the latter. It may be that the home meeting is very important to the Apostles. But, in God's devine plan, and he often is testing us, he has left it as a quiet early church pattern. Our thoughts are these:

  Perhaps it is important, because it allows for the full-meal Lord's Supper and the participatory meeting. Perhaps it is a test. God may be thinking, this is pretty obvious, let's see who respects and who doesn't. Perhaps I am wrong in my thoughts about it, and God is perfectly ok with almost no home based churches in most areas of America. All of this is conditioned on the home based meeting following the order and guidelines of 1 Corinthians 14, etc. If there is any deviation from the guidelines, then do not think I would encourage a home based meeting. The home based meeting in Jerusalem were city based. There is no such thing in the New Testament as an isolated individual house church.

We are painting a picture of what seems beautiful to us, but if you can afford an outwardly beautiful church building and you can assemble a whole host of Christians to worship and sing together, we might take a break from our theoretical home based meeting and come join you. Just don't ask us to share in the cost of the building or staff. Please think of it like a ministry. If you desire to spend the money on that, and you have no guilt in the expense of it, then favor us who might theoretically be not having a clear conscience about the expense, and just give us the blessing. Otherwise, grant us the right to follow the Old Testament example of meeting outdoors, on a nicer day if we might want to gather in larger groups. Or opinion is that if the Apostles visted today, they would teach us to quickly fix some things. They would quickly make us correct various things that we have done and introduced as our own traditions of man. The Apostles would probably explain more clearly from Scripture what they mean't and they would probably say, "how slow we are to understand the Scriptures."

10

The City based Ekklesia

The Jerusalem church was a city church. Every church in the New Testament was a city church. And even in the Old Testament, elders, were tied to the city. Not only that, but the roots of the word, *ekklesia* are tied to the *polis* (city).

According to the Bible, your church is really considered at the city/town level, even if you ignore it. If you have a church that ignores the other Christians in town, you are not following the New Testament pattern and you are not following the root meaning of *ekklesia.* The early church met in homes but was considered a church at the city/town level. Since Jerusalem had thousands of members, there were many home gatherings. There were many home-based meetings of Christians who gathered for the the Lord's Supper meal and the assembly meeting described in 1 Corinthians 14. At times, the early church might have gathered outside for a large assembly, but this does not seem ordinary. The normal practice seems to be that they gathered in homes for the observance of the full-meal Lord's Supper and the participatory meeting.[1]

We said this earlier, but to remind, the *ekklesia* in both the Bible and the origins of the word, was a city-based assembly. "In ancient Greece-most notably in classical Athens-the ekklesia was explicitly rooted in the polis (the city-state). You did not join this civic assembly through a broad application, election, or religious initiation. Instead, membership was an automatic right and duty granted exclusively to the adult male citizens of that specific city-state." [2] [3]

This is significant. The church was city-based both in the Bible and in the roots of the word *ekklesia*. Jesus chose the secular Greek word *ekklesia* and not the religious word *synagogue*, even though both would seem to work.

Instead of following the biblical instructions in Titus 1:5 (appointing elders in every town), we have become fragmented. There are so many independent church gatherings in each city or town that even the Christians are confused. Churches are independent and unconnected, and proud of it. Some of the reason is legitimate, some is division. There is nothing wrong with maintaining your particular doctrinal beliefs, but if the unbelievers notice division at the most visible level of separate institutions, there is a problem. The unbelievers have noticed. And they say Protestants are so divided that Protestantism and evangelicalism cannot be true.

We have good arguments for supporting our divisions. Our arguments have some legitimacy, but we rush to divide before considering other arrangements. Yes, we should divide at times, but we have gone too far and have ignored other godly Christians in town. In almost every city and town I go, I can find multiple evangelical churches that are reasonably faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I could be happy in any of these faithful evangelical/Reformed churches. But dividing into groups has so proliferated that we justify it without much of a thought.

According to the New Testament, sub-groups are fine. Jesus heard the disciples trying to denigrate another group and Jesus rebuked the disciples for their divisive attitude. Jesus said, "Do not forbid him, for the one who is not against you is for you" (Luke 9:50). We need to allow different groups without splitting the New Testament tradition of city-based *ekklesias*. John says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us" (1 John 2:19). This shows the seriousness of division to the early church. The divisions can imply a group of people are not true Christians (if you read John as I do). Divsion from false Christians is good and divsion from true Christians is bad. Yet we ignore this biblical principle and allow easy division within our towns.

Do you think the Corinthians were worse than us? On the issue of division, we have gone farther. We actually do follow Paul, or Apollos or Cephas. We follow them into separate denominations or non-denominational groups. We are Baptists or Presbyterians or Evangelical Free or Calvary or community types, but we are not ever simply Christians of the local town. We want Christians to have their theological convictions, but we do not need the hard group barriers. I can go to so many different groups, and even to groups that are seriously wrong on some things, but I know they are genuine Christians. If I attend a Methodist church, for example, many who attend may be rather shallow. There will be a mixture. Some genuine Christians will land in churches that have notable theological issues.

The point is this. When you follow the traditions of man in your modern church and divide up into various groups, you become trapped by the limits of your group. But since the New Testament defines church at the city/town level, you are forced to open up and relate to other Christians who you don't like at all. They may be Charismatics or anti-Calvinist or a bit confused on the Sabbath. But still, if we care about the city/town aspect of ekklesia, we must distiguish who we can associate with and who we cannot. If someone is LGBTQ friendly, I would probably not associate with them, as a church. If someone is not clear on the basic Gospel and core Christian doctrine, I would separate. The association and dividing needs to happen but it doesn't need to be perfect. But today, we have mass confusion. The outsider sees that Christians have no clear association (of true Christians). All they see is 100 groups in the vicinity. In reality, the 100 groups should be 50 that associate and 50 that shun each other (as an example). That would cause a stir, and the 50 that are massively compromising the gospel would feel the pain of not being associated with the 50 following the gospel. We know this could work theoretically, but in practice it would be impossible if the Holy Spirit was not involved. With God, all things are possible.

Today, however, we continue the endless division. We will continue to justify ourself and feel good for our divisions. I might think of myself as a house-church oriented Christian who meets at the town-level, but since no-one else in town believes the same, so I must give up and attend the best local church I can find. The church I found is a good church, but like all churches in town, they divide the members and non-members. And they form a separate group, sometimes a separate denomination which causes division.

Paul commands Timothy to watch his doctrine carefully. But we have stopped the expression of views to be heard. I am not too concerned, but I cannot talk about a whole myriad of issues and ideas because of group-division controls in place. Each group-division creates a stopping of conversation on a set of topics. For example, our local church had a huge debate about baptism before we landed. One of the notable speakers of a credo perspective soon left the church. I think there was a subtle understanding that the pedo perspective had one the upper had, having more senior pastor influence, and so staying would be no longer an open debate. Ever since that time, when this friend left, this issue has been shut. No one talks about it and all leaders are trained in how to carefully speak to the topic. They are trained to pretend to be open to the two sides but in reality the worst thing is to have any debate on the topic. Our point is this. In the New Testament, the debate was allowed to continue. But in our human thinking, debate is bad. Debate can be bad, if there are unkind heated words. But debate can be good. God has set so many difficult topics that are ripe for debate. But in the typical church you are called to sit in the pew or be a trained-controlled and authorized teacher in Sunday School. Any one who simply goes by the Bible is not suffiently authorized. Men and women can openly debate, which violates 1 Corinthians 14. This is one of the best churches in town.

In contrast, according to Scripture in 1 Corinthians 14, only men are to speak in the main assembly meeting and there is a very important time of testing what is said. In this open testing time, the elders are not given special priviledge. The elders are men who have been selected for their wisdom and they must be able to teach. But that cannot butt in and influence the testing. They may not be good at testing. They can easily be wrong about doctrinal things. If you have selected well, this should be rare. But according to the New Testament, elders are not the testers. Testing is open to all men. The elders are however, respsonsible for moderating the orderliness of the assembly. And it would be expected that elders would be often contributing to the speaking that 1

Corinthians says is for the upbuilding of the church. Some debate on controversial issues is acceptable, but it should trigger additional meetings of only men to haggle over the controversial issue. This is seen in Acts where the elders and apostles gathered for a more in depth meeting.

In our modern churches we are so untrained at the meeting assembly time in 1 Corinthians 14, that we should be expected to be failures if we ever tried it. We are trained at ignoring the Bible and well trained at following our particular church tradition in contradiction of 1 Corinthians 14. In modern church life, the deceptive ways of human thinking have been dominating church life for centuries.

[1] Robert Banks, Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

[2] See Tara Caudle, "The Ekklesia as an Assembly That Invokes Response," Liberty University Journal of Statesmanship & Public Policy 1, no. 1 (2020): Article 12.

[3] See Mogens Herman Hansen, The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 125–128; cf. Aristotle, Politics 3.1275a.

11

Behavior in the Ekklesia

The biblical church-*ekklesia* is the foundation and representation of God's truth on earth. This is God's *ekklesia*, not our own. He will hold all responsible. Paul says, that "you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the *ekklesia* of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).

Let's focus on the proper behavior in the *ekklesia* from the clearest picture of the *ekklesia* meeting in 1 Corinthians 14. In this most sacred meeting of the church, only men are permitted to speak, and testing follows. But generally, the church is ready to fight us on this idea of order. How dare you silence the women? What happens if something is said inaccurately or if there is controversy? What if there is an entrenched position disagreement? What if one man thinks something is firm and clear while another man completely disagrees? How can we have a peaceful and orderly meeting?

Let's use the example of the six days of creation. Many Christians these days are open to the evolutionary biological process in the formation of man. This is a suprising weakness of the modern church.[1] There are other churches that are strong on this point, but then they have other massive issues. If we don't have agreement in the basics of Scripture then we don't have harmony. We may gather with other Christian men and agree on the gospel and God's grace, but we will have fundamental issues if we can't agree that God created a literal Adam about 6000 years ago according to Bible chronology. We are not saying how long God lingered before Genesis 1:1, when the earth was formless and void. We are talking about the Bible's clear chronology once Adam was living and the Bible starts to record geneologies. This is a modern world test of faith. From our perspective many evangelistical churches are weak on this topic. Half follow the plain reading of the text and the others accept the secular view of long ages. Many in leadership have failed to care about this topic. There is real confusion when one follows Verne Poythres and John C. Collins. From our perspective this is a sad case of failure to follow the Scriptures. But we should not divide over this. Many of my friends hold to the long ages view and biological evolution, but we can still enjoy the dialog and discussion with a Bible and breakfast. The *ekklesia* may divide into groups that think differently, but the division should be an active discussion with healthy debate division with gathering together at times.

Another example is divorce and remarriage. Why do Christians have the same divorce and remarriage rate as non Christians? From our perspective, there is a problem with the usual Christian interpretation. Most Christians ignore most of the New Testament passages on this topic and they think they understand the so called exception verses. They are proof texting what they want. There is no serious debate, discussion or testing. The problem has gone on for years and so the divorce rate has risen. We would like to see both sides of the debate rather than the usual easy remarriage view getting the public voice. We want to see the traditional one man and one woman for life view get an opportunity to be heard. In some churches, the tolerant of remarriage view controls the conversation. Some would say talking about this will divide. But divsion only happens if the controlling dominant view demands control of the presentation time. Yes, division can easily happen, but division is far better than allowing an important biblical voice to be silenced. The brilliance of the *ekklesia* is everyone gets a voice and everyone gets an opportunity to test what is said. If there is division, it does not have to be complete division. We can still be friends and the city church can still gather.

In all potential conflict, "peace and quiet" is not the goal. Open debate follows the Acts 15 model. An orderly debate can be a good learning experience. Listening to a monologe with someone who controls the conversation is not the *ekklesia* way. It puts you to sleep and sometimes gets your biblical principles frustrated. The New

Testament way is not passivity.[2] A good *ekklesia* disucssion always keeps you on your toes. At any moment, you have to say something. Christian men must be encouraged to express their thoughts from the Bible and freely speak about their convictions. Elders should maintain order, but not interfere. The only time it is appropriate for an elder to step in above the other men is to restore order. If there is an active debate, they don't need to say a word. If there is an out of order debate, they are needed. If there is a doctrinal issues, other men can address the issue. If other men do not address the issue, the elder is responsible to address the issue. If there is a controversy, then it does not automatically go to the elders to resolve. The elders may contribute to the discussion, but they don't have authority to intervene in a peaceful discussion or testing. If the *ekklesia* has mature men, they are expected to step in and lead the assembly toward order. But if no other men step in to restore order when there really is an order problem, then the elders are expected to speak up and restore order to the assembly. Order is not control or uniform thinking. Order is following the protocol established by the Apostles. A basic order, for example, is the 1 Corinthians 14 one man speaking and then sitting down when another stands or shows readiness to speak.

Anyone involved in testing must be given good opportunity to test. If the elders step in too soon, they are interfering in the free testing by the ordinary men. If the elders never step in and allow disorder to continue, they are failing to the follow 1 Corinthians 14 order prescribed by God. The elders are responsible for order, but they are also ordinary men who may be sharing their words of encouragement like any other man. Their unique role as elder, is to step in to ensure order if anything goes wrong with the discussion. In some cases, elders may even suggest a separate meeting. Something like this seems to have happened in Acts 20 when the men involved had the opportunity to go into more detail on the issue at hand.

But there is a problem when some elders get too much influence and are able to control what is said in the assembly. According to 1 Corinthians 14, any man can speak. Any man can be involved in testing. There is no mention of elders having particular influence and control over what is said. Instead, elders are called upon to ensure there is order. If something is said wrong, then men from the assembly are expected to step up and challenge the thing said which is called the *testing*. Elders are given special rights and respect to help keep the meeting flowing for speaking or *testing*. This time in the week is for the men. The men are part of the city/town *ekklesia*. The men are subject to dealing with other men, but not women. The men should be from the local town. There is such a thing as extended association of towns and two towns nearby may have cross over, which is fine. But locality should have great importance. Locality should have a great importance especially when elders are selected. But locality should also weigh in on those speaking and testing. If one is from the town or a neighbor town fine. If one is from far away, one would wonder about that mans responsibility to his own town.

So officially selected elders should be town based and should help with maintaining order if things get out of hand. They should be able to teach in a home size meeting. They certainly should not be controlling the teaching. Any man should be free to test anything said by any other man in the assembly. If there is a fear of testing, there is probably a problem of leaders having too much power. The example of Diotrophes comes to mind. (Ref. 2 or 3 John)

Men who may focus on testing may be more gifted in testing than speaking for the encouragement of the church. These men may even tend to refrain from speaking in general, but care deeply about watching doctrine so they focus on testing.

Any man should be free to test any other man speaking in the meeting. This is the proper dynamic of this very important *ekklesia* meeting. The real *ekklesia* is completely different from our modern church meetings. Today, in most churches there is so much control and scripted presentation that the ordinary man has no place to speak. Instead of trusting God and the Holy Spirit working in men, we trust our human traditions and forbid all men from speaking except for the orator.

But there is another way. If you read your Bible looking the the Apostles ways of doing things, you will notice significant differences. You will notice we are called to love each other. One of the most significant ways to love

another man who is part of the holy temple is to allowing each man the God ordained speaking opportunity in the *ekklesia* meeting.

[1] Youtube - Hen Ham and Dr. Terry Mortenson

[2] "So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil" (Romans 14:16).

12

New Covenant Theology

God has revealed wonderful truths in the New Testament but he has still left some mysteries. We are left with enough to know for life and some for us to ponder. Scripture says this about Jesus, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." We can wonder and ponder and discuss our thoughts or we can fight over our differences. We can be glad or we can get mad. We are called to watch our doctrine closely, but we are also called to love and be like minded.

There are some theological systems of understanding the over-arching story of the Bible that may affect you without knowing it. We have seen the effects of Covenant Theology, in the area of *church membership* and the *Lord's Supper*, but normally these theological systems are hidden and quiet. Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology are the two dominant systems that have deep underlying side effects on how you understand the Bible. In our case, the idea of *covenant membership* seems to have driven the church to push *church membership* against our conscience convictions. It is possible for you to be happily attending a particular church and have a Covenant Theology oriented group of elders suggest that you leave the church, to find some other elders to submit to. This seems to be a Covenant Theology thing, not understanding 1 Corinthians 12:27, "Now you are the body of Christ and individualally members of it." Douglass Moo has written about this *covenant membership* issue. And I have written about this[1] Sometimes we need to discuss our differences. It seems we can preach about it and write books about it, but in the same church we can't talk about it.

I was thankful to have heard a theologically significant assessment of the two leading theological systems during my studies at Northeastern Bible College in 1987. Dr. Ferris L. McDaniel provided a thoughtful critique of both Covenant and Dispensational Theology, leaving something like New Covenant Theology. Dr. McDaniel was the main Greek Theology professor at Northeastern Bible college. Years later, I was amazed to discover a similar theological assessment in the form of New Covenant Theology and the Sovereign Grace teachings of John Reisinger. These theological systems tend to remain quiet until suddenly you might realize it affects the Gospel or your family attending church. John Reisinger was largely responsible for giving movement to NCT, but he is no longer with us. He has passed his material on to CrossToCrown Ministries who is doing a excellent job presenting NCT. We have enjoyed some excellent New Covenant Theology presentations from this ministry and will provide links below. If you are only familiar with Covenant or Dispensational Theology, and if you are interested in fundamentals/leadership/church, we suggest listening to these talks. There is also an introduction book by A. Blake White called, "What is New Covenant Theology." Follow this footnote for the CrossToCrown Youtube sessions:[2]

Our summary of the popular theological systems is this. NCT is the most biblical. Progressive Covenantalism is the 2nd best and is growing in academia. Generally you should avoid these theological systems unless you are interested in church/leadership. You are better off spending time reading your Bible. For some people, however, theological discussions are fun and can even be relationally encouraging. For others, theology and doctrine is not their cup of tea. That is ok. We are called to love each other. One of the most enjoyable things in life is to study God's Word, develop your convictions, and then talk about it over coffee and breakfast, with others who love God's Word, but think different. God has left enough mystery to test our character and see if we will pursue Christian friendships or instigate division. Let's pursue knowing God and pursue loving Christian friendships.

[1] https://rfaber.com/membership.html

[2] 1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_-GtYO5ZJIg&t=556s 2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXVrvy0URV8 3.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1arT8qZVj-U 4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CgAp1muDZk 5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuKgYL2lSw0

13

Preaching in the New Testament

To be honest, this is one of the last chapters added, and probably one of the most controversial. This is a mini response to Johnathan L. Griffith's "Preaching in the New Testament", an exegetical and biblical-theological study in the NSBT series edited by D.A. Carson. Right in the introduction, the author introduces a common observation that he will later try to prove wrong. He says, "Perhaps preaching as a specialized activity is now completely outmoded."[1] He is responding to C. H. Dodd's, "The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments" who proposed that *preaching* language is used for evangelistic proclamation rather than edification of believers. Dodd argued that the early church strictly distinguished between *kerygma* (the public proclamation of the gospel aimed at converting non-believers) and *didache* used for instruction and edification of believers. But lets dig a bit deeper.

These are the Greek words used for preaching: *κηρύσσω* (*kerusso*, proclaim or herald), *ευαγγελίζω* (*euangelizo*, to bring the Good News), and *καταγγέλλω* (*kataggello*, to declare thoroughly or solemnly).

Griffiths admits that "the bulk of the occurrences of the three 'semi-technical' verbs are found in the context of evangelistic proclamation to non-Christians." Then he suggests this is because most of the occurrences are in Acts, "which is dominated by accounts of pioneer evangelism." He says, "it stands to reason that a significant proportion of the occurrences of terms associated with proclamation will refer to evangelistic proclamation of the gospel."[2]

So the important point Griffiths makes is rooted in the rare exceptions. So he goes into detail on the exceptions. He tries to make a case that there was *preaching* to believers, so he can justify the modern form of *preaching*. He wants to show the legitimacy of modern-day *preaching* in the context of believers. He downplays the importance of word studies[3] and the importance of 1 Corinthians 14.[4] The main reason for dismissing 1 Corinthians 14 is because of so called 'revelation' even though revelation can be understood in various ways. Also, the speaking in 1 Corinthians 14 is not limited to 'revelation' speach. The amount of time spent on 1 Corinthians 14 is very short because it challenges his theory. He tries to leave 1 Corinthians 14 as mystery that can be ignored even though the chapter ends with these writings are 'a command of the Lord' (1 Corinthians 14:37).

Johnathan Griffiths has done a masterful effort in defending modern-day *preaching*, but has he treated the text of the Bible fairly? To be honest, his case must be strong enough to overrule the clear implications of the ordinary believer participation in 1 Corinthians 14. If Griffiths is right, then the Bible is very confusing to say that the believer should "Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor 14:1). This chapter along with Colossians 3 creates a dillema. Either modern-day *preaching* is primary, or *prophesy* (one another speaking) is primary. What is the proper order for the main gathered *ekklesia*? 1 Corinthians 14 precludes both as a primary way of doing things and it puts one another speaking as primary as a command of God. There is clear instruction for one another speaking when men are told to sit down. In evangelistic preaching, we are clear that the speaker is authorized to dominate the time. But in the *ekklesia* there is no clear teaching that the *preacher* should command the time? The only clear teaching is to sit down. But with our modern-day *preaching* way, he will dominate the speaking time. If *preaching* is intended for evangelistic purposes, there is no conflict. The hall of Tyrannus is a good example of an evangelistic effort. In this case *preaching* is called for. Either Griffiths has a point with his exceptions, and 1 Corinthians 14 should be ignored (as hard-cessationists would say), or perhaps Griffiths is making too much of his so called exceptions. Either *preaching* is supposed to dominate the primary meeting or this is a time that God intends for one another

encouragement. Either Carson/Griffiths and are right or Dodd/Zens are right. Just because something is popular, like *preaching* in the assembly, does not make it right. The Reformers popularized *preaching* to believers, but it was not this way in the 1st century church. The Reformers had a lot to deal with. But today, there is an ongoing effort to resist the clear text of Scripture. Human tradition is powerful. The proper role of New Testament *preaching* is not in the *ekklesia* but on the streets. The Hall of Tyrannus, the synagogue, the marketplace and the unbelievers homes were all places where New Testament *preaching* ocurrs. The New Testament shows the small-home-based *oikos ekklesia* as a place of informal teaching, dialog and discussion. The formal *preacher* of sermons is a model that developed later in history. The original *ekklesia* has always been whole city and small-home-based *oikos ekklesia* gatherings, fully united.

The large meeting gifted speaker is still an important role and gift. Peter and Apollos liked to stand up and boldly proclaim truth and their gifts were appreciated. Christians would do well to help these evangelistic and large meeting speakers. But the modern practice of the regular *sermon* is not appropriate for the regular *ekklesia* meeting unless you want to keep the men silent. But Johnathan Griffiths is saying what the traditional church wants to hear so almost everyone is on his side. Every modern-day traditional *preacher* should have a copy of his book. It does an excellent job of supporting the modern church passive-consumer-mindset. Griffiths suggests that *laypeople* should find new ways to express their teaching in small-group Bible-studies. But in doing this, he is downplaying the significance of 1 Corinthians 14 that seems to make the primary gathering a many voices model. His suggestion that the standard of 'lay' people is very high is still perpetuating the *clergy-laity* distinction that diminishes the meaning of the *priesthood of believers*. This traditional church midset still runs strong in our modern churches.

Let’s dig a little more into the three 'semi-technical' Greek verbs used for *preaching*. When you see *preaching* in your English translation it is one of these three words: κηρύσσω (kerusso), ευαγγελίζω (euangelizo), or καταγγέλλω (kataggello). Kerusso is used for open, public proclamation, like an announcer for the king, general or emperor. He raises his voice to announce the message to the crowds. The context is usually the public square, the marketplace, or an open crowd (Matt 4:17, Mark 16:15, Rom 10:14-15). Euangelizo was used to announce the good news of winning a war, for example, so it also fits announcing the *good news* of the Gospel. Kataggello is used to 'to proclaim intently', 'to tell thouroughly', or to celebrate aloud. In the New Testament, these words are usually directed at unbelievers (Luke 4:18, Acts 8:4). This meaning fits the *preacher* who is an evangelist like the famous Ray Comfort. He goes out on the street and talks to hundreds of people, trying to evangelize and win them to the faith.

There is a different set of Greek words used when the *oikos ekklēsia* is gathered. The words are more like teaching, explaining Scripture, exhorting, encouraging, and comforting. In the *ekklēsia* context, the *preacher* does not stand up to speak over the common man. It does not make much sense for the evangelist to evangelize the saints.[5] The 1 Corinthians 14 model encourages active listening because anyone may be next to test or encourage. Hebrews 5:12 even speaks of a "dull of hearing" audience who "ought to be teachers." These are the Greek words used in the context of the *ekklesia*. *διδάσκω* (didasko, to teach, instruct, or explain Scripture), *παρακαλέω* (parakaleo, to exhort, encourage, or comfort), *προφητεύω* (propheteuo, to speak a word for building up). These words are used in the οικος εκκλησία (home-based-ekklesia-gathering), not the public square.

But with traditional *preaching*, we have changed the New Testament way into a clergy-laity way of doing things. Now the preacher (clergy) has the podium (the speaking time) and the laity listen quietly. This would be fine if this were God’s intention. We should fully accept this model if it is taught in Scripture. But we see another model taught in Scripture, and the Reformers knew about it. The Reformers were afraid of the unruly peasants, so they relied on the secular government to protect themselves from the Roman Catholic armies. They changed the Roman Catholic "priest" into the Protestant "pastor" or "preacher" who used the pulpit to control the conversation. The passive audience (laity) sat in rows facing an elevated stage where a lone clergyman spoke. The Reformers replaced the Catholic Mass with the Protestant sermon, and maintained control. The Anabaptist (radical reformation) tried to implement the participatory house-church model, but they were often killed by both

the Roman Catholic Church and the mainstream Reformers. Calvin and Luther supported the drowning and burning of Anabaptists because their more democratic *ekklesia* threatened the institutional order of the church-state alliance. Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli retreated to "Constantinian sacralism",[6] and a "partnership with the State",[7] where the church and state were joined and Old Testament temple ideas were brought into the church.

The Free Church movement, realized the Reformation church and state problem and broke away from it. The Evangelical Free Church movement began in the 1800s in Scandinavia (Sweeden, Norway, and Denmark). The Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA) formed in 1950. But the concept of "free" in this book is dealing with a new church state issue with the 501(c)(3) rules along with the bondage of theological systems that allow Old Covenant ways into the New. And returning to the *ekklesia* and the *preacher* we are interested in a radical reformation different from the historic Anabaptist reformation and different from the Reformers Reformation. The focus and goal of our idea is biblically fidelity rooted in the Apostolic teaching and traditions. But that doesn't impact the modern reader so we have to be more explicit. Our goal is more of the Athenian *ekklesia* model that would have been fresh on the mind of someone in the days of Jesus. The modern *preacher* does not fit the biblical Greek words. It would be more accurate to say *evangelist*. But the *preacher* does fit the clergy-pastor of the Roman Catholic and Reformation days. The Athenian Ekklesia had an *episkopos* (overseer), but they were ordinary citizens chosen on a temporary or voluntary basis to ensure the order of the gathering. Every citizen had the right to stand up, address the crowd and participate in anything important to the *ekklesia*. We will always go back to the main clear picture of this in the Bible, 1 Corinthians 14.

When it comes to the *preacher* and 1 Corinthians 14, we have to mention *prophecy*. There is a debate among Christians as to what God intends for the church today. Should prophecy still exist and be used? Has prophecy ceased? Our view is often called soft-cessationism, meaning "no direct revelation from God." The idea is *prophecy* is the Holy Spirit in all Christians as we are inspired with thoughts based on God's Word. In this understanding, God is not giving any direct messages to the *prophet*. God can do anything, but we believe God is honoring his written Word and the proper attitude is even more cessationist than Jeremiah 23:28, and only "let him who has my word speak my word faithfully." The testing time after the speaker is 100% based on the same principle, a Spirit indwelled Christian judges based on God's Word. The negative attitude toward the *prophet* who has dreams from his own mind, should be our attitude. God says, "I am against the *prophets*, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the LORD'. Behold, I am against those who *prophecy* lying dreams… and lead my people astry by their lies and recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them…" God says to the prophet, "You are the burden, and I will cast you off… for the burden is every man's own word, and you pervert the words of the living God, the LORD of hosts, our God" (Jeremiah 23:26-36). If we judge and speak words inspired by the Spirit, based 100% on God's Word as written, then we can safely "earnestly desire to *prophesy*." But the default understanding of *prophesy* is flipped and assumes direct revelations. So this is why we propose never using the word *prophesy*. We should use our language as it is and treat *prophesy* as direct revelations as people want and do assume. Let us never *prophesy* if that is what we have. We do not want to cut out 1 Corinthians 14 just because we have a translation word flip. We do not want to be outwitted by the undermining linguists and theologians of devious agenda. So, even though we grant the Greek does say *prophet*, we can only safely use the word if we have the full story (The time in history, post canon, the theological caution like Jeremiah 23, and the Greek word study understanding). Our new translation for *prophet* is one who *speaks for God* shortened to *speak*. The default meaning of *prophet* can remain as the language has drifted, to mean a new revelation speaker, something we want to follow God in resisting (Jeremiah 23), now that God's Word is canonized.

The hard-cessationist view does not deal with the modern definition meaning reversal/flip of *prophet* and resorts to essentially omitting 1 Corinthians 14 along with all New Testament uses of *prophet*. They have good intentions to worry about new direct revelation from God, the inappropriate form of *prophecy*. We agree with this concern, but limit *prophecy* to a Christian relying on the Spirit tied to the *new creation* and God's Word. We assume the *testing* is meant to confirm that what is spoken to be faithful to God's Word. But if hard-cessationism is followed consistently, then all speakers should cease. The preacher is not in a separate category. The clergy

system puts the *preacher* in a separate class, but that is evil. To be consistent, the *preacher* should sit down because he is a *prophet* (who speaks for God). Our contention is biblical. 1 Corinthians 14 is clear. *Prophecy* is simple. *Ordination* of a special *preacher* class is Old Covenant ideology. We have adopted an absurd view that is inconsistent with Scripture. If the ordained clergy is allowed to speak and the ordinary man cannot, how do make sense of Scripture in 1 Corinthians 14? Anthony Thiselton helps understand *prophecy* with this statement, "Prophecy amounts to healthy preaching, proclamation, or teaching which pastorally applied for the appropriation of gospel truth and gospel promise, in their own context of situation, to help others."[8] This statement helps with *prophecy* but implies the traditional role of the *pastor* who dominates the speaking time. But we must include 1 Corinthians 14 in our theology. We must also include the root etymology of the Athenian *ekklesia*. The ordinary man has the same democratic right to speak in the gathering. The *preacher* is the evangelist on the street. The *overseer* must follow the order of 1 Corinthians 14. The real true and proper *ekklesia* includes the ordinary man. Paul makes the 1 Corinthians 14 order a strong command of the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:37). We seek to build a theology that puts Scripture above Reformation compromise and the powerful traditions of man. This is not our idea. We are perfectly happy to sit in the pew. It is Scripture that disturbs our traditions.

The claims of Johnathan Griffiths are strong. But the clarity of 1 Corinthians 14 is much stronger. And 1 Corinthians 14 is supported by many other examples of one-another based gatherings.[9] The definition reversal of *prophecy* is significant. It no longer means what it used to mean.[10] And many Christians do not understand our times when it comes to cessationism and the canon.[11] We would love to address the exceptions of *preaching* here, but it is left to the notes.[12] [13] [14]

The bottom line is this. You can read God's Word and get a much clearer picture of the way church should be. But God allows disorder. Just think about how God let Israel go down the wrong path until there was great disorder, and God did not intervene. Why is this? The truth is that God is testing us. God's Word is very clear to the common person who reads it without the trappings of modern institutionalism and systematic theology. The modern institutional church does not want discussion on this topic and it will run to the experts, books and abstract systems rather than allow men to discuss what the Bible says. The new Bible thinkers have to operate in the underground of Christianity. The problem is that there is much disorder in both the traditional and the new thinkers. God's Word stands true but man cannot be trusted.[15] However, we trust the Apostles, who set up a system in 1 Corinthians 14 with the potential to be a more clear method of arriving at truth. This system is the *ekklesia* and the community of Christians. The rules of order are clear, the method is clear, the community is all who are of the faith, the Apostles are our teachers, Jesus is King.

[1] Jonathan I. Griffiths, Preaching in the New Testament: An Exegetical and Biblical-Theological Study (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 2.

[2] Griffiths, Preaching in the New Testament, 34.

[3] Griffiths, Preaching in the New Testament, 17.

[4] Griffiths, Preaching in the New Testament, 127.

[5] "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God…" (Hebrews 6:1, ESV)

[6] Leonard Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 21-62, 132-159, 160-188.

[7] E. H. Broadbent, The Pilgrim Church: Being Some Account of the Continuance Through Succeeding Centuries of Churches after the Apostolic Pattern (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Pickering & Inglis, 1999), 173.

[8] Anthony C. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 1084.

[9] Steve Atkerson's NTRF, Jon Zens, Robert Banks, CrossToCrown(2025+), etc.

[10] Modern meaning of prophecy is primarily foretelling (prediction), but the etymology is more "to speak on behalf of." Prophecy used to mean "speak", but now it means "predict." We cannot use the word prophecy anymore. It can be used when we all understand the etymology, but in common English, it is completely wrong and confusing to use the word.

[11] Prophecy can be understood to have completely changed from the 1 Corinthians 1st century days when revelation was directly from God or via letters from the Apostles. With God's Word firmly established in the canon of Scripture, we would naturally expect the revelations to become rare as in Samuel's days (1 Samuel 3:1). According to soft-cessationism, we should always test everything by God's Word, and we should be very wary of 'open-but-cautious' Christians who think God still might be sending direct revelations. Why would God confuse the final authority with direct revelations when we have Scripture. But the most troubling is the perspective that direct revelations are common and testing is minimized.

[12] Romans 1:15 "I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome." Paul had never been to Rome and it is very understandable that there are many who need a presentation of the Gospel, and Christians who would appreciate an in person special presentation. They did not have the canon and all the books handy in Bible form as we have today. The Gospel was important enough to hear direct from Paul to be sure they got it. But that does not undermine the normal ekklesia meeting order of 1 Corinthians 14. We can't assume that the sermon and one man speaking is the normal way because of this general and historically significant event. When Paul did get to Rome, he often had non Christians visit and listen to the Gospel and that is what he had in mind. This is a false conclusion that Paul intended for gospel presentation to be a replacement of the order in 1 Corinthians 14.

[13] 1 Corinthians 9:14 This is apostolic ministry based on 1 Corinthians 9:1. It seems Griffiths has lost the context. He says, 1 Corinthians 9:14 "suggests that the believers themselves benefited from that ministry of proclamation as hearers" (Griffiths, 35). We always put the Apostolic ministry in the highest priority, even over the normal ekklesia order of 1 Corinthians 14. When Paul came to speak in Troas in Acts 20, "he prolonged his speech until midnight…" And "he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak" (Acts 20:7,11). This is to be expected and we should give Paul the same honor if he visited our ekklesia gathering. On the next "first day of the week", we should resume the 1 Corinthians 14 order. But Griffiths would suggest that we cancel the command from the Lord in 1 Corinthians 14, and elevate the Old Covenant ordained priest-man to the stage like in Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8:4).

[14] THE OTHER EXCEPTIONS need to be reviewed, TBD

[15] Romans 3:4

14

Senior Pastors and Seminaries

Jesus chose ordinary men for his disciples. He also said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 18:3) Many people like to be called teacher these days, but Jesus said, "you are not to be called rabbi[teacher], for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers… Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ." (Matt 23:8,10) Jesus did choose one highly trained 'troublemaker' named Saul, and He turned Saul into a passionate Apostle Paul. But, generally, Jesus promoted the less trained and was hard on the highly trained men. [1]

The Bible does have some interpretive challenges for our day. For example, "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?" (1 Cor 12:29). We would say apostle = "missionary", prophet = "speaker", teacher = "speaker with a teaching", miracles = not for today as it was then, tongues = not for today because the purpose has been fulfilled.[2] How broad is the "teaching one another" in Colossians? Amazingly, teaching one another is used in the same sentence with singing. It says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16). The modern church cannot bear to let this be said without some restricting it, because the modern church does not follow 1 Corinthians 14. How broad is the idea of "by this time you ought to be teachers" in Hebrews? Have we not had churches estabished for many years? Scripture says, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food" (Heb 5:12). But our modern churches can not accept this idea. It must be resisted to keep the one-man-speaker and teacher model. We tend to push men into teaching roles, give them the title of "teacher" or "pastor" (meaning teacher) and then we follow this teacher like the Corinthians, "'I follow Paul', or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' (1 Cor 1:12). Jesus warns against calling any man "teacher", elevating one man above the others. Scripture says, "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ (Matt 23:8-10). But we have our arguments and excuses and we resist the clear order of the meeting described in 1 Corinthians 14.

We tend to only select men with M.Div's for the highest positions in our churches. It seems we do the opposite of Jesus. Nothing I say will convince the ordinary Christian from changing this, because we have signed up for the consumer Christian role to sit in the pew and listen to the pastor every week instead of the 1 Corinthians 14 model. Since we sit, we want the best speaker possible to make the best of the sermon experience.

Another thing we do is bring in outside men for the top positions. We expect ordinary elders to come from the church, so they can be tested, but the senior pastor, is imported. He not only needs an M.Div, but he is usually selected from outside the church. The biblical model, seen in Titus 1:5, assumes appointed elders in each town, from the town, for the town. It is a good assumption that Titus did not move elders around to get the perfect elder for the job in a certain town. No, the older men from the town were selected/chosen to be responsible for the proper order of then town based *ekklesia*. These men would not necessarily speak more, but that had to guard the *ekklesia* and they should be "older-in-the-Lord" and the most qualified. For example, a divorced man, whose prior wife was still alive, would not be qualified over an older man who did not have that issue. Or if there were two older men who were married with children, everything else being about equal, the children would be considered in how they obey and respect their father. This is one of the qualifications for elder. The elder must be able to teach, but the assumption in Scripture was the house church setting, not a modern Sunday school class.

The assumption was an assembly following 1 Corinthians 14.

Another thing we do is push the "first among equals" idea even though the Bible pushes against that idea. There is no indication in the Bible that there was a chief elder (pastor). Titus was told to "appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). But somehow we have the idea of finding a professional pastor from outside the church by using a pastoral search, and this "elder" gets a lot more pay than the other elders who are usually volunteers. The technical Bible passage justifying a pay-based-career is the "double honor" and the "ox treading out the grain" and the "laborer deserves his wages" in 1 Timothy 5:17-18. This could be double the inclination to give someone a special thank you. Or it could mean giving someone a few extra bucks to help his busy life since he has spent more time preparing for teaching. It could mean double the 'honorarium', but we generally make this in to a full time salaried job. With this full time job comes the unspoken requirement of a decent educational background.

I recall my time in a 1 year Bible College, listening to my parents suggestion, and observing other young men pursing a pastoral path. I thought to myself, I don't see that justified in Scripture. But no one dared question it in public. Everyone seemed fine with it. But since I knew God's Word quite well, I knew I would not pursue that path, based on the New Covenant being so unclear about our modern pastoral career assumptions. The Old Covenant had the ordained priest, the New Covenant did not. But my roomate in Bible college was a 4th year student with a plan to become a pastor. He was a very nice guy, but I personally did not read my Bible the same way. I sensed a cultural thing more than a biblical thing driving some to become pastors. I did not see the idea of studying in academia to get an M.Div to be trained to become a "first among equals" church pastor. The Bible seemed to be so diffent in 1 Corinthians 14, etc.

In the words of a 89 year old man, "you put in your 3-4 years (of seminary training). You become a pastor. Now you are a young squirt telling the older people what to do."

The Biblical *elder*, however, is a very legitimate church leadership role. *Elder* simply means an older one. The real meaning is probably *older-one in the Lord*. But an elder is officially responsible for the city *ekklesia*. Are the ordinary men responsible for the city *ekklesia* also? Yes. So what is the difference. The Bible is not super clear, but based on Old Testament and New Testament and the history of the secular *ekklesia*, the elder is supposed to be a final say and an officially responsible person both for the order of the meeting and any financial issue or any significant issue of concern. If he is a younger man, you are following a worldly mindset. If he is older and mainly business qualified, you are following a worldly mindset. The qualifications are clear in the New Testament.

But Paul's ministry and his using helpers like Timothy, Titus, Silas, Luke, etc, show a biblical way of teaching that is the opposite of the modern seminary. It is more like missions with trainees. It is more like starting new churches in a home and community context without the academic focus or the oratory priority. There was no need for titles or resumes, but instead there was doing ministry work together. And in the process, Timothy is told to teach "faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2).

This is a different kind of *seminary* that uses young men, puts them into training, and does not involve degrees or sitting at a desk reading books. Timothy had known the scriptures from his youth, so even though he was a young man, he was very much into the scriptures (2 Tim 1:5, Acts 16:1-3). If Timothy was perhaps 35, he may have known God's Word for 25 years already. So, as a helper to Paul, Timothy not only had authority, but he was under the Apostolic authority of Paul, who was under Christ. Today, with the seminary method, we give a young man an idea that you can go into debt at a seminary, get an M.Div, and be ready for a salary paid position as a speaker who takes over the 1 Corinthians 14 meeting. According the biblical text, it does not seem that elders were paid positions. The Bible mentions giving "double honor." But that does not mean salary. At most, it may have been an honorarium for a busy elder working a normal job (1 Timothy 5:17-18). But the career idea does not fit. John Piper's book, "Brothers We Are Not Professionals" assumes the full-time paid position for the senior pastor. Instead, the true biblical *ekklesia* protects the rights of the ordinary men from the one-man show (1 Cor 14:26-40).

The Bible also brings up an interesting negative leader with a man 'Diotrophes' who put people out of the church. We wonder if he did this through some kind of church structures or the equivalent of strict-bylaws or possibly church membership, but we don't know. There are two kinds of pushing out of the church. One is denying the speaking time for ordinary men (1 Corinthians 14). The second is saying things from the pulpit that imply certain men don't fit the theology of the church and would be better off somewhere else (instead of leaving it up to the individual Christian). Whatever he did, he put people out of the church by making them not included and not welcome. Instead, some of our churches welcome the non-Christian and suggest certain Christians would be better off at another church. There can easily be a subtle spirit that likes to control church to the point of pushing certain people out of the church. Instead of the humble non-invasive *ekklesia* model, there can be the priest-like ordination and orator model that resists the 1 Corinthians 14 *ekklesia*. The American pastorate has certainly become very professional compared to my memories of the early African church in the Kaonde area of Zambia. But even the earliest African churches were guided by the ordained pastor and orator model. We are blind to the problem and we export our broken systems to the world. God does not come down with a gold trumpet, he only says look to my Word.

By the time a young man has spent $100,000+ on college and seminary training, there will naturally be a desire to seek a stable financial income. Who is going to pay that salary? Will it come from the Old Testament idea of the tithe? Will the one man in the pulpit pressure the attenders to give to the church system instead of to the Apostolic like ministry of Paul, Timothy, Titus, Silas, etc. There are exceptions. I know of a man who got a seminary degree on the side, and humbly does not mention it. He continues to work an ordinary job. It was just an important education he wanted to help clear up some thoughts. We are not talking about that. We are not against seminaries in all cases. We are concerned about the seminary being the assumed path to the pastorate. There are career assumptions built into this modern path of becoming a pastor.

We are not against seminary training and scholarly research. What matters is the *ekklesia*. What matters is humility. What matters is that Jesus usually found fault with the experts. We think seminary training has been good for some. If the proper *ekklesia* is maintained, and one man is not using his credentials to dominate. We like the stories of men like D.A. Carson and Steve Wellum. If we sense humility in a man, education can be good. But today, there is a problem in the *ekklesia*, and many men are involved in perpetuating the problem. If God leads someone into academia, they must not use it against the biblical model. Most churches are looking for a senior pastor with degrees and academic achievements. They want a gifted orator for a pastor. John Piper's book does not help, but perpetuates the problem. He still is resisting the model of the Apostles in 1 Corinthians 14. Sometimes we are stubborn and don't see the angel standing there. The donkey sees it, but we don't.

Here we will link to a nice interview with Steve Wellum, that we think shows a mixture of giving honor to someone with academic achievement but a man receiving it with humility. The important part of this interview, is Steve describing a time when he was willing to give up the academic world after learning about caring for people in the church. This is still the modern church pastor model, but we appreciate the humility. There are many stories like this. Those with academic backrounds can do great good if they remain humble.[3]

Any church that assumes their new senior pastor must be a gifted orator and must have an M.Div, is misguided. Jesus picks ordinary men to be his disciples and they still were considered ordinary men when Peter and John were questioned by the Sanhedrin. Jesus had the harshest words to the educated. He also confronted the proud Saul, to make him the humble Paul. The real test is how does your *ekklesia* operate? Is there respect for the Apostle Paul's Scripture in 1 Corinthians 14?

[1] (Ref Like Nicodemus and the Pharasees)

[2] This would take a long time to explain our reasoning. But our short answer this: Apostles: These are no longer authoritative like the original Apostles. In this book we try to use captial for the original Apostles. Ordinary apostles still exist today, but we call them "missionaries." We prefer to substitute missionary for the biblical 'apostle' to avoid confusion. Prophets: Some say these are preachers today. Some say this role has ceased, like Richard Gaffin and most Presbyterians. We would say they are ordinary men and women who speak for the encouragement or consolation of others. We argree with

D.A. Carson, John Piper, Wayne Grudem and all those who do not insist on complete cessationism for this idea. We are shocked at the Christians who make this important chapter (1 Corinthians 14) null and void.

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7_C63PERjw&t=1303s

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Denominations, Distinctives, And Order

How do we best order the church today when we have our strong theological distinctives? How do we maintain the purity of our persuasions when there are other competing Christian and non-Christian views all around us? How do we watch our doctrine closely and yet have an open heart to our Christian brothers who think different about important secondary issues? Will 'constitutions', 'statements of faith' or 'denominations' help?

We like Christians who are passionate about their beliefs. But we want to see beliefs tied to God's Word. We are skeptical of denominations, but they can also be used with good intentions. Guarding the right doctrine can sound like a good reason to add denominational boundaries. But, sometimes we divide, and we don't listen to each other. There is a tendency for human tradition that always maintains denominational boundaries even if they should be abandoned. Our general preference has been inter-denominational ministries and churches, because this usually implies a working out of differences rather than isolation and avoidance. We like to see discussion and dialog rather than stand-off isolation. Non-denominational ministries can be good or bad, it all depends on the purpose and intentions of the heart.

Today there are so many denominations in America that the unbelievers *know* Christianity is false. We have really missed the point of John 17. Our sad state of endless division gone to the extreme. The excuse of holding to right doctrines has become a problem in the big picture of Christian testimony. We are not going to say denominations are evil, because the intentions for creating denominations are often very good.

But when centuries go by, and there are still so many denominations, something is wrong.[1] Can anyone deny that we have done what the 1 Corinthian started in 1 Corinthians 1. The solution to division is not justification for our methods but a little more humility and reliance on the Spirit. With man things are impossible, with God all things are possible. Sit down with other Christians with a breakfast, a coffee and a Bible. Do this over and over. Discuss books and Bible readings. Things really can change.

This quote from Spurgeon is helpful. Spurgeon says, "We may draw up the most express and distinct form of doctrine, but we shall find that the next generation will depart from the truth unless God shall be pleased to give it renewed grace from on high. You cannot, by Presbytery, or Independency, or Episcopacy, secure the life of the Church-I find the Church of God has existed under an Episcopacy-a form of government not without its virtues and its faults. I find the Church of God flourish under a Presbytery, and decay under it too. I know it can be successful under an Independent form of Church government and can decline into Arianism quite as easily. The fact is that forms of government have very little to do with the vital principle of the Church. "The reason why the Church of God exists is not her ecclesiastical regulations, her organization, her formularies, her ministers, or her creeds, but the presence of the Lord in the midst of her; and while Christ lives, and Christ reigns, and stands and feeds his Church, she is safe; but if he were once gone, it would be with her as it is with you and with me when the Spirit of God has departed from us, we are weak as other men, and she would be quite as powerless."[2]

The Bible is simple about this. Each city or town had its own *ekklesia*. This is supported by the Old Testament (Deut 21:1-3, etc) and the roots of the secular word *ekklesia* that was always tied to the *polis*. Just think about the beautiful excitement and joy in the Old Testament when the Jews celebrated their festivals. Now think of the New Covenant described in 2 Corinthians 3 being of much greater glory. Imagine the joy and health of a city wide *ekklesia* in the 1st century when 3000 were added in one day. They were all meeting in homes and in the temple (while it lasted), but they considered the *church*/*ekklesia* at the city level. This is much better than 50

churches in town with the unbelievers wondering why they are so divided. The model of Christian unity in John 17 is profound.

[1] Murray, I. H. (2000) Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, p. 285.

[2] - Charles H. Spurgeon, "Christ is Glorious – Let us Make Him Known"

16

The Beautiful Church

I am glad to be part of the modern church, even with its flaws. I love to go to church, make friends, sing songs of joy, celebrate the Gospel of Jesus Christ and be encouraged. But I also want to dream about the Bible's idea of the *ekklesia* of Jesus Christ. I think we need pictures and visions of the ideal and the perfect. God's Word paints a picture of an amazing church, one that you may never see, but the picture is still painted. Our modern church problems should not stop us from dreaming.

If we know the good, we can help someone else. If we are immature, we can hurt. An important work of the Christian is to "spur one another on to love and good works" (Hebr 10:24). We can build up those in the church or we can tear down. Ephesians says, "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body" (Ephesians 4:25). And Ephesians 4:29 says, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." The clearest picture of the true *ekklesia* (gathering) is 1 Corinthians 14 and it is focused on this idea of building up, encouraging and comforting others. This is the beautiful church.

One of the most famous stories of the beautiful church is recorded in Acts, "Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32). The Christians were overcome by amazement at God's gracious goodness and his power in raising Jesus from the dead, so sharing their possessions was a natural response to their joy. This is the beautiful church.

Experts tell us this story in Acts will never happen again. The idea is that this was an unusual time for the church, and we should not expect to ever see anything like it. Perhaps. But I have hope that there might be glimpses of the 'beautiful church' here on earth. I will dream and hope that I might see aspects of the beautiful early church described in the 1st century. And I am not blind to the fact that the 1st century church had problems. But the problems sometimes help to show the beautiful church more clearly. I get some of the most interesting thoughts about the beautiful church from Corinthians, even with its many problems. So for this reason, I really like the books of 1 and 2 Corinthians. 1 Corinthians 11 has the clearest picture of an early church meeting with the Lord's Supper meal. If the Corinthians had not made a mistake, we wouldn't have such a clear picture of the full-meal Lord's Supper. So the problems can vividly help us see aspects of the 'beautiful church.'

The church is called the body of Christ, and as members of this body, we are expected to love one another. But the Christian faith is ultimately a call to love God and each other to the extreme. Paul says, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). And, "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:19). But we have hope, "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor 15:22). And on the love theme, Paul says, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor 13:4-7). This is a good kind of dying. And when you see it, you are seeing the beautiful church.

God is serious about our behavior. John says, "for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:20b-21). This is very tangible and plain in Paul's 1st letter to Timothy. The practical instruction for providing for relatives and advice for widows and how the church should be burdened or not

burdened, is fascinating (1 Tim 5).

The modern church has changed over the years and has become very institutional, formal and linked to the government. The church has experimented with small groups and mega-church, and it is not done trying things. There are online connection groups and there are alternatives to the traditional church. Many of these experiments and alternatives have issues. We need to show the issues so you can see the need for change. Even though the Reformers claimed the church is *"always reforming" ("ecclesia semper reformanda")*, they stopped far short of restoring the biblical *ekklesia*. Some of them knew better, but were afraid. They failed to follow 1 Corinthians 14:26 multi-voiced open forum and instead replaced the priest with the preacher. They continued to monopolize the assembly voice, leaving the ordinary believer to sit quietly in a pew and consume a sermon rather than actively participate. They continued to tie the church to the state in Germany, Switzerland and England for protection and enforcement. So the goal is really to be always reforming by the Word of God. To honor the headship of Christ, the church must continually re-examine its traditions with the traditions of the Apostles. There is a need to examine the invasive, controlling structure and look to the beautiful, non-invasive ekklesia model that Jesus envisioned. Allowing every qualified member to freely function in the ekkesia meeting is a foundation of the church.

We can't blame the Reformers because those days were chaotic. But we can blame ourselves for not following the Reformers call to be *always reforming*. The Reformers were heros but they made some compromises. "The Reformers, frightened by the wildfire that they saw breaking out around them, turned back to the old medieval concept of a Church… They had at first spoken bravely of a church of believers, an ekklesia of the reborn; but when they saw the radical implications of this concept, they beat a hasty retreat. They felt that society could not hold together without a monolithic, uniform religious structure. Hence, they retained the parish system, placed the pulpit where the altar had been, and substituted the authority of the orthodox preacher for the authority of the Catholic priest. It was a halfway covenant, a compromise born of fear."[1]

Today we can describe Protestant Christianity as disunified. One co-worker with a Russia background wondered what religion I was, "Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, etc." He was very confused by our Christian denominations. But Jesus pictures the beautiful church in John 17. It is hard to imagine a more disunified church than what we have today.[2] The unbelievers notice. The true church is only beautiful if the true Christians are unified like the church in Corinth. We can learn from the Corinthians. We should not be so quick to point out the flaws of the Corinthians when we have done worse. Today's Christians can learn from the failures of the church in Corinth, and resist the temptation to endlessly divide. There is nothing wrong with maintaining your doctrinal distictives, but dividing to the point of visibly divided institutions shows failure. The simple African church I lived among was unified in the early days, until the denominations found an opportunity to divide.[3] Early baptisms were public spectacles down by the muddy river with 50% unbelievers watching. There is a reason why this church grew. God chose to bless this church with growth, but there are a myriad of issues that also come with growth. As in the early church, we are all needy in different ways. The Corinthians were gifted and wealthy, but they didn't realize their poverty. The same was true of the Laodicean church (Rev 3:17). 1 Corinthians 14 calls us to use our mind and test. 1 Corinthians 1 addresses our modern church divisions. Obedience to Christ begins with a single visible *ekklesia* at the city/town level, so unbelievers are not utterly confused (Corinth, Ephesus, Jerusalem, Titus 1:5, etc).

[1] Leonard Verduin, The Reformers and Their Stepchildren (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1964), 34–36.

[2] Murray, Iain H. Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000.

[3] "The root of evil is the secular spirit of all of our ecclesiastical institutions", James Henry Thornwell, pg 9, introduction to Murray, Evangelicalism Divided.

17

Conclusion

This book has been a deeply felt expression of our thoughts about the church. But there is so much more that cannot fit in a book. The burden of observing resistance to Apostolic traditions has compelled me to speak. This book is not easy to write because its message is so unpopular. This book is not calling for revolution, unless you call obeying the Bible revolution. We want peace with all Christians, but also freedom to speak our mind. This book explains some of our thoughts about the *ekklesia* as we understand the Apostle's teaching. The goal is for open discussion and comparing these ideas with Scripture. This book is just the tip of the iceberg. There are many other books supporting many of our ideas. We like to talk about these things, but it might make more sense to find similarly minded Christians in your area, if you can find them. Unfortunately, people tend to stick to their traditions even over biblical traditions. Institutions do not change. Schools like Harvard and Yale were once Christian. But we would not even think about them changing back. Usually the only way for change is to start something new. Our appeal for change is nothing more than a call for conformitity to the Bible. We agree with the Reformation's idea that we should *always be reforming*.

The Bible is our final authority for faith and life. The Reformers were blind to many issues in their day. Their 16 and 17th century perspective was deeply influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. We are proud of their achievements, but getting stuck in the 17th century theology is not responsible. We should always be looking to the Bible to question our theology. The Reformers failed and we will too, but we should not stop, sit back and cling to the old theological systems for traditions' sake. The Reformers boldly confronted an evil church and made many steps in the right direction. But that does not mean they had the opportunity like we have to look carefully to the scriptures and review our faithfulness to the shepherding of Jesus and the Apostles. The biblical way is for all things to be tested (1 Corinthians 14:29).[1]

The purpose of this book is not provoke anyone in traditional church leadership. Let the traditional church continue with what they want to do. I do not want to challenge existing church leadership. However, I do invite willing Christians and willing church leaders to consider these ideas, according to their own research in the Bible. Our reason for saying these things is based on the freedom we have in Christ to speak our mind in favor of our thoughts on faithfully following God. One of our reasons is, "So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil" (Romans 14:16). I am calling all willing men to compare these thoughts with Scripture and pursue *ekklesia* based discussion. I encourage godly men to investigate if it is true that the Apostles have commands and traditions that might differ with our modern day traditions. Discussion that is focused on Apostolic obedience and faithfulness, if held in a context of love, can be healthy and refining. We want our life to be conformed to Scripture. We want God's Spirit to guide us.

Let's get together and discuss these things based on the Bible, starting with only the Bible. We have gone almost 50 years without using commentaries to avoid bias. God's Word calls us to use our mind in our *ekklesia* gatherings (church meetings) (1 Corinthians 14:19).[2]

[1] "…let the others weigh what is said" (1 Corinthians 14:29) (ESV)

[2] "Nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind in order to instruct others,… (1 Corinthians 14:19).