

Grace Evangel Fellowship Pulpit

WHICH CHURCH DO YOU GO TO?

A Message

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“And He is the Head of the body, the ecclesia, Who is Sovereign, Firstborn from among the dead, that in all He may be becoming first.” (Colossians 1:18)

Christ is the Head of the Body of Christ; Paul’s description of the church; the *ecclesia*.

When I stepped down as a minister within the Free Methodist Church due to significant doctrinal differences, Jill and I founded Grace Evangel Fellowship. This became our ministry. This became our church.

Some might contend that Grace Evangel Fellowship is not a real church. It has no building. There are no members. There are no weekly worship services to attend. How can it be a church?

I contend that Grace Evangel Fellowship is as much a church as any other organized church. The First Baptist Church of Anytown ... The Anytown Free Methodist Church ... The United Methodist Church of XYZ Town ... Grace Evangel Fellowship. All represent a part of the Body of Christ ... the church.

Grace Evangel Fellowship is the church at the home of Jill and Bob Evely; much like the church Paul greets at the home of Prisca and Aquila (Romans 16:5), or the church at Nympha’s house (Colossians 4:15), or the church at Philemon’s house (Philemon 1:2).

While the “official” name of our church is Grace Evangel Fellowship, I often use an informal name – The Fellowship of Believers ... because that is really what our church, and any church, really is ... a fellowship of believers.



“Recognizing Christ as the Ultimate Saviour of All!”



Before we consider what the Scriptures have to say about the church, allow me to begin by presenting a hypothesis that is based upon my interpretation of the Scriptures and what they reveal about the church; the *ecclesia*. We will then consider some key passages that speak to this subject.

The true Church as created by God is far different from the many “churches of man” we see scattered throughout every city and village and countryside across the world. What are a few of these differences?

1. There is only a single true Church (capital C). It is invisible. This is contrasted with the multitudes of visible churches of man.
2. The true Church requires no attendance or membership vows. There are no creeds or statements of faith. There is only truth as revealed by God in His Word.
3. The true Church is not to be found in any specific place or building. It is anywhere and everywhere.
4. The true Church is not something we “go to” – it is what we ARE. If we believe, then we ARE the Body of Christ. We ARE the Church.

When a believer encounters another believer, very often the first question asked is, “Where do you go to church” or “What church do you belong to?” I contend that these are irrelevant questions. They reveal a misunderstanding of God and Christ and the Scriptures, assuming that one must “go to” a church or “belong to” a church.

In fact, when one believes they are automatically a part of THE Church; the Body of Christ. They ARE the Church in every setting, 24x7. They need not go anywhere to assemble as the church, because wherever they are ... at home, or at work, or when visiting with neighbors, or at the grocery store, or on the golf course, or at a little league game, or doing housework or home repairs ... in all of these places and situations they ARE the Church.

You need not GO to any visible church of man. Doing so does not make you a better Christian. Going to church might even create some hindrances that are difficult to overcome.

You listen to sermons and Bible teachings that represent the opinions and interpretations of the singular brand of Christianity you have happened upon; and after awhile you buy what you hear as absolute truth without considering alternative interpretations. You become indoctrinated.

You attend church faithfully every Sunday thinking you are fulfilling your Christian obligations, and that you can leave all of that behind as you leave the church building and enter the world.

You believe that you pay the pastor and church staff to perform Christian obligations like visiting the sick or counseling those facing difficulties, liberating yourself from doing so.

Again I contend that you need not attend any church or participate in the life of any church ... because you ARE The Church. Just be conscious of this fact, wherever you are, 24x7. Just go out and BE the Church.

As we consider “The Church” in the Scriptures we could dedicate an entire session to many of the important details along the way. That is not our intent here. Instead, we will be considering a broad overview of what it means to be The Church.

1. THE CHURCH IS IN APOSTASY.

Before we base our vision of today’s Church on tradition ... the church of the first century, ore even the church of the apostles as recorded in the Scriptures ... let us consider the fact that the church was in apostasy even before the apostles died. Consider the final words of Peter, John, and Paul.

John reported that in his day MANY who were a part of the church had already turned away.

Little children, it is the last hour, and, according as you hear that the antichrist is coming, now also there have come to be many antichrists, whence we know that it is the last hour. Out of us they come, but they were not of us, for if they were of us they would have remained with us. (1 John 2:18-19)

I write somewhat to the ecclesia, but Diotrephes, who is fond of being foremost among them, is not receiving us. Therefore, if I should be coming, I shall be reminding him of his acts which he is doing, with wicked words gossiping about us, and not being sufficed with these, neither is he receiving the brethren, and those who are intending to be is forbidding, and is casting them out of the ecclesia. (3 John 9,10)

So even Diotrephes, one of the foremost within the church, had turned away from John, an apostle. Peter reports a similar “falling away.”

Yet there came to be false prophets also among the people, as among you also there will be false teachers who will be smuggling in destructive sects, even disowning the Owner Who buys them, bringing on themselves swift destruction. (2 Peter 2:1,2)

Deeming gratification by day a luxury, they are spots and flaws, luxuriating in their love feasts, carousing together with you, having the distended eyes of an adulteress, and they do not stop from sin, luring unstable souls, having a heart exercised by greed, children of a curse. (2 Peter 2:13,14)

In the last days scoffers will be coming with scoffing, going according to their own desires and saying, “Where is the promise of His presence? For since the fathers were put to repose, all is continuing thus from the beginning of creation.” (2 Peter 3:3,4)

Curiously, even today many believers are asking, “Where is the promise of His presence?” They are not looking for Christ’s return as promised in the Scriptures. This is because the apostasy – the turning away from sound teaching – has never been corrected. There is not an event in history that shows an end to the apostasy that permeated the church even in the last days of the apostles.

Paul reports:

All those in the province of Asia were turned from me, of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes. (2 Timothy 1:15)

Now this know, that in the last days perilous periods will be present, for men will be selfish, fond of money, ostentatious, proud, calumniators, stubborn to parents, ungrateful, malign, without natural affection, implacable, adversaries, uncontrollable, fierce, averse to the good, traitors, rash, conceited, fond of their own gratification rather than fond of God; having a form of devoutness, yet denying its power. These, also, shun. (2 Timothy 3:1-8)

Does this sound familiar? Is this not an accurate description of the world today, and of those within the church today?

Hymeneus and Philetus, who swerve as to truth, saying that the resurrection has already occurred, and are subverting the faith of some. (2 Timothy 2:17)

Endeavor to come to me quickly, for Demas, loving the current eon, forsook me and went to Thessalonica, Crescens to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. (2 Timothy 4:9)

Alexander the coppersmith displayed to me much evil ... At my first defense no one came along with me, but all forsook me. (2 Timothy 4:14-16)

The Apostle Paul was in the minority. What makes us think that today truth is proclaimed by the majority within the organized church?

Herald the word. Stand by it, opportunely, inopportunely, expose, rebuke, entreat, with all patience and teaching. For the era will be when they will not tolerate sound teaching, but, their hearing being tickled, they will heap up for themselves teachers in accord with their own desires, and, indeed, they will be turning their hearing away from the truth, yet will be turned aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4:2-4)

So, near the end of Paul's life, this is his instruction to Timothy. We see Paul's great concern that the word, and sound teaching, needed to be preserved. Nearly all had turned against Paul and the truth. And Paul warns of even greater apostasy, when people would find teachers who taught in accord with their desires; turning away from the truth.

Sir Robert Anderson summarizes it like this, in "The Buddha of Christendom":

"The same apostle who had exulted in the fact that 'all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 19:10) lived to pen the sad lament, 'This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me.' (2 Timothy 1:15) Then, taking, a still wider view of the condition of the Church, he indicted the solemn forecast, 'But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived.'" (2 Timothy 3:13)

With this growing apostasy the focus would turn from church leaders to individual teachers. Paul would say to Timothy:

"What things you hear from me thru many witnesses, these commit to faithful men who shall be competent to teach others also." (2 Timothy 2:2)

At the end of Paul's final letter to Timothy he instructed Timothy to greet certain individuals, not the ecclesias (or churches) as he had in previous letters (2 Timothy 4:19). And near the end of his life he would provide Titus with instructions to individuals, not church leaders. He instructed them to, "*Be examples.*" (Titus 2:1)

The evidence that apostasy is still dominating the church today is clearly seen in the many different factions, all proclaiming different messages and different teachings. This despite the fact that an Ambassador should be rightly representing our Lord – so there should be great unity in the message.

United Methodist. Free Methodist. Wesleyan. Nazarene. Salvation Army. Presbyterian. Episcopal. Anglican. Lutheran. Baptist. Southern Baptist. Primitive Baptist. Congregational. Pentecostal. Assembly of God. Roman Catholic. Church of Latter-Day Saints. Jehovah's Witnesses. Church of God. Church of Christ. Unitarian Universalist. Independent.

Men and women trying to figure out what the church should look like; and how the church should function. Men and women thinking they have figured out God and the Scriptural Church. Men and women teaching others that they have figured it out.

E. W. Bullinger, in “Foundations of Dispensational Truth,” says it well.

In the apostle’s [Paul] own lifetime the most spiritual of all the assemblies (Ephesus) “turned away from” him (II Timothy 1:15). Some used to tell us to go back to the first three centuries to find pure Christianity ... But our answer is that we cannot go back to the first century; for the very assembly (Ephesus) which received his longest ministry (three years), “so that all they that dwell in Asia heard the words of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 19:10), was the first to turn away from him and his teaching.

In the midst of this apostasy that has never been overcome, as evidenced by the many different churches teaching many drastically different things, the Word alone must be our guide, for Paul completed the Word of God (Colossians 1:25).

2. CONSIDER THE WORD “ECCLESIA” IN THE SCRIPTURES.

The word *ecclesia* is, in the Greek, *ekklesia*. *Ek* carries the meaning “Out” and *Klesia* means “called.” So, this word translated “church” throughout most Bible translations actually means “out-called,” or “the called-out-ones.” *Ecclesia* is simply a group of people that are called-out from a larger group of people.

But the group being called-out or selected is not always the same. *Ecclesia* is not always referring to the church of our day. The context must always be examined to determine who “the called-out-ones” are in each instance.

When we see the word *church* in our English translations it is always an interpretation. The translator is telling us that in that instance the called-out-ones are the church as we know it today. But is the translator always right with their interpretation?

Every Bible translator acknowledges that *ecclesia* is not always referring to the church. Let’s consider a few passages where it is very clear that *ecclesia* cannot be referring to the Church.

Acts 19:32,41. The *ecclesia*, the called-out group, is an unruly mob that has formed in Ephesus. This mob is comprised of people “called-out” from the larger group that was present. Here the NIV and KJV use the word assembly for *ecclesia*, recognizing that it cannot mean church.

Acts 19:39. The *ecclesia* is a legal assembly. Here we see the convening of a group authorized to hear both sides of a dispute to make a lawful decision. Again, the NIV and KJV use the word assembly in this case.

Acts 7:38. The *ecclesia* refers to a gathering of the “called-out-ones” in Moses’ day, many years before any would say the church was initiated. Here the NIV uses the word assembly, although the KJV uses church.

So, we see in these three instances that *ecclesia* is simply a called-out group of some kind, but it is not always the same group. And it is certainly not always “the church.”

Now if *ecclesia* means an “assembly” or a “mob” in Acts 19:32 and 19:41, and if *ecclesia* means a “court” or “jury” in Acts 19:39, what makes us think the other 112 times it means “church” as we know it today? Translators use the word “church” in these 112 cases because it seems to fit as far as their understanding of “church” goes. But is this correct? Can we make the assumption that in all these instances *ecclesia* is always referring to the same group of called-out people ... the church as it exists today?

As we study the Scriptures we must remember ... *ecclesia* means “called-out-ones.” It’s as simple as that.

3. CONSIDER THE FAILURE TO RIGHTLY DIVIDE WHEN STUDYING THE SCRIPTURES.

The failure to rightly divide is responsible for most of the disunity in the message proclaimed by the many different churches of man.

“Endeavor to present yourself to God, qualified, an unashamed worker, correctly partitioning the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

In Matthew 16 Jesus said:

Upon this rock I will build my church (called-out-ones); and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18)

But up until this time in Jesus’ ministry, to qualify as a called-out-one you would need to be Jewish. Jesus Himself stressed that He was commissioned to go only to the sheep of Israel.

“[Jesus], answering, said, I was not commissioned except for the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matthew 15:24)

“Let first the children be satisfied, for it is not ideal to take the children’s bread and cast it to the puppies.” (Mark 7:27)

“These twelve Jesus commissions, charging them, saying, Into a road of the nations you may not pass forth, and into a city of the Samaritans you may not be entering. Yet be going rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matthew 10:5-6)

The church that Jesus spoke of during His earthly ministry, was comprised exclusively of Israelites. The called-out-ones throughout the Gospels are exclusively the called-out-ones of Israel.

Continuing into the book of Acts, after the resurrection and after Jesus’ comments concerning “upon this rock,” the apostles addressed only the believers among Israel.

“[They] asked Him, saying, Lord, art Thou at this time restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)

In Acts Chapter 2 we read of Pentecost. Many believe THIS is the beginning of the church as Jesus’ “upon this rock” comment is put into action. But if this is “the church,” observe that it is entirely Jewish.

“There were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.” (Acts 2:5)

So this ecclesia is comprised of Jews and Jewish proselytes (2:11), having assembled from every nation where they resided, coming to Jerusalem to observe an important annual Jewish feast ... Pentecost. True, the spiritual demonstration that took place on this Pentecost would be witnessed by all those dwelling in Jerusalem (2:14) and Joel had prophesied that God’s spirit would be poured out on all flesh (2:17), but the *ecclesia* gathered on this Pentecost was comprised of Jewish believers. And Peter’s words were directed to Israelites. (2:22; 2:36)

“Let all the house of Israel know ...” (Acts 2:36)

“[Peter said to them], ‘Chiefs of the people and elders! ... Let it be known to you all and to the entire people of Israel ...’ (Acts 4:8-11)

“This Inaugurator and Saviour, God exalts to His right hand, to give repentance to Israel and the pardon of sins.” (Acts 5:31)

“Those indeed, then, who are dispersed from the affliction which is occurring over Stephen, passed through as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews only.” (Acts 11:19)

It is only at the conclusion of Acts that we see God initiating a change. Here Paul declares with finality;

“Let it be known to you, then, that to the nations was dispatched this salvation of God, and they will hear.” (Acts 28:28)

So, the believers; the ecclesia; the “church” throughout the Acts period was comprised exclusively of believers from Israel.

Consider also that the message being proclaimed by Jesus was, “Repent, the kingdom is near.” He is referring to the Jewish kingdom that existed in David’s day, and that would one day be restored unto Israel, as the prophets had declared to Israel.

Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16:18, “I will be giving you the keys of the kingdom of the heavens.” A thorough study of Matthew will show us that Jesus was proclaiming the kingdom of the heavens which was to come upon the earth. Had the Jews received this message, and had they received their king, the kingdom would have come upon the earth.

But they rejected the kingdom, and they crucified their king. Jesus knew this was coming, and as He spoke to Peter He was preparing him to proclaim the same kingdom to come upon the earth after the crucifixion and resurrection. It was a message to Israel, pleading with them to repent so the kingdom could be restored.

This is exactly what Peter and the other apostles did throughout the book of Acts. The ministry of the twelve apostles went always to the Jews, just as was the case during Jesus’ ministry.

So, we ask ourselves, what was the ecclesia (the called-out-ones) that Jesus was talking about in Matthew 16:18, and what was the ecclesia (the called-out-ones) that was being gathered throughout Acts? The ecclesia here was comprised of Israelites who believed in Jesus Christ, whose expectation was the restored kingdom to come upon the earth, and to whom the message was:

“Repent, and Christ Jesus will return, and all will be restored” (Acts 3:19ff).

Those of us who are Gentiles have no place in this church – this ecclesia! Furthermore, when the kingdom proclamation was continually rejected by the Jews, and then finally rejected in Acts 28; the called-out-ones are a different group (Jews and Gentiles alike), whose expectation is in the heavenly realm (not upon the earth), and to whom the message was no longer concerning the kingdom, but:

“In Christ, God was conciliating the world to Himself, not reckoning their offenses to them ... We are, then, ambassadors for Christ, as God entreating through us. We are beseeching for Christ’s sake, ‘Be conciliated to God!’” (2 Corinthians 5:19-21)

So let me repeat once again; throughout the gospel accounts and the Acts period, God’s *ecclesia* (called-out-ones) were believers exclusively from Israel! This will include the epistles written specifically to the *ecclesia* that was, at the time, exclusively Jewish (i.e. the letters not written by Paul). We know this to be true based on the authors of these letters, and their commissions, and the “patch” on which they exclusively worked, and the blatantly Jewish language and references made throughout, and at times the “address on the envelope” on these letters; clearly directed to Jewish believers.

The book of Revelation also speaks of Israel and not the Body of Christ, as can be seen by the language, the imagery, and frequently the direct references to Israel.

All of this Jewish exclusivity is difficult to see in our English translations as the word “church” is used throughout ... whether the called-out group consisted of Jewish believers or Gentile believers.

4. PAUL IS THE APOSTLE TO THE GENTILES.

Now let us consider Paul.

He is a choice instrument of Mine, to bear My name before both the nations and kings, besides the sons of Israel. (Act 9:15)

Paul had a dual commission. He is the only apostle that was commissioned to go to the nations; the non-Jews. But since he was ALSO commissioned to go to *the sons of Israel* we will see him go FIRST to the synagogues to speak to the sons of Israel ... and only after being rejected would he go to those of the nations.

Until Acts 28 ... where we read:

Let it be known to you, then, that to the nations was dispatched this salvation of God, and they will hear. (Acts 28:28)

When we consider what Paul has to say about the *ecclesia*, let us also consider what he does NOT say or do.

Paul did not go to church. He went to the synagogues to gain an audience with the Jews. And as for new believers that responded to his message, he never encouraged them to “go to” church.

Churches today that continue the ministry and the message of the Twelve apostles, the “Circumcision Evangel,” are proclaiming a message that is no longer valid today, and that does not pertain to the out-called of Gentiles and Jews that now comprise the *ecclesia*, the Body of Christ.

It requires a careful study of God’s Word to “rightly divide” things that are different within Scripture, instead of mixing them together and creating confusion.

“Endeavor to present yourself to God, qualified, an unashamed worker, correctly partitioning the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

The ecclesia today can only be patterned after Paul's ministry, for he was chosen as the apostle to the Gentiles, and to bear the evangel of the Uncircumcision. But most traditional churches today are patterned after Peter's ministry (a failure to "rightly divide").

Certainly Peter was a great man, and one of the Twelve chosen by Jesus. But he was chosen for the purpose of proclaiming the "kingdom evangel" to the sheep of Israel. How can we appropriately proclaim this kingdom which is to come upon the earth, when it belongs to Israel? How can the kingdom be restored, as the prophets have prophesied, to a group of people who never had the kingdom to start with?

Even in Revelation, when Christ returns, we see God in the final ages restoring the kingdom to Israel and dealing with the nations thru Israel. The Body of Christ is absent throughout the book of Revelation, having joined the Lord in the air to serve God's purposes in the celestial realm.

Many today confuse things by substituting "the church" in place of Israel, claiming the future kingdom to come upon the earth as their own. But we have no right to do so. We are attempting to steal things that do not belong to us, and instead of preaching the correct gospel we are creating confusion as we mix the "kingdom evangel" with the "evangel of grace" that was given to Paul and intended for the Body of Christ.

There is great danger in mixing together the "Circumcision Evangel" of Peter with the "Uncircumcision Evangel" of Paul. Both evangels came from God, but they are appropriate to different groups of people in different eras. We live in a day when God has temporarily set aside Israel (Romans 11:25), and the "kingdom evangel" is not appropriate for this time. God is not now dealing with Israel as He had in the past, and as He will again in the future. We live in a day when God is dealing with mankind in a different way; where there are no barriers between Jew and Gentile; where the coming kingdom is not being proclaimed but instead conciliation and peace with God; where we are not born again as the nation of Israel was called to be, but are entirely new creations.

We create confusion when we preach the message Peter preached, or when we look to Peter to discern the purpose of the ecclesia in this present day. We must look instead to Paul, whose message and model are for the current day while Israel is temporarily set aside, as Christ is gathering His Body to display the fullness of the grace of God.

And so I say once again ... when we encounter the word *ecclesia* we must always seek to understand which called-out-ones are being spoken of. If your translation uses the word "church" you must always think "*ecclesia*" and not assume the passage is speaking of the church or called-out-ones of our present day.

It is interesting that while Paul speaks directly to the Body of Christ, it is the words directed to Israel that are more often applied to the Church today.

Church hierarchy and structure are more closely aligned with the Temple, the Tabernacle, synagogues, priests, ritual ... all of which relate to Israel. But should we be basing the structure of the Church upon instructions given to Israel?

- ✓ Most churches assemble at least weekly, on "the sabbath." (Some say this is Sunday, others Saturday.)

- ✓ Most have their own church building.
- ✓ Many teach that tithing is commanded.
- ✓ Great emphasis is placed on “going to church.”

All of this is quite Jewish in form. When God chose Israel as His people (His “called-out-ones”) He commanded them to keep the sabbath. This was a part of the law they were under. It is not a part of the grace that we are under. Paul wrote to the ecclesia at Rome:

One, indeed, is deciding for one day rather than another day, yet one is deciding for every day. Let each one be fully assured in his own mind. (Romans 14:5)

As individuals we may choose to set aside a specific day, or not. But the ecclesia today is not required to keep the “sabbath” as was Israel.

On the sabbath, Israel assembled at the place designated for this purpose; the Tabernacle, the Temple, or the synagogue. In Acts, when the apostles took the evangel of the kingdom to the Jews, we see the ecclesia continuing to go to the synagogues. But in Paul’s writings, when the evangel of grace is going to Gentile and Jew alike, we most often hear of the ecclesia meeting in homes. No separate building is mentioned that would parallel the synagogue of the Jews. Yes, Paul did go into the synagogues to proclaim his message; but this was only to reach the Jews and proselytes that were gathered there.

Tithing was a part of the Jewish law; to support the system of priests and the Temple. But today we are not under the law. Instead, as Paul writes:

Each according as he has proposed in his heart, not sorrowfully, nor of compulsion, for the gleeful giver is loved by God. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

As we give gleefully, our giving need not be to support a church, and our gleeful giving may not always be tax deductible. Each of us is convicted individually, as God lays it upon our heart, as to how and where we give in furthering the work entrusted by God to His ecclesia. We may give directly to individuals God has placed in our path that have need, or that need our support as they serve as Christ’s Ambassadors.

And nowhere in Paul’s writings do we see a mandate to be GOING to church. Instead the Scriptures show us what it means to BE the ecclesia, living our lives wherever we may be as Christ’s Ambassadors.

If we want to consider the Scriptural model given to us for the ecclesia, we cannot simply blend together the various forms from different eras or administrations. Mixing together the Jewish ecclesia from the Old Testament or during the time the kingdom was being heralded to the Jews, with the ecclesia being out-called as Paul proclaimed the evangel of grace, will create confusion; just as mixing together the law and grace creates confusion.

Does all of this mean that “The church” of the 21st century is to be condemned for observing forms not specifically given in Scripture? As we read Paul’s writings, we observe an ecclesia with some form and organization, but which is largely informal. But Paul would also say:

I became to the Jews as a Jew, that I should be gaining Jews; to those under law as under law ... To all have I become all, that I should undoubtedly be savings some. (1 Corinthians 9:20-23)

Paul would not condemn the various forms used by the church today. But he would condemn:

- ✓ Churches that insist that the forms and church organization being observed are the only correct ways being prescribed by God.
- ✓ Churches that create disunity with other believers due to adherence to certain forms or organization.
- ✓ Churches that create stumbling blocks for others due to adherence to certain forms or organization.
- ✓ Churches that create disunity by insisting upon certain outward rituals or observances as the only correct way to worship or serve God.
- ✓ Churches that proclaim an incorrect message, mixing together things that are different in God's Word (as did the Judaizers who contended with Paul).

The various forms employed by churches today are not necessarily wrong, if they are used to further the purpose God has for the ecclesia. As Paul would become all things to all people toward the end that some might be saved thru his ministry; so also the ecclesia today can use many different forms to reach many different kinds of people, toward the end that some might be saved thru the ministry.

The problem is when forms become non-negotiable and points of dissention. When those not participating in some specific church are criticized, condemned or judged, there is no difference from what the Pharisees once did in Jesus' day when the traditions of men were held equally as high, if not higher, than the Word of God.

I like what Thomas Talbott has to say about the churches of today in his book, "The Inescapable Love of God."

"I am inclined, then, to draw a relatively sharp distinction between the Christian faith, on the one hand, and the organized Christian church, on the other, and I am quite prepared to see the latter as, more often than not, an enemy of the former. Not that the organized Christian church is any worse than other human institutions; on the whole, it is just no better." (page 33)

Now a few additional considerations ...

5. TRADITION

Consider Jesus' words to the Pharisees regarding tradition.

Wherefore are you also transgressing the precept of God because of your tradition?
(Matthew 15:3)

You invalidate the word of God because of your tradition. (Matthew 15:6)

The harshest words Jesus spoke were directed at the Pharisees and the traditions they imposed upon the people. To the Pharisees these traditions carried more weight than the Scriptures themselves.

And today, tradition reigns within the organized church. W. Simson writes in his 2001 book, "House 2 House" ...

“In aligning itself to the religious patterns of the day, the historic Orthodox Church after Constantine in the 4th century AD adopted a religious system which was in essence Old Testament, complete with priests, altar, a Christian temple, frankincense and a Jewish, synagogue-style worship pattern. The Roman Catholic Church went on to canonize the system. Luther did reform the content of the gospel, but left the outer forms of “church” remarkably untouched.”

Consider the simplicity of the church structure as found in the Scriptures. Then consider the complexity of the structure within the organized church of our present day.

6. CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Churches today place great emphasis on structure and position. We see priests, bishops, elders, deacons, superintendents, ordination rituals and varying levels of structure and bureaucracy. But most of these things stem from the traditions of men. Churches may believe these things come directly from Scripture, but the many differing forms employed show us very clearly that there is great difference of opinion as to how Scripture is to be interpreted in these areas.

The ecclesia we see in Scripture has some organization, but it is highly informal and non-bureaucratic. There is no formal "ordination" of clergy members; just a simple recognition of God's graces upon one who is selected by the ecclesia to lead.

Now, selecting elders for them according to the ecclesia, praying with fastings, they committed them to the Lord in Whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

ELDERS (*presbuteron*): The individual gatherings of the ecclesia had one or more recognized as “elder.” We also see the ecclesias selecting, praying or laying hands on those commissioned to undertake a specific mission. In 2 Corinthians 8:18 the ecclesias collectively “selected” a brother to travel with Paul.

But while there are leaders within the ecclesia, there is nothing like the level of authority and institutional bureaucracy we find within “the church” today.

Paul describes the ecclesia as the “Body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27), with individual members of the body chosen and gifted to play a particular role.

Paul appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23) and he charged Titus to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5).

Elders were chosen as leaders within the ecclesia (Acts 14:23). This term is used in Scripture to refer to one who is older in age or position. This is not a term unique to the ecclesia, as there were also elders within the Jewish leadership. (Mark 14:43)

When Paul travelled he might call together just the elders of the ecclesia (Acts 20:17) as the representatives or leaders of the larger group.

We get a glimpse of the role of the elders in Acts 20:28 when Paul refers to them as “supervisors” (*episkopos*) who are to be “shepherding” the ecclesia of God.

In 1 Peter 5:1-4 we see Peter considering himself alongside the other elders within the ecclesia. He also helps to bring definition to the position of elder. We recognize that Peter represents the Jewish ecclesia, being called together in response to the Circumcision evangel, but the form and organization appear to be very similar to the ecclesias gathered by Paul.

"The elders, then, among you I am entreating (who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ...),

"Shepherd the flocklet of God among you, supervising, not of compulsion, but voluntarily, according to God; nor yet avariciously, but eagerly; nor yet as lording it over the allotments, but becoming models for the flocklet, and, when the Chief Shepherd is manifested, you shall be requited with an unfading wreath of glory."

As a leader within the ecclesia, an elder is to shepherd, lead and serve as a model; and is not to exercise power or lord his authority over the ecclesia.

SUPERVISORS (*episkopos*): The Greek *episkopos* is often translated bishop and is typically a different rank within the hierarchy of "the church." But Scripture does not lend credence to the creation of this hierarchy. Instead we see a very simple structure, with the ecclesia being led by elders who have been called by God to lead, to shepherd, to supervise, to care for, and to serve as a model for the ecclesia.

It does not appear in Scripture that *episkopos* (supervisor) is a different position from that of elder. Making this distinction, and adding to the bureaucratic structure of the church, is a tradition of men and not a distinction made in Scripture.

Paul described certain qualifications for those who would supervise within the ecclesia:

"If anyone is not aware how to provide over his own household, how will he care for the ecclesia of God." (1 Timothy 3:2ff)

So, we see that at least a part of the role of a supervisor or elder would be to "care for" (or shepherd) the ecclesia. Titus 1:7 tells us:

"The supervisor must be unimpeachable as an administrator of God..."

Administrator is often translated steward, or one who cares for things belonging to another. In this case it is left to the leaders within the ecclesia to care for the interests of God.

DEACONS (*diakonos*). The Greek *diakonos* is generally translated deacon and speaks of one who is in a servant capacity. In Paul's introduction to his Philippian letter (1:1) he appears to differentiate between those who are elders and those who are servants (*diakonos*). But *diakonos* seems to speak more of a function than of an official position within the ecclesia.

"There are apportionments of services (diakonion) ..." (1 Corinthians 12:5)

"Martha is serving (diakonian) ..." (Luke 10:40)

And when the Hellenists complained that they were not getting their daily dispensation, the apostles chose seven men to serve (*diakonein*). (Acts 6:2)

So, while we see organization and leadership within the ecclesias, we make the following observations as we compare what we see in Scripture with "the church" of today.

- ✓ Not a large bureaucratic institution, but quite simple in structure.
- ✓ Informality.
- ✓ Meeting in homes, as opposed to specially designated buildings.
- ✓ No denominations.

- ✓ No creeds or membership.

In a biography of T. Austin Sparks entitled “Shaped by Vision,” written by Rex Beck, we read:

“The New Testament abounds with descriptions of local churches as being simply the aggregate of believers in a particular locality or city, with each locality having only one local church. For example, Acts 8:1 says, ‘the church which was in Jerusalem.’ 1 Corinthians 1:1 says, ‘the church of God which is at Corinth.’ And 1 Thessalonians 1:1 says, ‘the church of the Thessalonians.’

When referring to a region containing many cities, the Bible uses the plural ‘churches’ as in ‘the churches of Galatia’ (Galatians 1:2) or ‘the churches of Judea’ (Galatians 1:22). In addition, Paul appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:23) and charged Titus to appoint elders in every city (Titus 1:5).

Churches were not distinguished by a particular teaching, emphasis, spiritual practice, level of spirituality, nationality, founder, or apostle. All the believers in a locality were one church, the church in that city.” (pages 229-30)

7. GOING TO CHURCH

Those within the organized church stress great importance on GOING to church or being a part of the life of their organization. An oft-quoted passage in making this point is Hebrews 10:25,

“And we may be considering one another to incite to love and ideal acts, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves, according as the custom of some is, but entreating, and so much rather as you are observing the day drawing near.”

There is certainly benefit in meeting together with others in the ecclesia. There are models throughout Scripture of the ecclesia meeting together. But we are not under the law that requires us to meet at a specific place or at specific times. Those of the Jewish ecclesia in the book of Acts continued to go to the synagogues as they were accustomed to doing, and to proclaim Christ. But this was just a part of their life, for they assembled on a daily basis; sharing meals, ministering to the needs of one another, meeting in homes, and living as a community of believers; on a daily basis.

This continued when the ecclesia responding to Paul's ministry, and made up of Gentile and Jew alike, met in homes.

The problem is that the church today would say that those not regularly going to or active in a visible, traditional church are not meeting together as the Scriptures call for believers to do. They will often place so much emphasis on GOING to an organized church that they fail to recognize that they ARE the church, seven days a week, wherever they happen to be.

Furthermore, there may be times when meeting together is not a good thing:

You are coming together, not for the better, but for discomfiture. For first, indeed, at your coming together in the ecclesia, I am hearing of schisms inhering among you. (1 Corinthians 11:17)

Meeting together with other believers, wherever and whenever, is important as we cause one another to consider how we might incite to love and ideal acts (Hebrews 10:25). But

this can occur anywhere and everywhere ... homes – workplaces – grocery stores – state parks – golf courses – a front porch. Anywhere and everywhere, 24x7.

And of greater importance is that we understand that we ARE the ecclesia, and Christ's Ambassadors, in all places and at all times.

"For Christ, then, are we ambassadors, as of God entreating through us. We are beseeching for Christ's sake, 'Be conciliated to God!'" For the One not knowing sin, He makes to be a sin offering for our sakes that we may be becoming God's righteousness in Him." (2 Corinthians 5:20-21)

8. OUR COMMISSION

Those within the organized church would have us believe our "Great Commission" is found at the end of Matthew:

Going, then, disciple all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the holy spirit, teaching them to be keeping all, whatever I direct you. (Matthew 28:19)

But these words ... this commission ... was directed TO ISRAEL; not to us! Considering that which Paul, the apostle to the nations, said; I believe that OUR Great Commission can be found in 2 Corinthians 5:18 ...

Yet all is of God, Who conciliates us to Himself through Christ, and is giving us the dispensation of the conciliation,

How that God was in Christ, conciliating the world to Himself, not reckoning their offenses to them, and placing in us the word of the conciliation.

For Christ, then, are we AMBASSADORS, as of God entreating through us. We are beseeching for Christ's sake, Be conciliated to God.

This is OUR commission. And this is OUR message. Far different from the message proclaimed to Israel by John the Baptist, by the Lord Jesus, and by Peter ... *Repent! Flee the wrath to come!* Our message contains no wrath; for in Christ God is now conciliated to the world.

And as to how we proclaim this message as faithful Ambassadors ...

Stupid and crude questionings refuse, being aware that they are generating fightings. Now a slave of the Lord must not be fighting, but be gentle toward all, apt to teach, bearing with evil, with meekness training those who are antagonizing. (2 Timothy 2:23)

Herald the word. Stand by it opportunely; inopportunely. Expose, rebuke, entreat with all patience and teaching. (2 Timothy 4:2)

As Paul goes on to tell Timothy, there will come a time (and I believe that time is now here) when people will not tolerate sound teaching. They will look for their hearing to be tickled. They will seek out teachers in accord with their desires. But ...

You be sober in all things; suffer evil as an ideal soldier of Christ Jesus; do the work of an evangelist; fully discharge your service. (2 Timothy 4:5)

Be speaking what is becoming to sound teaching. (Titus 2:1)

9. WORSHIP.

Consider what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman in John 4:21-24.

The hour cometh when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.

The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth.

God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.

Many think it is necessary for the church to assemble in one place, corporately, to worship the Father. But here we see the true heart of worship. It is not physical, but in spirit.

A study of the word “worship” throughout the Scriptures will be a study unto itself. But if one does undertake such a study he will find that worship very often occurs in a one-on-one setting; not corporately. Worship is simply a “coming toward” in an attitude of reverence (revering) the object of worship (God). Most importantly it is an expression of attitude, not a physical thing. Worship God – revere Him – come toward Him – wherever and whenever, 24x7.

10. MEMBERSHIP

There is nothing in Scripture that speaks of “membership” in a church. An individual is automatically a part of the ecclesia when, through faith, he believes. He is not thereafter required to do, or to sign, anything to become a member. Some may point to baptism as a required Biblical initiation, but water Baptism was a part of the Jewish “kingdom administration.” As the kingdom was continually rejected, and as Paul began going directly to the Gentiles proclaiming his evangel of grace, water baptism faded. Paul proclaimed in 1 Corinthians 1:17,

“Christ does not commission me to be baptizing, but to be bringing the evangel...”

Physical circumcision was a requirement of the Jewish law, but this later gave way to spiritual circumcision. Likewise, water baptism served its purpose but was later superseded by a much more important baptism; the baptism of the spirit.

11. CREEDS AND ORTHODOXY

Some today place great emphasis upon Creeds, Articles of Religion and Orthodoxy, but it must be remembered that these are simply the opinions of men as to the meaning of God’s Word. Decisions were made by men as to the correct doctrinal position in various matters, but whether these decisions were correct or not is another matter.

Many believe that orthodoxy protects against heresy, but this is only true if orthodoxy is 100% correct on all points. If errors were made when men established what is today the orthodox position, then orthodoxy, with its Creeds and Articles of Religion, will simply preserve error.

It is important to remember that orthodoxy is not truth as opposed to error. It is simply the majority opinion held by the organized church.

Where in God's Word are we told the requirements to "join" or become a "member" of "the church"? In God's Word one is either a part of the ecclesia or not. Where are the creeds? The only creed is the Word of God itself. The reason we find creeds within "the church" today is because of arguments and disagreements and opinions of men as to how God's Word is to be interpreted.

12. MONEY

The tithe was a requirement of the Jewish law, but being freed from the law Paul encouraged giving that was not of compulsion. (2 Corinthians 9:7) The believer was encouraged to be a gleeful giver.

In Acts 2:41 we read that the ecclesia, which was then entirely Jewish, had all things in common, and even disposed of their properties and divided the proceeds if there were needs.

But the ecclesia Paul addressed was spread about, with many miles between. Still Paul advocated a sharing of finances when a need existed within the ecclesia, and he facilitated a collection when deemed appropriate. This collection did not go toward supporting upkeep on a church building, or to pay a pastor's salary.

SUMMARY

On Saturday afternoons I sometimes think of all of the preparations being made for Christian worship services that will take place on the following day. Catholics, Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Independents and many other flavors and varieties of believers will be gathering once again. Sunday is widely viewed to be the "Christian Sabbath."

I think of the many wonderful works that churches take part in. Hurricanes in Florida result in churches opening their doors to the temporary homeless and distributing food to the needy. Help is often sent to believers living in poverty in places like Haiti. Churches provide comfort to families who have been devastated by the death of a loved one.

But along with these good works, seeds of confusion are being planted everywhere by the churches of men. Church preachers and teachers tell those attending exactly what the Bible means. Creeds are recited. Church membership vows are taken. The Bible is used to remind the listener to tithe. But these things all stem from the traditions of men, and not from the Word of God. Creeds, covenants and membership vows are all ways for men to influence other men to believe the same way they do. But creeds, covenants and membership vows differ drastically from one church to the next. They cannot all represent the correct interpretation of God's Word!

Each Sunday morning preachers will preach with great certainty, and Sunday School teachers will share their expert knowledge of the Scriptures with their classes. But think of the differences in these teachings!

- ✓ To be baptized one must be an adult.
- ✓ Children may be baptized.
- ✓ Proper baptism involves complete immersion.
- ✓ Baptism by sprinkling is sufficient.
- ✓ Water baptism is a requirement for salvation.
- ✓ Water baptism is no longer necessary today.

This is just one small issue! Think of the multitudes of other issues being taught in significantly different ways by the many different churches of our day. And every teacher standing before a class, and every preacher standing before a congregation, and every professor standing before a seminary class, and every author writing commentary on the Bible; all think they are dead right, and all other viewpoints dead wrong.

But wait just one minute!

"For Christ, then, are we ambassadors, as of God entreating through us. We are beseeching for Christ's sake, 'Be conciliated.'" (2 Corinthians 5:20)

If we, as the Church (the "called-out-ones") are ambassadors entreating to the world as if God were entreating thru us; shouldn't we all be bearing the same message? Shouldn't the message we proclaim be God's message, and not our own concoction?

Most every church that assembles will say they believe the Bible is God's Word. Then why so many different and confusing teachings? It is because churches and preachers and teachers today are following after the traditions of men more than the Word of God. They have been "indoctrinated" into a certain system of Bible interpretation, and they go out into the world to perpetuate that same interpretation; indoctrinating others.

"Endeavor to present yourself to God qualified, an unashamed worker, correctly cutting the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)

We must each of us take heed of this truth. We are to be as the Bereans, who received the words of Paul with eagerness, but who then examined the scriptures to see if his words were true. (Acts 17:11)

Reformation is needed in the church today more than ever. Traditions of men are in firm control, and any who would see things to be in error when studying the Word of God are not long welcomed by the church that is challenged. If preachers or teachers or professors began to proclaim truth from God's Word that varied from their church or institution, they would be asked to be silent or leave. Faithful preachers would lose their jobs. Each church and institution has already shaped their theology ... their interpretation of God's Word ... and there is no room for the rogue believer who would present a challenge.

As churches assemble, attendees will think the message and the teaching they are hearing is pure 100% truth, because they are hearing it from the experts. Many different churches, denominations, institutions; all believing they are right; indoctrinating as many as they can into their "system" of theology. But they cannot all be right, and very obviously many of them are wrong.

Whether you go to a church or not, the challenge is the same if you are a part of the one true church; the ecclesia; the Body of Christ.

"Endeavor to present yourself to God qualified, an unashamed worker, correctly cutting the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)

When it comes to Biblical truth, we cannot trust the organized, traditional churches of our day. This should be obvious, for there is much division and strife and confusion. There are many different churches and denominations teaching things that contradict each other. Confusion reigns; not unity!

We who are believers are the ecclesia when we assemble and when we are alone. We are the ecclesia when we gather for worship at a "church building" on Sundays, or when we

gather in a home on Tuesdays. A believer is part of the ecclesia if he is a part of the life of an organized church ... or if he is not.

What image comes to your mind when you hear the word “church?” Is it possible that your beliefs about what the church is, or what it does, or when it meets, or how it worships; are based upon traditions or your own personal history and biases?

In his book “Charge That to My Account,” Harry Ironside said:

“When people talk of worshiping in some building on earth, and think of a ritualistic service as worship, and talk of worshiping God in music, it simply shows that they do not understand. In every moment of a believer’s life, he is sitting in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. The place of our abiding is in the immediate presence of God with nothing between.”

As I conclude, let me re-state my hypothesis concerning “the Church” that I mentioned at the beginning of this talk.

The true Church as created by God is far different from the many “churches of man” we see scattered throughout every city and village and countryside across the world.

1. There is only a single true Church (capital C). It is invisible. This is contrasted with the multitudes of visible churches of man.
2. The true Church requires no attendance or membership vows. There are no creeds or statements of faith. There is only truth as revealed by God in His Word.
3. The true Church is not to be found in any specific place or building. It is anywhere and everywhere.
4. The true Church is not something we “go to” – it is what we ARE. If we believe, then we ARE the Body of Christ. We ARE the Church.

When one believes they are automatically a part of THE Church; the Body of Christ. They ARE the Church in every setting, 24x7. You need not GO to any visible church of man. Doing so does not make you a better Christian.

You need not attend any church or participate in the life of any church ... because you ARE the Church. Just be conscious of this fact wherever you are, 24x7. Just go out and BE the Church.

Let us earnestly seek God’s Word concerning His church – His ecclesia – and not the traditions of men. Contemplate the Scriptures. Think for yourself. BE the Church.

This overview contains the thoughts and opinions of the author and is a work in progress as his study of the Scriptures continues. Some things that God has revealed are very clear. That Christ died for our sins; that He was entombed; and that He was roused (1 Corinthians 15:3) is clear. That all are to be ultimately reconciled to God thru the work of Christ is also very clear (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). But on many specifics in the Scriptures there are a variety of interpretations and opinions, and none should conclude they have the complete and final understanding on these matters that are less clear. The reader is encouraged to consider various opinions, but to study and to think for himself. Within the Body of Christ we should study and discuss our understandings so as to mutually reach a more complete understanding of that which God has revealed.

*Unless otherwise noted, Scriptures are taken from the Concordant Literal
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