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I. THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH MEETING

The great Bible expositor Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said, "We are living in an age hopelessly below the New Testament pattern -- content with a neat little religion." With this thought in view, I would like to begin our discussion on the practice of the New Testament church by examining why the early church gathered together. What was the purpose of the New Testament church meeting?

Note that when I use the term "church meeting," I am using it in a very narrow sense. The Bible portrays a number of different types of meetings in which the early Christians gathered together (prayer meetings, evangelistic meetings, ministry meetings, apostolic meetings, church councils, etc.). By "church meeting," I am referring to the special meeting of the local assembly that is described in I Corinthians 11-14. According to the Biblical record (as well as to church history), this meeting seems to have occurred on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

Before we explore the purpose of the New Testament church meeting, let us first examine why most Christians gather together for "church" today. There are basically four reasons: 1) for corporate worship, 2) for evangelism, 3) to hear a sermon, or 4) for fellowship. As strange as it may seem, the New Testament never envisions any of these reasons as being the central purpose of the church meeting.

The Place of Worship, Evangelism, Sermonizing, and Fellowship

According to the New Testament, worship is something we live. It is the setting forth of the thankfulness, affection, devotion, humility, and sacrificial obedience that God deserves at every moment (Matt. 2:11; Rom. 12:1; Phil. 3:3). Therefore, when we come together as God's people, we should come in a spirit of worship. The temple of Old Testament Israel is the key figure for this aspect of the church meeting. The outstanding feature of the temple was worship. In the minds of many modern Christians, however, worship is restricted to singing choruses, hymns, and praise songs. While worshiping God through song was a very important facet of the early church meeting (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), the Bible never presents it as its chief aim.

In the same way, the Bible never equates the purpose of the church meeting with evangelism. Rather, the New Testament demonstrates clearly that evangelism was commonly engaged in outside of the meetings of the church. Gospel preaching was commonly conducted in those places where unbelievers frequented, e.g. in the synagogues (of the Jews) and in the market places. Contrarily, the New Testament church gathering was primarily a believer's meeting. The context of I Corinthians 12-14 makes this quite plain. While the unregenerate were sometimes present, they were not the focus of this gathering. (in I Cor. 14:23-25, Paul fleetingly mentions the presence of unbelievers in the meeting, framing his comment in hypothetical language.)

Furthermore, the popular notion that the weekly church meeting was for the sake of hearing a sermon is without Biblical warrant. While the ministry of the Word was certainly present in the early church gathering (I Cor. 14 speaks of those bringing doctrines, revelations, and prophecies), hearing "a sermon" was never its chief feature. In this regard, the New Testament church meeting was markedly different from the typical Protestant church service wherein the pulpit is the central feature, where everything leads up to and is structured around the sermon, and where the congregation evaluates the meeting by the quality of the message. The notion of a sermon-oriented, pulpit-pew styled church meeting cannot be sustained by the New Testament.

Indeed, the apostles ministered the Word of God at length in certain settings. But such settings were not "church meetings." They were "ministry meetings" designed for evangelistic purposes or for the strengthening of the believers. These meetings would be akin to the special seminars, workshops, and conferences of our day. Such "ministry meetings" should not be confused with "church meetings." In the former, one or two believers share with an interactive audience to equip it for works of service; in the latter, every member freely exercises his gift with no one taking center stage. So while the ministry of the Word was one aspect of the church gathering, it was not its central purpose. Furthermore, the teaching in the church meeting was not delivered by the same person week after week as is the custom in today's institutional church.

Fellowship was not the main purpose of the New Testament gathering either. While fellowship is a demand of Body life, it is never said to be the primary purpose of the church meeting. Fellowship is simply one of the many organic outgrowths that emerge when God's people begin to joyfully enthrone the Lord Jesus and allow His Spirit to direct their gatherings (Acts 2:42). Yet as necessary as fellowship is to the life of the church, it should not be equated with the purpose of the church meeting.

Mutual Exhortation and Edification

If the purpose of the church meeting, as described in the New Testament, was not for corporate worship, evangelism, sermonizing, or fellowship, what then was it for? According to Scripture, the governing purpose of the church meeting was mutual edification and exhortation. I Corinthians 14:26 puts it plainly:

How is it then, brethren? When ye come together, EVERYONE OF YOU hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. LET ALL THINGS BE DONE UNTO EDIFYING.

Hebrews 10:24-25 puts it even plainer:

And let us consider ONE ANOTHER to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but EXHORTING ONE ANOTHER and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching (see also Rom. 14:19; 1 Thess. 5:11; and Heb. 3:13-14).

The meeting of the church envisioned in Scripture was designed to allow every member of the assembly to participate in the building up of the Body as a whole (Eph. 4:16). Mutuality was the hallmark of the New Testament church meeting "every one of you" was its most outstanding characteristic. While praise and worship songs were sung, they were not confined to the leadership of a special group of "professional" musicians. Rather, the meeting was open to allow for "every one" to minister through singing. In the words of Paul, "every one of you hath a psalm" in the local gathering. Even the songs themselves were marked by an element of mutuality, for Paul exhorts the brethren to be "speaking to yourselves, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). In such an open context, it is reasonable to assume that the early Christians regularly composed their own songs and shared them with the rest of the saints during the meeting.

Each believer who possessed a word from God was given the liberty to supply it through his or her own particular spiritual gift. Hence, a typical New Testament church meeting may have looked like this: a child shares God's word through a drama presentation and a song; a young woman gives her testimony; a young brother shares an exhortation followed by a group discussion; an older brother expounds a portion of Scripture and follows it up with a prayer; an older sister tells a story out of her own spiritual experience; several teenagers discuss their week at school and request prayer; and the whole group experiences table fellowship during a shared meal.

As Paul pulls back the curtain of the New Testament gathering in I Corinthians 14, we see a meeting wherein every member is actively involved. Freshness, openness, and spontaneity are the chief marks of this meeting, and mutual edification is its primary goal.

Christ, the Director of the New Testament Gathering

The Biblical injunctions regarding the meeting of the early church outlined in Scripture solidly rest upon the Headship of Christ, which is the focal point of God's eternal purpose (Eph. 1:922; Col. 1:16-18). That is to say, Christ was fully preeminent in the New Testament church meeting. He was its center and its circumference. He set the agenda and directed the events. Although His leading was invisible to the naked eye, Christ was clearly the Guiding Agent.

In this connection, the Lord Jesus was free to speak through whomever He chose and in whatever capacity He saw fit. The common practice of a few professional ministers assuming all of the activity of the assembly, while the rest of the saints remain passive, was utterly foreign to the early church. The New Testament meeting was based upon the "round-table" principle, wherein every member is encouraged to function, rather than upon the "pulpit-pew" principle, where the members are divided into the active few and the passive many.

In the New Testament gathering, neither the sermon nor "the preacher" was the center. Instead, congregational participation was the Divine rule. The meeting was non-liturgical, non-ritualistic, and non-sacral. It possessed no sense of sacrosanctity or perfunctoriness. Instead, it reflected a flexible spontaneity wherein the Spirit of God was in utter control, being free to move through any member of the Body as He willed in an orderly fashion. In fact, the early church gathering was so governed by the Holy Spirit that if a person received an insight while another was sharing the Word, he was free to interject his thought. Strikingly, the person speaking would stop and give heed to what was being said by the other (I Cor. 14:29-30). Moreover, profitable questions and healthy discussions were a common part of the gathering (I Cor. 14:27-40).

Such a meeting is almost unthinkable in the context of most contemporary churches today. Most Christians fear trusting the leadership of the Spirit to direct and shape their church services. The fact that they cannot envision a corporate gathering without placing themselves under the direct guidance of a human moderator reveals that they are strangers to God's ways. Much of the reason for this has to do with their own unfamiliarity with the Spirit's working in their personal affairs. Simply put, if we don't know the Spirit's control in our own life, how can we know it when we gather together? The truth is that many of us-like Israel of old-still clamor for a king to rule over us and a visible mediator to tell us what God has said (Exod. 20:19; 1 Sam. 8:19).

Undoubtedly, the presence of a human moderator in the church meeting is a cherished tradition to which many Christians are fiercely committed. The problem is, it does not square with Scripture. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find grounds for a meeting that is dominated, directed, and officiated by one person. Neither do we find a gathering that is rooted in a pulpit centrality that is focused upon one man. Probably the most startling characteristic of the New Testament church meeting was the absence of human officiation. Christ led the meetings by the medium of the Holy Spirit through the believing community. Again, the principle that governed the early church meeting was that of "one-anothering;" mutuality was its peculiar feature. It is no wonder that the phrase one another is used nearly sixty times in the New Testament! Watchman Nee observes,

"In the church meetings, 'each one hath a psalm, hath a teaching, hath a revelation, hath a tongue, hath an interpretation' (I Cor. 14:26). Here it is not a case of one leading and all others following, but each one contributing his share of spiritual helpfulness...Nothing is determined by man, and each takes part as the Spirit leads. It is not an 'all man's ministry, but a Holy Ghost ministry. An opportunity is given to each member of the church to help others, and an opportunity is given to each one to be helped. One brother may speak at one stage of the gathering and another later on; you may be chosen of the Spirit to help the brethren this time, and I next time. Each individual must bear his share of responsibility and pass on to the others what he himself has received of the Lord. The conduct of the meetings should be the burden of no one individual, but all the members should bear the burden together, and they should seek to help one another depending upon the teaching and leading of the Spirit, and depending upon His empowering too...A church meeting has the stamp of 'one another' upon it." (The Normal Christian Church Life).

Today's popular one-man orientation, which rivals the functional Headship of Christ, was completely unknown in the early assembly. Instead, all of the brethren came to the meeting feeling that they had the privilege and the responsibility to contribute something. The early church gathering was marked by an open freedom and informality that was the requisite atmosphere for Christ to function freely through each member of His Body.

In essence, going to church in the first century meant giving more than receiving. That is, you did not attend the church meeting to receive from a class of religious specialists called "the clergy." Instead, you met to serve your brethren through your individual gifts so that the whole Body could be edified (Rom. 12:1-8). In God's thought, it is the unified-diversity of Spirit-endowed gifts that is essential to the building up of the local assembly. Robert Banks describes the function of the New Testament gathering saying,

"Each member of the community is granted a ministry to other members in the community. This means that no person, or group of persons, can discount on the basis of their particular gifts other contributions of the 'Body' or impose a uniformity upon everyone else. The community contains a great diversity of ministries, and it is precisely in the differences of function that the wholeness and unity of the Body resides. God has so designed things that the involvement of every person with his special contribution is necessary for the proper functioning of the community. This means that each member has a unique role to play, yet is also dependent upon everyone else." (Paul's Idea of Community).

It is important to stress at this point that the concept of mutual ministry that is envisioned in the New Testament is far different from the pinched definition of "lay-ministry" that is promoted in the modern institutional church. Granted, most established churches offer a plethora of volunteer positions for "lay people" to fill such as cutting the lawn of the parsonage, ushering the aisles, washing the pastor's car, shaking hands at the sanctuary door, passing out bulletins, teaching Sunday school classes, singing in the choir or worship team, and flipping transparencies. But these restricted ministry positions are a far cry from the free-and-open exercise of spiritual gifts that was afforded to each believer in the early church gathering.

The Necessity of a Functioning Priesthood

In light of all that has been said, consider these telling questions: Why did the early church meet in this way? Was it just a passing cultural tradition? Did it represent the early church's infancy, ignorance, and immaturity? I think not, for the practice of the early church meeting IS deeply rooted in Biblical theology. It made real and practical the Biblical doctrine of the priesthood of all believers -- a doctrine that all evangelicals affirm with their lips.

And what is that doctrine? In the words of Peter, it is the notion that all believers are spiritual priests who are called to offer up spiritual sacrifices" unto the Lord and toward their brethren. In Paul's language, it is the idea that all Christians are functioning members of the Body of Christ. From a pragmatic standpoint, then, the New Testament church meeting is the Biblical dynamic that produces spiritual increase -- both corporately and individually (Eph. 4:11-16); for if we do not function, we do not grow -- and this is a kingdom law (Mark 4:24-25). Granted, believers can and should function outside of the church meetings; but the gatherings of the church are especially designed for every Christian to exercise his or her gifts (I Cor. 11-14; Heb. 10:24-25). Thus, the common practice of pushing "one anothering" outside of the modern church service cannot help but retard the growth of the believing community.

In this regard, the institutional church is essentially a nursery for overgrown spiritual babes. Because it has habituated God's people into being passive receivers, it has stunted their spiritual development and kept them in spiritual infancy. (The incessant need for predigested, dished out spiritual food is a mark of spiritual immaturity -- I Cor. 3:1-2; Heb. 5:12-14.)

While the Reformation recovered the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, it failed to restore the necessary practices that embody this teaching. While the church has claimed the ground of a believing priesthood, it has failed to occupy that ground. Consequently, in the typical Protestant church, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is no more than a sterile truth. In this regard, Joseph Higginbotham and Paul Patton pointedly remark,

"Every year on 'Reformation Sunday' it is urgently proclaimed that the Reformation won the battle for the priesthood of the believer. The wish is certainly the father of the thought, but we are still talking about wishes, not facts. The very congregations who hear the proclamation deny by their polity, their congregational life, and even by their architecture the truth they claim to embody. Our words betray our Reformation Sunday victory celebrations. The battle is not won; we do not yet occupy the ground where the priesthood of the believers is fact." ("The Battle for the Body," Searching Together, Vol. 13:2).

The doctrine of the believing priesthood in modern evangelicalism continues to beg for practical application and implementation in the life of the Lord's people. Thus, God has established open participatory meetings to incarnate the splendid spiritual reality of expressing the Risen Christ through a fully employed priesthood. In this way, the New Testament church meeting was designed by God to fulfill His eternal purpose, which is centered upon forming Christ in a company of people and bringing them unto His full stature (Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:11-16).

There is nothing more conducive to the culture of spiritual life than the open church meeting that is depicted in the New Testament. In this regard, the book of Hebrews amply demonstrates that the mutual supply of the Body is vital for the spiritual increase of the church. Quite simply, mutual ministry is the Divine antidote for preventing apostasy, the Divine requirement for ensuring perseverance, and the Divine means for cultivating individual spiritual life. Consider Hebrews 3:12-14:

Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an EVIL HEART OF UNBELIEF, IN DEPARTING FROM THE LIVING GOD. BUT EXHORT ONE ANOTHER DAILY..LEST ANY OF YOU BE HARDENED THROUGH THE DECEITFULNESS OF SIN For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.

Here the writer of Hebrews teaches us that mutual edification is the remedy for developing an unbelieving heart and a hardened will due to sin's deceitfulness. Furthermore, in Hebrews 10:25-26, the Bible again presents mutual exhortation as the Divinely-established safeguard against turning away from the Lord. It says,

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is; BUT EXHORTING ONE ANOTHER FOR IF WE SIN WILFULLY after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins.

While multitudes of clergy have made common use of the above text to stress the importance of "attending church," they have blissfully ignored the rest of the passage, which furnishes us with the primary purpose and activity of the church meeting, i.e. mutual exhortation and encouragement. Frankly, we ignore the full teaching of this passage to our own peril, for our spiritual prosperity is hinged upon corporate meetings that are marked by mutual ministry.

Manifesting Christ in His Fullness

It is not without significance that the Greek word for church, *ekklesia*, literally means "assembly." This meshes nicely with the dominant thought in the Pauline corpus that the church is Christ in corporate expression (I Cor. 12:1-27; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:1-16). Hence, the function of the local assembly is to express the Risen Savior. We gather together so that the Lord Jesus can manifest Himself in His fullness unto the building up of His Body. But the only way that this can become a reality is if every member of the assembly is free to supply that aspect of Christ that he or she has received.

If, therefore, the hand does not function in the gathering, then Christ is not manifested in fullness; for the Lord Jesus cannot fully disclose Himself through only one member. Likewise, if the eyes fail to function, Christ will be limited in revealing Himself. On the other hand, when every member of the Body functions according to his peculiar gift, Christ is fully seen -- He, as it were, is Assembled in our midst!

Consider the analogy of a puzzle. When each piece of a puzzle is placed in its rightful position in relation to the other pieces, we say that the puzzle is "assembled." As a result, the entire picture is seen and understood. And so it is with Christ and His church. When every member of the *ekklesia* supplies something of the Risen Head through the free-yet-orderly exercise of Spirit-endowed gifts, God's desire of revealing His blessed Son to our hearts anew and afresh is realized.

Lest someone misunderstand at this point, participatory meetings do not preclude the idea of planning. Nor do they mean that we should scrap any semblance of order or form. In I Corinthians 14, Paul formulates a number of broad guidelines which are designed to keep the church meeting running in an orderly fashion. These guidelines demonstrate that in Paul's thought there is no tension between an open participatory meeting and an orderly one which results in the edification of every member. With scholarly insight, Robert Banks summarizes the texture of the New Testament church meeting saying,

"The Spirit's sovereignty over the gifts results in a stable, though not inflexible, distribution within the community and in their orderly, though not fixed, interplay in the gatherings...So then, provided certain basic principles of the Spirit's operation are kept in view -- balance, intelligibility, evaluation, orderliness, and loving exercise, Paul sees no need to lay down any fixed rules for the community's proceedings...Paul therefore has no interest in constructing a fixed liturgy. This would restrict the freedom of God's communications. Each gathering of the community will have a structure, but it will emerge naturally from the particular combination of the gifts exercised." (Paul's Idea of Community).

The Question of Sustaining Force

What has been set forth concerning the purpose of the early church meeting touches a vital feature that sets the New Testament assembly apart from the modern institutional church. It involves the searching question of what drives and sustains the church.

In the typical institutional church, the religious machinery of the church "program" is the force that propels and charts the direction of the assembly. If the Spirit of God left an institutional church, His absence would go unnoticed: the 'business-as-usual' process would forge ahead; the worship would be unaffected; the liturgy would be uninterrupted; the announcements would be heard; the offering would be taken up; the sermon would be preached; and the closing song would be offered. Like Samson of old, the congregation would go right along with the religious program, "knowing not that the Lord had departed" (Judges 16:20).

By contrast, the only sustaining factor of the New Testament assembly was the life of the Holy Spirit. The early church relied entirely upon the spiritual life of the individual members to maintain its existence. Hence, if the life of a New Testament meeting was at a low ebb, everyone would know it -- the cold chill of death could not be overlooked. What is more, if the Spirit of God left the gathering, the meeting would collapse altogether. In short, the New Testament church knew no other sustaining influence other than the life of the Spirit through the believing community. It did not rely upon a man-programmed, human-planned, institutionally-fueled system to preserve its momentum.

In this regard, the institutional church has been perfectly mirrored by the Mosaic tabernacle of old after the ark of God had been taken from it. When the presence of God had left the holy tent, it was reduced to nothing more than a hollow shell accompanied by an impressive exterior. Yet regardless of the fact that the Lord's glory had departed, worshipers continued to offer their sacrifices at the empty tabernacle (I Chron. 16:39-40; 2 Chron. 1:3-5; Jer. 7:12). To use the Old Testament figure, the institutional church has confused the laying down of the altar with the consuming fire. Resting content with rearranging the pieces of the sacrifice upon the altar, the institutional church no longer sees a need for the heavenly fire (except perhaps to make people feel good).

The tragedy of the church, therefore, lies in its reliance upon a humanly-devised, program-driven religious system that serves to scaffold the "church" structure when the Spirit of God is absent. This moss-laden system betrays the fact that when the spontaneous life of the Spirit has ebbed away from a group of believers, it ceases to be the church in any Biblical sense, even though the outward form may be preserved. John W. Kennedy sums it up well:

"Man always tries to conserve what God rejects, as church history adequately demonstrates. The result is seen in the bulk of present-day denominations, much of it a lifeless monument to glories that have long since disappeared, is it possible that God's people, in erecting 'lampstands' of bricks and mortar which have had to be kept up long after the light of the Spirit has gone out, have thwarted God's purpose?" (Secret of His Purpose).

The Clerical Objection

While the New Testament abundantly establishes the fact that the early church meetings were open, participatory, and spontaneous, many modern clergymen refuse to approve of such meetings today. Modern clerical thinking on the subject goes something like this: "If I allowed my congregation to exercise their gifts in an open meeting, there would be sheer chaos; therefore, I have no choice but to control the services, lest the people spin out of control." Such an objection is severely flawed on several points and betrays a gross misunderstanding of God's ecclesiology.

First, the mere notion that a clergyman has the authority to "allow" or "forbid" his fellow brethren to exercise their gifts is built upon a skewed understanding of ecclesiastical authority and ministry (more on this later). The bottom line is that no one has the right to permit or prohibit the believing priesthood in the exercise of its Spirit-endowed gifts.

Second, the assumption that chaos would ensue if clerical control were removed betrays a lack of confidence in the Holy Spirit. It also reveals a lack of trust in God's people, something that is utterly non-Pauline (Rom. 15:14; 2 Cor. 2:3; 7:6; 8:22; Gal. 5:10; 2 Thess. 3:4; Phlm. 2 1; see also Heb. 6:9).

Third, the idea that the church meeting would turn into a tumultuous free-for-all is simply not true. If the saints are properly equipped in their use of spiritual gifts and understand how to submit to the Holy Spirit, an open participatory meeting is a glorious event. (By the way, Christians do not become equipped by listening to sermons week after week while being planted in a pew. The resolute fear among professional pulpites to open up their church services for spontaneous ministry is sheer proof of this.)

While open participatory meetings may not always be as prim and proper as the traditional church service that runs flawlessly according to the pastor's (unwritten) liturgy, they do reveal much more of the fullness of Christ and the preciousness of His people than any human arrangement could ever manufacture.

Granted, there will be times (especially in the beginning stages of a church's life) that some may bring unprofitable ministry. But the antidote for this is not to put a lid on spontaneous ministry. Rather, those who deliver un-edifying ministry should be corrected. And this largely falls on the shoulders of the more mature brethren, namely the elders (more on this later).

Recall that when Paul faced the frenzied morass in Corinth, he did not close the meeting nor introduce human officiation. He rather supplied the brethren with a number of broad guidelines to facilitate order and edification in the gatherings (1 Cor. 14:1 ff.). What is more, Paul was confident that the church would adhere to these guidelines. In like manner, if such guidelines are heeded today, there is no need for human officiation, fixed liturgies, or preplanned services in the gatherings of the church. G.H. Lang explains,

"And when they had gathered, no visible leader was in evidence, nor was a pre-arranged programme followed. Two or even three prophets might address the assembly; psalms, prayers, and other exercises were introduced spontaneously (1 Cor. 14). Great emphasis is laid on this as being the Divine intention by the fact that upon gross disorders arising, and the gatherings becoming unseemly and unprofitable (1 Cor. 11, 14), the apostle by no means suggests any other form of service, but only lays down general principles, the application of which would prevent disorder and promote edification, the method of worship continuing essentially as before. There was indeed a duty to restrain vain and deceitful talking (1 Tim. 1:3; Titus 1:10-16); but there was no legislative or coercive power; the authority of the elders was purely moral. The control of the assembly by one man was thus unknown. The Lord Himself by His Spirit, was as really present as if He had been visible. Indeed, to faith He was visible; and He Himself being there, what servant could be so irreverent as to take out of His hands the control of the worship and ministry? But, on the other hand, most certainly it was not the case that anybody had liberty to minister. The liberty was for the Holy Spirit to do His will, not for His people to do as they willed. All rights in the house of God rest solely in the Son of God. The post-apostolic church quickly departed from this pattern." (The Churches of God).

At bottom, the tendency to reject the New Testament styled church meeting unearths a lack of trust in the Holy Spirit. Rendle Short puts an even finer point on it saying,

"We spoil God's workings, and we starve our souls, if we depart from this principle [open participatory meetings]. Someone may say, 'But will not things get into dreadful confusion if you seek to follow out these patterns.' In those days they had the Holy Spirit to guide them, and shall not we go wildly astray, and have dull, confused, unprofitable, perhaps even unseemly meetings, unless we get someone to take charge?' Is that not practically a denial of the Holy Spirit? Do we dare deny that the Holy Spirit is still being given? The Holy Spirit is at work today as much as He was at work in those days. Please do not think that what is sometimes called the 'open meeting' means that the saints are at the mercy of any unprofitable talker who thinks he has something to say, and would like to inflict himself upon them. The open meeting is not a meeting that is open to man. It is a meeting that is open to the Holy Spirit. There are some whose mouths must be stopped (Titus 1:10-14). Sometimes they may be stopped by prayer, and sometimes they have to be stopped by godly admonition...But because there is failure in carrying out the principle, do not let us give up on the principles of God." (The Churches of God).

In Numbers 11, we have the first appearance of clericalism in the Bible. Two servants of the Lord, Eldad and Medad, received God's Spirit and prophesied in the camp (vv. 26-27). In hasty response, a young man urged Moses to "restrain them" (v. 28). Moses, however, stopped the mouth of the young suppressor by declaring that it was God's desire that all of His people possess the Spirit and prophesy. This desire was fulfilled at Pentecost (Acts 2:17-18) and continues to find fulfillment today (Acts 2:38-39; 1 Cor. 14:1,3 1). Unfortunately, the modern church does not lack those who wish to again restrain Eldad and Medad from ministering in the Lord's house. May God raise up a multitude of believers who are of the spirit of Moses so that the Father would get what is rightfully His -- a kingdom of functioning priests that serve under the Headship of His Son.

Headship vs. Lordship

It may prove useful at this point to note the careful distinction that the Bible draws between Headship and Lordship. Throughout the New Testament, the Headship of Christ virtually always has in view Christ's relationship with His Body (Eph.

1:21; 4:15-1 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:19), while the Lordship of Christ virtually always has in view His relationship with individuals (Matt. 7:21-22; Luke 6:46; Acts 16:3 1; Rom. 10:9,13; 6:17). What Lordship is to the individual, Headship is to the church. Thus, Headship and Lordship are two dimensions of the same thing. Headship is Lordship worked out in the corporate life of God's people.

This distinction is important to grasp, for it throws light on the problem of church practice today. It is all too common for Christians to know Christ's Lordship and yet know little of His Headship. For instance, a believer may truly submit to the Lordship of Jesus in his own personal life. He may obey what he understands in the Bible, pray fervently and regularly, and live a life of self-denial, personal piety, and love for others. Yet simultaneously he may know nothing about shared ministry, mutual accountability, and corporate testimony.

In the final analysis, to be subject to the Headship of Jesus means to obey His will regarding the life and practice of the church. It includes such things as discerning God's mind through mutual ministry and sharing, obeying the Holy Spirit through mutual subjection and servanthood, and testifying to Jesus Christ collectively through mutual outreach and oneness. Submission to the Headship of Christ incarnates the New Testament teaching that Jesus is not only Lord of the lives of men, but that He is Master of the life of the church. And Scripture is plain that when Christ's Headship is established and given concrete expression in the earth, He will become Head over all things in the universe (Col. 1:16-18). With stirring clarity, Arthur Wallis describes the inseparable connection between Christ's Headship and His Lordship saying,

"Christ taught that our commitment to Him must be wholehearted. It means denying oneself taking up the cross and following Him. But Scripture is equally clear that our attitude toward Christ is reflected in our attitude toward His people. As is our attitude toward the Head, so will our attitude be to His Body. You cannot be wholehearted toward Christ but only half-hearted toward His church." (The Radical Christian).

Final Thoughts

I end this chapter with several questions for thought: Is it possible that modern evangelicalism has only affirmed the doctrine of the believing priesthood intellectually, but has failed to practically apply it due to the subtle entrapment of deeply entrenched traditions? Do our modern church services, which are largely built around the sermon of one man and the worship program of an established music team, reflect the normative gatherings that we find in our Bibles or are they at odds with it? Why would open participatory church meetings be good for the early Christians, but somehow be unworkable or dangerous for us today? Finally, is our practice of the church an expression of the complete Headship of Christ or the headship of man?

May God help us to answer these questions sincerely and in the light of His Word.

II. THE FOCUS OF THE CHURCH MEETING

While the New Testament clearly demonstrates that mutual edification was the primary purpose of the early church gathering, it equally indicates that the practice of "breaking bread," or "the Lord's Supper," was its central focus. This is abundantly established by such passages as Acts 20:7 and I Corinthians 11:20,33:

And upon the first day of the week when the disciples CAME TOGETHER TO BREAK BREAD, Paul preached, 'When you come together in the same place it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. So then, my brothers, when you COME TOGETHER TO EAT wait for one another.'

The central feature of the New Testament church meeting was nothing other than the Lord's Supper. In Acts 20, we are told that the disciples came together to break bread on the Lord's day. In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul reproved the brethren for departing from the assembly's normal focus, chiding them for not coming together to eat the Lord's Supper (which they should have), but for coming together to eat their own supper! In this connection, Acts 2:42 declares that the early Christians continued steadfastly in "the breaking of bread," among other essentials.

The Breaking of Bread Embodies Christ in His Salvific Work

The breaking of bread embodies the major features of the Christian life. First, it points us to the humanity of Jesus. Just as the Son of glory took upon Himself the form of a servant in the lowliness of human flesh, so too the bread, being the most basic and lowly of all foods, points to the humility of our Messiah. By taking upon Himself our humanity, Jesus, the Son of Man, has become accessible to all, just as bread is available to every one of us, both rich and poor.

The breaking of bread also reminds us of the cross upon which our Lord's Body was broken and the healing that was wrought for us. The very elements present at the Lord's Table represent death: bread is made from the crushed wheat and wine is made from the pressed grape. Not only does the breaking of bread depict the death of Christ, but also His resurrection.

Because the grain of wheat has gone into the ground, it now lives to produce many grains like itself (John 12:24). For this reason our Lord declared that if we eat His flesh and drink His Blood we will obtain life (John 6:53). In this connection, the revelation of the Risen Christ is bound up with the bread. When the Risen Lord ate with His disciples, it was bread that He broke with them (John 21:13). In addition, the Resurrected Christ had fully disclosed Himself to the two men on the Emmaus road only after He had broken and distributed the bread (Luke 24:30-32).

The testimony of the oneness of Christ's Body, the church, is also embodied in the breaking of bread. Recall that there was only one loaf in which the early disciples broke weekly in each locale. In the words of Paul, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one Body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (I Cor. 10:17). Surely the Lord is grieved when multitudes of His children living in the same community break bread as though they were each a separate Body. In short, to break bread while having a sectarian spirit is a serious thing in the sight of God. This was the error of Corinth, and Paul chided them sternly and severely for it (I Cor. 11:27-29).

The Lord's Supper -- A Covenant Meal

It is important to point out that the Lord's Supper was originally taken in the context of a larger meal. When the Master Himself instituted the Supper, it was taken as part of the Passover feast -- which served as a forerunner of the Lord's Supper throughout the Old Testament. In addition, the whole of I Corinthians 11 makes clear that the believers gathered to eat the Supper as a meal -- for one would find it hard-pressed to become drunk on a thimble of grape juice or to satisfy his hunger with a bite-sized cracker (vv. 21-22; 33-34). The New Testament word for "supper" literally means a dinner, a meal or a banquet, and the New Testament word for "table" indicates a table in which a full, square meal was spread (Luke 22:14; 1 Cor. 10:21).

Consequently, the Lord's Supper of the early church comprised a fellowship meal. (Today, New Testament scholars from all denominational persuasions agree on this.) It was the table communion of the saints -- a family festival -- a covenant meal. For this reason the early church referred to the Supper as the Agape, or love feast (2 Pet. 2:13; Jude 12). Regrettably, centuries of ecclesiastical tradition have made today's truncated version of the Supper something far removed from what it was in the New Testament. As a result, the communal meaning of the breaking of bread has been largely lost. Robert Banks observes the following regarding the dialogical setting of the Supper:

"The most visible and profound way in which the community gives physical expression to its fellowship is the common meal. The word 'deipnon' (1 Cor. 11:20), meaning 'dinner,' tells us that it was not a token meal (as it has become since) or part of a meal (as it is sometimes envisaged), but an entire, ordinary meal. Paul's injunctions to the 'hungry' to eat before they leave home (vv. 22,34) do not represent the beginnings of a separation of the Lord's Supper from the meal itself. He is merely trying to avoid the uses that had entered into the meal at Corinth... This meal is vital, for as the members of the community eat and drink together their unity comes to visible expression. The meal is therefore a truly social event; the meal that they shared together reminded the members of their relationship with Christ and one another and deepened those relationships in the same way that participation in an ordinary meal cements and symbolizes the bond between a family or group." (Paul's Idea of Community).

G.H. Lang argues along the same lines saying,

"It was during the social meal connected with the Passover feast that the Lord had introduced the new association of that bread and cup with His own Person and work. Likewise does I Cor. 11 show that the believers at Corinth observed the Supper in connexion with a social meal of the whole company. This was known as the 'Agape' or feast of love, and though it had led to abuses at Corinth the apostle does not repudiate the practice but regulates its observance. It is healthful that this picture rise before the mind. An ordinary house the place; a customary meal the occasion; the Supper quietly and easily conjoined therewith. No ecclesiastical building, no priest or functionary, no altar or sacrifice, no vestments or ornaments, as lights, incense, crucifixes, no formality. The Supper observed in simplicity the home dignified thereby, the ordinary meal sanctified and solemnized." (The Churches of God).

Finally, the breaking of bread points to Christ's future coming in glory, wherein the Bridegroom will preside at that sumptuous wedding feast to sup with His beloved Bride anew in the Father's kingdom (Matt. 26:29). The Lord's Supper, therefore, possesses eschatological overtones. It is a last-days feast -- a figure of the Messianic Banquet that will occur at the future *eschaton* (Matt. 22:1-14; 26:29; Luke 12:35-38; 15:22-32; Rev. 19:9). Accordingly, the breaking of bread is always viewed in the context of a celebrative meal marked by joy and thanksgiving (Luke 22:17; Acts 2:46; 1 Cor. 10:16). It is a cheerful reminder not only of what our Lord has done at Calvary, but of what He will do when He returns in His glorious kingdom.

In sum, the breaking of bread possesses past, present, and future implications. It is a re-proclamation of the Lord's glorious atoning death for us in the past, a re-declaration of His ever abiding nearness with us in the present, and a re-pronouncement of the resident hope of His coming in the future. In addition, the Lord's Supper involves the practical outworking of the three chief virtues of faith, hope, and love. Through the Supper, we regroup ourselves in that glorious salvation that is ours by faith, we re-express our love for the brethren as we reflect on the one Body, and we rejoice in the hope of our Lord's soon return. Through its correct observation, we do "proclaim (present) the Lord's death (past) till He comes (future)."

While some have made the Lord's Supper literal and sacrificial, others have made it merely symbolic and commemorative. But the Lord's Supper is neither a perpetual sacrifice nor an empty ritual. It carries no sacramental overtones nor can it be properly conceived by historical modes of thought alone. Rather, the Lord's Supper is a spiritual reality. That is, the Holy Spirit is present in it, revealing the living Christ to the hearts of His beloved saints as they sup with Him through the one loaf and the one cup. In this connection, our Lord often used the imagery of eating and drinking to depict our spiritual communion with Him (John 4:14; 6:5 1; 7:37; Rev. 3:20). Eric Svendsen aptly summarizes the chief features of the Lord's Supper:

"The Supper held a wide range of purposes. First, it served as an expression of concern for the poor in the believing community. In all likelihood, the Supper was a potluck of sorts provided by the rich to show their love for less fortunate Christians. It is probably this purpose that resulted in the adoption of the title 'Agape.' A second dimension of the Supper is that it compelled the Christian community to live out the theology of equality of status in Christ, violating the Hellenistic societal norm to hold homogenous banquets where class distinctions were acutely recognized.. Another very important, yet often missed focus of the Supper is its eschatological focus. The Lord's Supper prefigures the Messianic Banquet and acts as a means to petition Messiah to come again. The Supper is to be repeated on a regular basis in order to sound this petition and to give the participants the opportunity to proclaim with one voice, 'Maranatha!'" (The Table of the Lord).

The Supper and the Table

In the light of all that has been said, it is instructive to note the careful distinction that the New Testament makes between the Lord's Supper and the Lord's Table. While both terms point to the single practice of breaking bread, between them exists a subtle difference in emphasis.

In I Corinthians 10:16-22, Paul speaks about the Lord's Table (v. 2 1). There the emphasis is on the church, and the bread points to the unified Body of Christ (v. 17). Communion and oneness are the dominant thoughts in the Table, and they sharpen our

focus on the fellowship aspect of the meal (vv. 16-17). In I Corinthians 11:17-34, Paul speaks about the Lord's Supper (v. 20). There the emphasis is on the death of the Lord Jesus for us, and the bread points to the physical Body of our Lord that was slain for our redemption (v. 24). Remembering and proclaiming are the principal thoughts in the Supper, and they direct our attention to the sacrificial-death aspect of the meal (vv. 25-26).

In the Table, it is the horizontal relationship of the believing community that is in view; in the Supper, it is the vertical relationship between the believers and Christ that is in view. Put differently, the Table is the place of our fellowship, sharing, and eating; the Supper is the essence of our meal. The Table is the environment for our communion. The Supper is the substance of our communion. While the Table and the Supper are distinct, they are not separate.

The Centrality of the Lord's Table in the Church Meeting

From a practical standpoint, the rightful place of the Lord's Table in the church meeting delivers us from our natural penchant as subjective creatures to be self-absorbed. When our meetings are structured around the Table of the Lord, all of our attention is taken off ourselves and fastened upon Christ. In this way, the breaking of bread reminds us of the centrality of the invisible Head who is always present when we meet. Perhaps this is why the Table of the Lord is the only material thing that the Bible mentions as being present in the meetings of the church. The words of Hugh Kane are fitting:

"That which occupied the most conspicuous place in the assemblies of God's people was neither a 'preacher nor a pulpit' but a 'table' on which rested the symbols, 'bread and wine.' Those early believers were gathered unto Him (Matt. 18:20). He was the magnet to which their hearts were drawn and by which they were charmed and satisfied, The beauty of that method of gathering was its very simplicity. No arrangements nor adornments of men! No 'altar service,' no priestly vestments, 'no specially 'robed choirs'...they had no one to lead their assembly worship but the Holy Spirit; He was sufficient. He directed their hearts to Christ it was beautifully and God-honoring, because it was His own arrangement. The vainglory of the flesh found no place there. No one was seen but 'Jesus only.'" (My Reasons).

These are but a few precious truths bound up with the breaking of bread-truths which help explain why the early Christians made it the central focus of their weekly church gatherings. Suffice it to say that the practice of breaking of bread was instituted by the Lord Jesus Himself (Matt. 26:26) and handed down to us by the apostles (I Cor. 11:2). With this in view, should not New Testament teaching and example shape our approach to the Lord's Supper today?

The Lord help us to no longer neglect the unique place that God has reserved for His Son's Table in our midst.

III. THE LOCATION OF THE CHURCH MEETING

Have you ever been asked, "Where do you go to church?" Such a question is commonplace today, especially among Christians. Yet the question itself touches a significant note in God's purpose. Consider the following scenario:

Suppose that a new employee was recently hired at your workplace. You learn by talking with him that he is a Christian. Upon asking what church he attends, he responds by saying: "I attend a church that meets in a home." What are the thoughts that run through your mind? Do you think, "Well, that's rather strange -- this guy must be a religious misfit or an emotional outcast of some sort." Or, "Maybe he's part of some cult or flaky fringe group." Or, "There must be something wrong with him -- if there wasn't, why doesn't he go to a regular church?" Or, "This guy certainly must be a rebel of some sort; he's probably unable to submit, else he would be attending a normal church -- you know, the kind that meets in a building."

Unfortunately, these are the thoughts that run through the minds of many modern Christians whenever the idea of a "home church meeting" is brought to their attention. But here's the punch line: that new employee's place of meeting is identical to that of every Christian mentioned in the New Testament! In fact, the local church met in the homes of its members for the first three hundred years of its birth. New Testament scholar Robert Banks observes,

"Whether we are considering the smaller gatherings of only some Christians in a city or the larger meetings involving the whole Christian population, it is in the home of one of the members that 'ekklesia' is held -- for example in the 'upper room. 'Not until the third century do we have evidence of special buildings being constructed for Christian gatherings." (Paul's Idea of Community).

The common meeting place for the early Christians was none other than the home. Anything else would have been the exception and most assuredly looked upon as being out of the ordinary. Note the following passages:

And [the believers went about] breaking bread from HOUSE TO HOUSE .. (Acts 2:46)

As for Saul, he made havoc of the CHURCH, entering into every HOUSE .. (Acts 8:3)

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, teaching you publicly and from HOUSE To HOUSE.. (Acts 20:20, NASB)

Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus...Likewise greet the CHURCH that is in their HOUSE. (Rom. 16:3,5)

The churches of Asia salute you. Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord with the CHURCH that is in their HOUSE. (I Cor. 16:19)

Salute the brethren which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas, and the CHURCH which is in his HOUSE. (Col. 4:15)

And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the CHURCH in thy HOUSE (Phm. 1:2)

If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into the HOUSE, neither bid him Godspeed (2 John 10)

The Location of the Church Meeting

The above Scriptures amply demonstrate that the early church customarily met in the hospitable homes of its members (see also Acts 2:2; 9:11; 10:32; 12:12; 16:15,34,40; 17:5; 18:7; 21:8). Thus, the first-century believers knew nothing of what would correspond to the "church" edifice of today. Neither did they know anything about houses that were converted into basilicas wherein hardwood pews were bolted to the floor and a pulpit accompanied the living room furniture. While such oddities exist in

the 20th century, they were foreign to first-century believers. The early Christians simply assembled together in ordinary, livable houses. Thus, the New Testament knows nothing of "church-houses." It only knows the "church in the house."

What did the early church do when it grew too large to assemble in a single house? It did not erect a building, but simply multiplied and met in several other homes following the "house to house principle" (Acts 2:46; 20:20). In this regard, New Testament scholarship today agrees that the early church was essentially a network of home-based meetings. Hence, if there is such a thing as a normal church, it is the church that meets in the house. Or as one writer put it, "If there is a New Testament form of the church, it is the house church."

Notwithstanding, some have tried to argue that the primitive Christians would have erected specialized buildings if they were not under persecution; therefore, they met in homes to hide themselves from their persecutors. While this idea is somewhat popular, it is rooted in pure conjecture and maps poorly with the historical evidence. Bill Grimes crystallizes the point saying,

"Many dismiss early house churches as the result of persecution. However, any church history textbook will reveal that persecution prior to A.D. 250 was sporadic, localized and usually the result of mob hostility rather than a decree of a Roman official. This 'persecution' myth also clashes with Scripture. Acts 2:46-47 describes home meetings at a time when the church was 'enjoying the favor of all the people' When persecution did break out, meeting in homes didn't stop Saul from knowing just where to go to arrest believers (Acts 8:3). They obviously made no secret about where they met." (Toward a House Church Theology).

If we read the New Testament with an eye for understanding how the first-century Christians related to one another, we will discover that they met in homes for reasons that are 'In harmony with spiritual principle. As such, these reasons apply to us today with as much force as they did to the first Christians. Let us explore some of them now.

(1) The Home is the Natural Setting for One-Anothering

All of the instructions given by the apostles concerning the church meeting are best suited for a small group setting like the home. Normative apostolic church practices like mutual participation (Heb. 10:24-25); the exercise of each member's gifts (I Cor. 14:26); the building together of the brethren into an intentional, face-to-face community (Eph. 2:21-22); the communal meal (I Cor. 11); the open transparency and accountability of members one toward another (Rom. 15:14, Gal. 6:1-2, Jas. 5:16,19-20); the freedom for questions and interactive dialogue (I Cor. 14:29-40); and the liberty-oriented koinonia (shared life) of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17; 13:14) all operate best in a small group setting such as a house.

In sum, the fifty-eight "one-another" exhortations in the New Testament can only be rightly obeyed and fleshed out in a house-like environment. For this reason the home church meeting is highly conducive to the realization of God's eternal purpose -- a purpose that is centered upon the "building together" of a Body into the likeness of Christ (Eph. 2:19-22).

(2) The Home Represents the Simplicity of the Christian Life

The home represents humility, naturalness, and pure simplicity -- the outstanding marks of the early church (Acts 2:46; 2 Cor. 11:3). The house (typically speaking) is a far more humble place than the stately religious edifices of our day with their lofty steeples, elegant decor, and spacious naves. In this way, most modern "church" buildings seem to reflect the boastings of this world more than the meek and lowly Savior whose name we bear.

By contrast, the early Christians sought to draw attention to their Risen Lord rather than to themselves or to their own accomplishments. What is more, the overhead costs of a religious building ordinarily costs the brethren much financial loss. How much freer their hands would be to support apostolic workers ("church planters") and help the poor if they did not have to bear such a heavy burden.

(3) The Home Reflects the Family Nature of the Church

There is a natural affinity between the home meeting and the family motif of the church that saturates Paul's writings. Because the home is the native environment of the family, it naturally furnishes the ekklesia with a familial atmosphere -- the very atmosphere that pervaded the life of the early Christians. In stark contrast, the artificial environment afforded by the church building promotes an impersonal climate that inhibits intimacy and accountability. The conventional "church" edifice produces a certain stuffy rigidity that is contrary to the pleasant unofficial air of the home meeting. Further, it is quite easy to "get lost" in a large building. Because of the spacious and remote nature of the basilica church, it is not difficult for folks to go unnoticed -- or worse, to hide in their sins. Not so in a home. All our warts show there -- and rightly so. Everyone in the gathering is recognized, accepted, encouraged, and helped.

In addition, the formal manner in which things are done in the basilica church tends to discourage the mutual intercourse and spontaneity that characterized the early church gatherings. For instance, if you endeavor to exegete the architecture of a typical church building, you will discover that it effectively teaches the church to be passive. The interior structure of the building is not designed for interpersonal communication, social cohesion, mutual ministry, or fellowship. Instead, it is designed for a rigid one-way communication-pulpit to pew, leader to congregation.

In this regard, the typical "church" edifice is not dissimilar to a lecture hall or cinema. The congregation is carefully arranged in pews (or chairs) to see and hear the pastor (or priest) speak from the pulpit. The people are focused on a single point-the clergy leader and his pulpit. (In liturgical churches, the table/altar takes the place of the pulpit as the central point of reference.) Moreover, the place where the pastor and staff are seated is normally elevated above the seating of the congregation. Such an arrangement not only reinforces the clergy/laity chasm, but it feeds the spectator-mentality that afflicts most of the Body of Christ today. W.J. Pethybridge astutely observes,

"In a small group meeting in the friendly associations of a home, everybody can know each other and relationships are more real and less formal. With the smaller number it is possible for everybody to take active part in the meeting, and so the whole Body of Christ present can function...Having a special building for meetings nearly always involves the idea of a special person as

minister developing into 'one man ministry' and preventing the full exercise of the priesthood of all believers." (The Lost Secret of the Early Church).

It seems clear, then, that the early Christians conducted their meetings in the home to express the character of church life. That is, they met in houses to encourage the family dimension of their worship, fellowship, and mutual ministry. The meetings in the home naturally made the saints feel that the interests of the church were their interests. It fostered a sense of closeness between themselves and the church, rather than distancing them from it (as is so often the case today -- where the members attend church as remote spectators, rather than as active participants).

In short, the house church meeting provided both the connectedness and deep-seated relationships that are to characterize the ekklesia. The spirit of the home-based meeting furnished the saints with a family-like atmosphere where true fellowship occurred shoulder-to-shoulder, face-to-face, and eyeball-to-eyeball. It provided a climate that fostered open communication, spiritual Cohesiveness, and unreserved communion-the requisite features for the full experience and flourishing of the koinonia (shared fellowship) of the Holy Spirit for which we were designed. In all of these ways, the house church meeting is not only fundamentally Biblical, but it is strikingly at odds with the modern pulpit-pew styled service where believers are forced to fellowship with the back of someone's head for an hour or two. In his discussion on the meeting place of the church, Watchman Nee remarks,

"In our assemblies today we must return to the principle of the 'upper room.' The ground floor is a place for business, a place for men to come and go; but there is more of a home atmosphere about the upper room, and the gatherings of God's children are family affairs. The Last Supper was in an upper room, so was Pentecost, and so again was the meeting [in Troas]. God wants the intimacy of the 'upper room' to mark the gatherings of His children, not the stiff formality of an imposing public edifice. That is why in the Word of God we find His children meeting in the family atmosphere of a private home...we should try and encourage meetings in the homes of the Christians...the homes of the brethren will nearly always meet the needs of the church meetings." (The Normal Christian Church Life).

(4) The Home Models Spiritual Authenticity

We live in a day when many people, especially youth, are searching for spiritual authenticity. For many such folks, churches that meet in amphitheatres, crystal cathedrals, and ivory-towered domes appear superficial and shallow. By contrast, the church in the home serves as a fruitful testimony of spiritual reality to unbelievers who are skeptical of those religious institutions that equate glamorous buildings and multimillion dollar budgets with success.

Many unbelievers will not attend a modern religious service held in a basilica church where the attendants are expected to "dress up" for the show. But they often will feel unthreatened and uninhibited gathering in the natural comfort of someone's house where they can "be themselves." The unconventional atmosphere of the home, as opposed to a clinical building, is much more inviting to them. Perhaps this is another reason why the early Christians chose the simple setting of a house to worship their Lord rather than erecting shrines, sanctuaries, and synagogues as did the other religions of their day.

Ironically, many modern Christians believe that if a church does not own a building, its testimony to the world will somehow be inhibited and its growth stifled. But nothing could be further from the truth. Arguing on the basis that the early church did not start to build edifices until the third century, Howard Snyder observes,

"Whatever else buildings are good for, they are not essential either for numerical growth or spiritual depth. The early church possessed both these qualities, and the church's greatest period of vitality and growth until recent times was during the first two centuries A.D. In other words, the church grew fastest when it did not have the help -- or hindrance -- of church buildings." (The Problem of Wineskins, used by permission of the author).

(5) The Home Testifies that the People Comprise God's House

The contemporary notion of "church" is frequently associated with a building (commonly called "the sanctuary"). However, according to the Bible, it is the believers indwelt with God's life who are named "the house of God," not the bricks and the mortar. Whereas in Judaism the temple is the sanctified meeting place, in Christianity the believing community is the temple.

The spatial location of the early Christian gathering went directly against the religious customs of the first century. The Jews had designated buildings for their corporate worship (synagogues), and so did the pagans (shrines). Thus, both Judaism and paganism teach that there must be a sanctified place for Divine worship. Not so with Christianity. The early church was the only religious group in the first century that met exclusively in homes. While it would have been quite natural for them to pursue their Jewish heritage and erect buildings to suit their needs, they intentionally kept from doing so. Perhaps the early believers knew the confusion that sanctified buildings would produce, and hence, kept from erecting them to preserve the testimony that the people comprised the living stones that make up God's habitation.

Conclusion

What we have said thus far can be reduced to this simple yet profound observation: the social location of the church meeting both expresses and influences the character of the church itself. Therefore, the spatial setting of the church possesses theological significance. In the typical "sanctuary" or "chapel," the pulpit, the pews (or benches) and the massified space breathe a formal air that inhibits interaction and relatedness. By contrast, the peculiar features of a home-the low-volume seating, the casual atmosphere, the convivial setting for shared meals, the personalized space of soft sofas, etc.--contain a relational subtext that befits mutual ministry. Stated simply, the early church met in the homes of its members for spiritually viable reasons. And the modern basilica church undermines those reasons. Regarding the present implications of the house church meeting, Howard Snyder astutely remarks,

House churches have probably been the most common form of Christian social organization in all church history. Despite what we might think if we simply look around us here, hundreds of thousands of Christian house churches exist today in North America,

South America, Europe, China, Australia, Eastern Europe, and in many other places around the world. In some sense, they are the underground church, and as such, represent the hidden stream of church history. But although they are hidden, and in most places not the culturally dominant form, these house churches probably represent the largest number of Christians worldwide... The New Testament teaches us that the church is a community in which all are gifted and all have ministry. The church as taught in Scripture is a new social reality that models and incarnates the respect and concern for people that we see in Jesus Himself This is our high calling. And yet the church, in fact, often betrays this calling. House churches are a big part of the way out of this betrayal and this paradox. Face-to-face community breeds mutual respect, mutual responsibility, mutual submission, and mutual ministry. The sociology of the house church fosters a sense of equality and mutual worth, though it doesn't guarantee it as the Corinthian church shows.

...In the house church model, equality and mutual ministry are not the result of some program or educational process; they are inherent in the very forms of the church itself Because in the house church everyone is valued and known-everyone has a place by definition. The house church provides an environment of mutual care and encouragement that tends to foster a wide range of gifts and ministries. The New Testament principles of the priesthood of believers, the gifts of the Spirit, and mutual ministry are found most naturally in this informal context .. House churches are revolutionary because they incarnate this radical teaching that all are gifted and all are ministers. They offer some hope for healing the Body of Christ from some of its worst heresies: that some believers are more valuable than others, that only some Christians are ministers, and that the gifts of the Spirit are no longer to function in our age. These heresies cannot be healed in theory or in theology only. They must be healed in practice and relationship in the social form of the church." (Taken from a lecture entitled " Why House Churches Today?" presented at Fuller Theological Seminary, Feb. 24, 1996 Used by permission of the author).

While the normative meeting place for the New Testament church was clearly the home, this does not suggest that it is never appropriate for a church to gather in a location other than a house. On special occasions when it was necessary for "the whole church" to gather together, the church at Jerusalem met in large settings such as the open courts of the temple and Solomon's porch (Acts 2:46a; 5:12). But such large group gatherings did not rival the normative location for the regular church meeting, which was the house (Acts 2:46b). Nor did it set a Biblical precedent for Christians to erect their own buildings. (The temple courts and Solomon's portico were public, outdoor arenas that were already in existence before the first Christians appeared.)

These large group settings simply accommodated the "whole church" when it was necessary to bring it together for a particular purpose. In the beginning days of the church's existence, the apostles used them to hold special teaching meetings for the vast number of believers and unbelievers in Jerusalem (Acts 3:11-26; 5:20-21,25,42). (Instances where we find the apostles going to the synagogue are not to be confused with church meetings. These were evangelistic meetings designed to preach the gospel to unsaved Jews. While the church meeting is primarily for the edification of believers, the evangelistic meeting is primarily for the salvation of unbelievers.)

Perhaps the Holy Spirit has led and will lead some to assemble in a building from time to time. But the Spirit will only do so if it truly suits the Lord's purposes and is directed by Him rather than by human zeal, energy, and advertising machinery as so often is the case. Therefore, we must guard against the fleshly tendency to practice something simply because it may represent the latest spiritual fad for the day. The Lord spare us from failing into the peril of ancient Israel wherein they aimlessly "followed after the nations."

Notwithstanding, is there not something for us to glean from the apostolic practice of meeting in homes? Should not house church meetings be more the rule than the exception due to the benefits that are bound up with them? If nothing else, should we not repent of our fleshly criticism and unjustified fear of those churches that meet exclusively in homes, invalidly dooming them to sub-normal status? May God deliver us from mindlessly adopting the present edifice complex because it is the conventional thing to do.

Upon examining the Biblical evidence, the question in our minds regarding the location of the church meeting ought not to be, "Why do some meet in homes," but rather, "Why is it that so many do not meet in homes?"

IV: THE NATURE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

Scripture is undeniably clear that all who possess the indwelling life of the Risen Head comprise the church. The natural implication of this glorious truth is that the church is a family whose members are joined together, organically connected, and inseparably related by Divine life. This being the case, one cannot join the church. If you are in Christ, you are joined already and that by birth.

Just as our limbs are joined to our physical bodies by life, and not by organization, invitation, examination, or catechism, so too we are joined to Christ and His Body simply by life. If you are a believer in Christ, therefore, you share one new life with all other born again believers. In becoming a Christian, you have become part of a new family, and this family is called the church.

It is for this reason that the New Testament writers frequently refer to the church as "the household," or "family," of God (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6; 10:21; 1 Pet. 2:5). In fact, while the writers of the New Testament describe the church with a variety of different images-such as a body, a bride, a nation, a priesthood, and an army-their favorite metaphor is the family.

Familial terms such as "new birth," "children of God," "brethren," "fathers," "sisters," "household," et al. are liberally punctuated throughout the New Testament documents. But as with most Divine truth, there is a vast difference between giving mere mental assent to the family nature of the church and in fleshing out its sober implications. And it is the latter that I would like to stay with throughout the rest of this chapter.

Familial Norms

In understanding the church to be the family of God, let us first wrestle with the challenging question of how a family is to live. A normal family lives under the same roof, does it not? The members of a [healthy] family take care of, spend time with,

admonish, encourage, serve, and look after one another. Families typically eat together and greet one another with affection. Interestingly, the early church incarnated all of these familial norms (Acts 2:46; Rom. 12:10,13,16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; Gal. 5:13; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14).

Is this not the picture that is before us throughout the book of Acts? Luke tells us that the early believers "were together and had everything in common" (2:44, NIV). He reports that "every day they continued to meet together" (2:46, NIV), and that "all the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions were his own, but they shared everything they had" (4:32, NIV). And why? Because the church is a family.

The sense of family and community was so high among the early believers that it has been said that the Christian network of care in the first century was the third strongest influence in the Roman empire. If you were a Christian in the first century, you would not have needed insurance. The local church was your insurance, for the brethren were Divinely called to bear the burdens of the believing community (Rom. 12:13; Gal. 6:2,9-10; Heb. 13:16; 1 John 3:17-18) and they did (Acts 6:1-7; 1 Tim. 5:2-16; Heb. 6:10). And why? Because the church IS a family.

In the early church, new converts were received with open arms. They were not ignored or treated with irrational suspicion. The children in the assembly were viewed as the children of the church, and the interests of each individual believer were regarded as the church's interests (Phil. 2:4). The early Christians looked after one another and took responsibility for each other, for they saw themselves as a shared-life community-an extended household of brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers (Mark 10:29-30). And why? Because the church is a family.

Most modern Americans do not hesitate to help their (physical) family members when they meet financial hardships. Yet how many modern Christians react in the same way when their brother or sister in the Lord meets similar financial difficulties? Do we feel a sense of familial obligation to help them, or do we feel detached from their situation? Such a disturbing question sorely tests our alleged belief that the church is indeed a family.

It is sobering to note that the early Christians were not forced to look to secular government for financial assistance. Instead, the believing community took responsibility for those who had lack (2 Cor. 8:12-15; Rom. 12:13), regarding them as "their own." In the words of Paul, the early believers saw themselves as "members one of another" (Eph. 4:25). This being so, the early Christians operated on the principle of mutual care: "He that had gathered much had nothing [left] over; and he that had gathered little had no lack." And why? Because the church is a family.

In the New Testament church, the brethren appreciated one another and relationships were paramount. Putting it in the context of modern times, if you had fellowship with a group of believers in one location and then moved to another community at a later time, the first group would not cut off relations with you. And why? Because the church is a family; moreover, the whole church is a family and not a particular section of it. When our blood relatives move away, do we stop relating to them simply because they are out of sight? How much stronger are the ties of Divine life than human blood?

Community or Corporation?

Significantly, the New Testament writers never use the imagery of a business corporation to depict the church. Unlike the institutional church, the early Christians knew nothing of spending colossal figures on building programs and projects at the expense of bearing the burdens of their brethren. Many contemporary churches have essentially become nothing more than high-powered, enterprises that bear more resemblance to General Motors than to the apostolic community. With masterful eloquence, Hal Miller writes,

"Unfortunately, the metaphor that dominates most of American Christianity doesn't help us much; we usually envision the church as a corporation. The pastor is the CEO. There are committees and boards. Evangelism is the manufacturing process by which we make our product, and sales can be charted, compared, and forecast. Of course, this manufacturing process goes on in a growth economy so that any corporation-church whose annual sales figures aren't up from last year's is in trouble. Americans are quite single-minded in their captivity to the corporation metaphor. And it isn't even Biblical." ("Church as Body, Church as Family," *Voices in the Wilderness*, May/June '89).

Regrettably, many modern Christians have succumbed to the intoxicating seductions of an individualistic, materialistic, business-oriented, consumer-driven, self-serving society. By contrast, the New Testament church did not commit itself to a "bigger-is-better," "business-as-usual" mentality. It knew nothing of a paid professional staff that held the other brethren at arms distance (only "letting their hair down" with other professionals in the same profession). Neither did it know anything of a separate caste-system where those who were elevated into positions of official authority looked down upon their fellow brethren through the artificial lenses of clerical glasses.

Instead, the leaders of the New Testament church saw themselves as mere brethren-members of the same family -- having no designations that tended toward separation. Each member, including every leader, was easily accessible to the other members. The spirit of community, personal relationship, and bonding was chief among all of the early Christians. They were intimate, interdependent, and ever growing up together into the Head. In this way, the early believers not only professed to be family, they lived as family.

In short, the church that is disclosed before us in Scripture is a loving household, not a business. It is a living organism, not an organization. It is the corporate expression of the Lord Jesus, not a religious corporation. It is the community of the King, not a well oiled, hierarchical machine. This teaching is not only found in the examples set forth in Acts, but it is peppered throughout the Pauline epistles, reaching its height in the letters of John. In the language of the apostles, the church is composed of infants, little children, brothers, sisters, young men, mothers, and fathers -- the speech and imagery of family (1 Cor. 4:15; 7:15; 1 Tim. 5:1-2; Jas. 2:15; 1 John 2:13-14).

The Simplicity of Christ

Tragically, Christianity has become something far removed from what it was in the first century. The church has become far too complex, and in many ways, it has fallen from its spiritual and heavenly position. More specifically, the church has regressed into something that better resembles a business rather than what God had intended it to be -- a close-knit community of Christ-like care and compassion that is centered in the Person of Jesus Himself. Paul's warning rings just as true today as it did in the first century:

For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a CHASTE VIRGIN to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from THE SIMPLICITY THAT IS IN CHRIST (2 Cor. 11:2-3)

Oh, the simplicity that is in Christ! A.W. Tozer has rightly put his finger on modern Christendom's obsession with power and trend toward complexity, both of which undermine the Biblical vision of the church as a family:

"Churches run toward complexity as ducks take to water. What is back of this? First, I think it arises from a natural but carnal desire on the part of a gifted minority to bring the less gifted majority to heel and get them where they will not stand in the way of their soaring ambitions. The oft-quoted (and usually misquoted) saying is true of religion as well as in politics: 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely.' The itch to have the preeminence is one disease for which no natural cure has ever been found. In all our fallen life there is a strong gravitational pull toward complexity and away from things simple and real. There seems to be a kind of sad inevitability back of our morbid urge toward spiritual suicide. Only by prophetic insight, watchful prayer and hard work can we reverse the trend and recover the departed glory." (God Tells the Man Who Cares).

How the Lord longs for His people to return to the simplicity and purity that marked the early church--a simplicity and purity that are the chief characteristic of a vibrant, loving family. Is this not the very longing that constantly yearns deep within the heart of every person--the desire to be a functioning part of a caring and accepting family? Is this not what our young people are looking for and are aimlessly replacing with gangs, nightclubs, cults, unruly fraternities, wanton sororities, superficial sexual relationships and the like?

Put plainly, a church can have the most exhilarating praise music, the greatest orators, and the best evangelistic programs, but if it is not functioning as a genuine, close-knit, serving family, then it cannot rightly be called a Biblical church! Let us always remember that love is the hallmark of the Christian ekklesia.

May the Lord help us to experience the church as a family in reality instead of in mere rhetoric alone, and may He deliver us from our American corporation mentality which has turned our local churches into social clubs, political machines, passive priesthoods, and dysfunctional families, all supporting the unbiblical notion of a clergy-laity class system.

Let us return to the New Testament reality that if we belong to Christ, then we belong to one another, And let us live as the household of God so that the words of our Savior may be fulfilled: "By this shall they know you are my disciples, if you have love one for another."

(Chapters 5-10 omitted)

XI: WHAT SHALL WE DO?

A common peril in the Christian walk is to equate a mental apprehension of truth with its practical outworking in life. If you have served the Lord for any length of time, you are no doubt aware of the subtle danger of having a truth lie sterile in your intellect, mentally grasped but not spiritually applied. Our problem is that we are rather quick to catch things in our minds while our experience lags far behind. In this regard, Russell Lipton writes,

"What we must guard against (and this applies with heaviest force to readers who do agree with this material) is mere mental assent to the church as an 'issue.' We live in a day of issues. Paul referred to issue followers as those with tingling ears. He did not treat them gently. This church, this Bride for whom Christ as a heavenly suitor bore the cross, is no mere 'issue.' Around her completion revolves issues of life, death, reward, shame, heaven, hell." (Does the Church Matter?).

Certainly, having a right perception of Divine things does not insure that we are holding them in our hands. With this thought in view, let us shift our focus to the challenging arena of practical application and implementation. After we have made a fresh appraisal of the Biblical understanding of the church, it is no less than tragic if we fail to flesh out the new light that we discover. So let me press the terse query: What shall we do?

In the previous pages we have discussed at length the need for radical renewal in the church. But the question that lies before us now deals with the Biblical means of renewal. In addressing this question, some have championed the idea of renewing the institutional church from the inside out. However, those who have sought to completely revamp the established church have met serious resistance, frustration, and sometimes persecution.

To be quite candid, unless the extra-biblical clergy/sectarian system is dismantled in a particular church, efforts to reach God's highest desire will be forcefully challenged. The following disheartening results are commonplace whenever an attempt at Biblical renewal is made within a typical institutional church: the pastor feels threatened; the congregants resist the disruption of the status quo; the staff is thrown into a panic for fear of division; and the masses misconstrue what is taking place. Before we discuss the Lord's answer to the problem of the contemporary church, let us take a brief look at some modern movements that have sought to renew it.

Shopping at a Supermall

The superstore megachurch trend is just one example of a failed attempt at fully renewing the church. These event-driven, shopping mall churches have created specialized boutiques for every sociological slice in America today -- from single parents, twelve step recoverers, homebuilders, premarital couples, parents-of-adolescents, Generation Xers to working mothers,

businessmen, actors, and dancers. Advertised by extraordinarily gifted marketers and driven by a formidable "growth-industry" mentality, megachurches attract thousands every Sunday into their enormous amphitheaters.

Using the latest church growth strategies, organizational methods, and marketing techniques, churches of this ilk are quite successful in swelling their ranks. They provide flawless multimedia worship, pep-rally like religious services, high-tech visual effects, tightly scripted gospel orations mingled with a heavy dose of comic relief, seamless choreographed drama presentations, frequent visits from featured celebrities whose clothes are always color-coordinated, and a zillion splinter interest groups designed to meet every consumer need. To top it off, megachurches offer these mass-market religious resources to the public in exchange for minimal commitment, low visibility, and little cost. Stated simply, the megachurch movement is built on a corporate business paradigm that utilizes a market-driven approach to building the kingdom of God.

Unfortunately, those believers who are attracted to these large, flashy, organized Wal-Marts of the American religious world can hardly find a place in their hearts for a simple, unextravagant meeting centered around the person of Christ alone. For them, choosing between a lavish supermall church and a "house church" is like choosing between the flamboyant supercenter mall and the corner grocery store.

The weakness endemic to the superstore church is that it so emphasizes the "church scattered" dimension of the Body of Christ that the "church gathered" dimension suffers great loss. By focusing all attention on being "sensitive" to the comfort zones of "seeking" unbelievers, most megachurches have failed to adequately disciple their new converts into radical abandonment to Christ and nurture close-knit communal relationships with other disciples. What is more, the business machinery that drives these mammoth institutions obscures the spiritually authentic and organic nature of the local assembly.

While it labors under the banner of "cultural relevancy," the supermall church bears too striking a resemblance to the shallow business structures of this age to have any profound or lasting impact on the culture. Put plainly, the modern techniques it utilizes to communicate the gospel are often just as carnal as the system from which it is supposed to deliver people. In this way, the gospel has become trivialized, commercialized, and emptied of its Power, being, viewed as just another "product" in our consumer-obsessed culture.

In a word, the megamall church of modern pop-Christian bears little similarity to the simple, Spirit-dependent, centered, spiritually dynamic, mutually-ministering churches of the first century that turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6).

Pulled Under a Wave

In addition to the superstore church, the recent "third-wave movement," and its cousin, "the restoration movement," have been two highly influential players in the renewal game. These corollary movements, populated mostly by charismatics and Pentecostals, stress the restoration of apostolic power, apostolic miracles, and apostolic ministry. For brevity sake, I will call these related movements third-wave-restoration.

While I have no quarrel with the pressing need for a genuine move of the Holy Spirit in and through the church today, most third-wave-restoration churches have put the cart before the horse. Namely, they have sought to possess the power of the Spirit before they have gone under the flesh-severing knife of the cross.

Scripturally speaking, the cross is the exclusive ground of the Holy Spirit's power. Just as Calvary preceded Pentecost, our Lord's Jordan baptism preceded the arrival of the heavenly dove, the sacrificial altar preceded the heavenly fire, and the smitten rock preceded the flowing waters at Horeb, so too the power of the Spirit finds its resting place upon the altar of a crucified life. Recall the Lord's command to Israel not to pour the sacred oil upon any flesh (Exod. 30:32). This command is an apt figure illustrating how the cross must cancel out the old creation in order for the Spirit to come and operate. In a word, the Spirit cannot work through uncrucified flesh.

The dangers of beginning with the Spirit rather than with the cross are numerous. For one thing, it can easily lead a person into an unwholesome quest for power without character, mystical experience without godliness, unrestrained soulish excitement without sound discernment, and demonic counterfeits without spiritual reality. In this regard, not a few Christians desperately seeking individual renewal are routinely packing their bags and flocking to the various "Christian Meccas" of revivalism sponsored by third-wave-restoration churches.

Because of their desperation to be touched by God, many of them have become open targets for every new wind of doctrine or experience that blows through the doors of the church, regardless of whether or not it has any Biblical merit (Eph. 4:14). In this connection, many in the third-wave have developed an unhealthy dependence upon phenomenological experience—a dependence that, like that of an addict, drives them to travel far and wide to acquire the next spiritual fix. Such a dependence not only obscures the role of Scripture as the main source of individual spiritual sustenance, discernment, and communion with the living Christ, but it equally fosters an unhealthy (and sometimes pathological) spiritual instability.

This is not to suggest that the third-wave-restoration movement has been without value to the Body of Christ. On the contrary, the movement has contributed a number of helpful Biblical accents. Most significantly, it has fostered a genuine hunger for and openness to God's moving, a sound blending of evangelical and charismatic theology, and a vast collection of wonderfully anointed worship and praise music. However, its basic flaw lies in its overemphasis on mystical experience, its tendency to put power gifts on the throne rather than Christ the Giver, and its zealous support of the modern clergy system.

Quite frankly, the pastor is king in the typical third-wave restoration church. Consequently, congregants who have been truly renewed with the new wine of the Spirit find very little freedom to fully function in their gifts during a typical church service. While third-wave-restoration churches may boast about possessing "the new wine," they have confined it to an old, leaking wineskin -- one that inhibits mutual ministry, relatedness, freedom, and vibrancy. The old wineskin that is employed merely reinforces the "sit-and-soak" mentality that plagues the Body of Christ today.

"Christian guruism" is also epidemic in third-wave-restoration churches. High-powered teachers, prophets, and apostles are copious in the movement and are revered as spiritual icons, basking in the limelight of fan-club followings. A typical renewal crusade is not dissimilar to a rock concert whereby the featured celebrity gives an encore performance and takes his bow in the limelight.

It is not uncommon, for example, for church members to arrive hours early to secure a prime seat to hear the latest circuit teacher who has come to town. In effect, the third-wave-restoration movement has so emphasized the five-fold ministry that it has rivaled and obscured the priesthood of all believers. It has stressed the extra-local ministry at the expense of the local church. And it is the latter that God has established to be the normal environment for individual spiritual nurture and nourishment. It is no wonder that those who desire the fullness of God, but do not know New Testament church life, are compelled to try anything that promises them a greater surge of renewal juice.

Regrettably, many in the third-wave-restoration movement have rushed headlong toward theological ambiguity and Biblical inconsistency. That is, they have wholeheartedly embraced a peculiar phenomenon that has little to no Biblical warrant while shrugging their shoulders at a pattern for church life that has abundant Biblical merit. Ironically, the very experience that multitudes in this movement are seeking to achieve can only be found in the New Testament church. When one tastes "Body life" as God has ordained it, they will be cured of the unbridled urge to travel "to and fro" to attend the latest "hot spot" of renewal. Instead, they will discover true and long-lasting refreshment and stability within the church of their locale.

To spin the metaphor, in seeking to ride the latest spiritual wave, many third-wave-restorationists have been caught in the undertow of a clergy-dominated ecclesiastical structure. What is more, some have been bitten by the sharks of counterfeit spiritual experience and are now drowning in the murky waters of Christian mysticism and charismatic clericalism. Regrettably, CPR cannot be successfully administered within the institutional matrix of the third-wave-restoration movement. The only hope for recovery lies in pulling the institutional plug to dispel the rising water.

Imprisoned in a Cell

Another attempt at renewal in recent years, more promising than the former two, has been the emergence of the "cell church" model. Cell churches are based on a two-winged approach to doing church. They provide a weekly "cell group" meeting (set in a home) and a Sunday "celebration" meeting (set in a building). The small cell meetings are designed for fellowship, ministry, prayer, and evangelism, while the large group meetings are designed for preaching and worship. While there is much that can be commended in the cell church movement -- especially its emphasis on close-knit connectedness, one-anothering, and Body ministry -- its greatest weakness lies in its leadership model.

Although the cell church has sought to renew the institutional church by providing a context for corporate relatedness and mutual functioning, it has left the unscriptural clergy system untouched! Endemic to cell churches is a top-heavy, hierarchical leadership structure that works against the community. Thus, "the longer leash" is an apt metaphor to describe the cell church model. That is to say, the congregation is given a measure of church life as they meet together weekly at someone's home. Yet through a highly organized hierarchy, the pastor controls the gatherings and steers them according to his own wishes. (For instance, it is not uncommon for the "ministry time" in a cell meeting to be restricted to a discussion of the pastor's latest sermon!)

Moreover, in the typical cell church, the Sunday basilica service is treated as the prominent meeting, while the smaller cell meetings are regarded as mere appendages. Despite the fact that cell church literature calls the cell "the basic unit" of the church, this is not what is ordinarily modeled. Rather, the cells chiefly serve as entry points for making the larger basilica church, to which the cells belong, increase in number. Further, each "cell group" typically shows little interest in fellowshiping with other Christians who attend a different church on Sunday morning -- even if such folks desire to be an active part of the mid-week cell meetings.

That the cell church model looks impressive on paper is beyond dispute (cell church manuals are replete with elaborate flow charts and catchy organizational graphs). However, it is found wanting in real life experience. It deserves our applause for its denunciation of "program-based" churches that find themselves mired in bureaucratic structures. But it warrants our disapproval for its blithe espousal of a rigid, multi-layered, hierarchical leadership structure. Not only does this structure undermine Biblical principle, but it makes each cell an extension of the pastor's vision and burden, thus burying the believing priesthood under layers of human hierarchy.

Accordingly, the cell church model violates the very principle it claims to uphold, i.e. that the church is an organism made up of individual "spiritual cells." In stark contrast, each "cell group" is nothing more than a facsimile of the same Body part (the single pastor), rather than a true representation of the diversified unity that marks the Body of Christ. Stated simply, the mere addition of home meetings (cells) to the clergy-dominated church structure fails to go far enough in providing a concrete expression of the full ministry of every believer and the functional Headship of Christ.

Adopting the Right Attitude

What I have said thus far is not meant to place judgment on any of God's dear people. Rather, it is meant to strike a contrast between those structures that God has sanctioned in His Word and those that He has not. It is a fact that God has used and is using the institutional church. Because of His mercy, the Lord will work through any structure as long as He can find hearts that are truly open to Him. Hence, there is no question that God is using cell, mega, and third-wave-restoration churches alike--even more so than some so-called "house churches" that have grown insular and exclusive.

However, this is not the question at hand. The Lord holds us responsible for following His Word insofar as we have heard it. Comparing ourselves with others is shaky ground for seeking His approval (2 Cor. 10:12). Thus, anything less than what God has

disclosed in Scripture concerning church practice will fall short of His full purpose for His people. I do not say this judgmentally, but soberly. The words of T. Austin-Sparks capture the tone of my spirit:

"While the sects and denominations, missions, and institutions are a departure from the Holy Spirit's original way and intention, God has undoubtedly blessed and used these in a very real way and has sovereignly done great work through faithful men and women. We thank God that it is so, and pray that every means possible of use may have His blessing upon it. This is not said in any patronizing or superior spirit: God forbid. Any reserve is only because we feel that there has been much delay, limitation, and weakness due to the departure from the first and full position of the first years of the church's life, and because of a heart-burden for a return thereto. We cannot accept the present 'disorder' as all that the Lord would or could have." (Explanation by T Austin-Sparks of the Nature and History of "This Ministry).

The Symptom Masquerading as the Cause

In order for genuine church renewal to occur, we must distinguish between the symptom and the root of the problem. Along this line, Elton Trueblood has rightly said, "The basic trouble [with the institutional church] is that the proposed cure has such a striking similarity to the disease" (The Company of the Committed). Conferences for burned-out clergy, cross-denominational unity gatherings, support groups for pastors who suffer from "sheep bite," and workshops presenting the latest church growth strategies are vivid examples of Trueblood's penetrating observation.

All of these supposed "cures" merely coddle the system that is responsible for the church's maladies. They simply treat the symptom while ignoring the real culprit, and hence, the same drama continues to play out on a different stage. It is the clergy/sectarian system that inhibits the rediscovery of face-to-face community, supplants the functional Headship of Christ, and stifles the full ministry of every believer. Thus, all attempts at renewal will be short-sighted until the clergy structure and denominational system are dismantled in a local assembly. At best, such attempts will bring limited change. At worse, they will invite open hostility.

To be blunt, the attempt to work for a true recovery of the full testimony of Jesus from the inside of an institutional church is usually a worthless exercise. Such an attempt can be likened to the dismantling of a tower from the ground. If those disassembling the tower come close to compromising the structure, the tower will fall down upon them. The only way to dismantle a tower is to proceed from the top down. And this requires that the dismantling process begin from the top. In like manner, local assemblies will never reach God's end if the clergy/denominational structure is not abandoned. Renewal movements that merely transplant Biblical principles into institutional soil will never succeed in realizing the full purpose of God. In the words of Arthur Wallis,

"A church is not fully renewed if the structures are left untouched. To have within a traditional church a live group composed of those who have received the Spirit and are beginning to move in spiritual gifts; to introduce a freer and livelier spirit into the worship with renewal songs; to permit the clapping and the lifting up of the hands and even to dance; to split the weeknight meeting into home groups for the purpose of discipling; to replace 'one-man leadership' with a team of elders--all these measures -- good though they are -- will only prove to be a patching operation. Individuals will undoubtedly be blessed. There will be an initial quickening of the church. But if it ends there, the long-term results will be detrimental. There will be a quiet struggle going on between the new measures and the old structures, and you may be sure the old structures will win in the end. The new patch will never blend in with the old garment. It will always look incongruous." (The Radical Christian).

In sum, the church will never be renewed until it recognizes that the framework within which it operates is inadequate and self-defeating. Despite the good intentions of the persons that populate it, the interior design of the institutional church sets us up for defeat. True renewal, therefore, must be radical (i.e., it must go to the root). Recovering the Lord's testimony necessitates that we forsake our ecclesiastical patches and Band-Aids.

The Call to Leave Clergy-Dominated Christianity

In this connection, we thank God for the thousands of Christians who have left their clerical professions, laid down their high powered hierarchical positions, and abandoned their sects to become simple brethren in the Lord's house. It is among such that the Lord has found a clear basis for His own building.

As would be expected, those who have left their salaried, clergy positions have paid a tremendous cost. Such a thought strikes a sensitive chord in the heart of the average paid, religious professional. For this reason many will resist such a notion, reacting in a way not dissimilar to the silversmiths of Ephesus who withstood Paul's message because it "endangered their craft" (Acts 19:24-27). Therefore, unless those in clerical positions are ready to openly examine and obey the New Testament teaching that bears upon the issue, any discussion on the matter will remain for them a highly flammable topic that can easily turn torrid.

It is critical to stress at this point that clerical leaders need not be despots in order to hinder mutual ministry. Without doubt, clergy are typically well-intentioned and gifted Christians who sincerely believe that God has "called" them to their profession. Some are highly stylized and regulated benevolent dictators. Others are spiritual tyrants with a Machiavellian quest for power who imprison and freeze the life of their assemblies.

The point is that clergy need not use vicious forms of pedagogy and authority to be injurious to Body life. The mere presence of the one-up/one-down hierarchical model of leadership suppresses mutual ministry, no matter how non-authoritarian in temperament the cleric may be. The mere presence of clergy has the deadening effect of conditioning the congregation to be passive and perpetually dependent upon its leadership. Christian Smith makes the point lucidly:

"The problem is that, regardless of what our theologies tell us about the purpose of clergy, the actual effect of the clergy profession is to make the Body of Christ lame. This happens not because clergy intend it (they usually intend the opposite) but because the objective nature of the profession inevitably turns the laity into passive receivers. The role of clergy is essentially the centralization and professionalization of the gifts of the whole Body into one person. In this way, the clergy represents Christianity's capitulation to modern society's tendency toward specialization; clergy are spiritual specialists, church specialists.

Everyone else in the church are merely 'ordinary' believers who hold 'secular' jobs where they specialize in 'non-spiritual' activities such as plumbing, teaching, or marketing. So, in effect, what ought to be accomplished in an ordinary, decentralized, non-professional manner by all church members together is instead accomplished by a single, full-time professional -- The Pastor. Since the pastor is paid to be the specialist in church operations and management, it is only logical and natural that the laity begin to assume a passive role in church. Rather than contributing their part to edify the church, they go to church as passive receivers to be edified. Rather than actively spending the time and energy to exercise their gift for the good of the Body, they sit back and let the pastor run the show." ("Church Without Clergy, " Voices in the Wilderness, Nov/Dec '88).

The average believer is probably unaware that his notion of leadership has been shaped by centuries of ecclesiastical and bureaucratic history (about 1700 years' worth!). The clergy concept is so embedded in the thinking of most modern Christians that any attempt to deviate from it will meet fierce opposition. For this reason most modern believers are just as resistant to the idea of dismantling the clergy, as are the clergy themselves. The words of Jeremiah have pertinent application: "The prophets prophesy falsely and the priests rule by their means-, and my people love to have it so" (Jer. 5:3 1). Thus, "clergy" and "non-clergy" are both responsible for the ailments of the church.

Despising Not the Day of Small Things

Recall that in the history of Israel's captivity, God had called His people out of Babylon to return to Jerusalem to build His house afresh on its original foundation. Note that while Israel was in captivity in a foreign land, she still assembled to worship God in the various synagogues spread throughout the empire. Yet the high call of God to Israel was for her to leave the comfortable homes she had erected in Babylon and return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Lord's true temple. Unfortunately, only a few Israelites were willing to pay the price of leaving the convenient worship styles to which they had grown accustomed. Consequently, only a tiny remnant returned to the land (Ezra 9:7-8; Hag. 1,14).

It is not hard to see that the call of God to Israel to return to the land and build His house foreshadowed the present cry of the Spirit to His church today. Accordingly, the burden of the prophet Haggai holds tremendous significance for us in this hour. He writes,

"Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your ceiled houses, and this house lie waste? Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts; consider your ways. Ye have sown much, and bring in little; ye eat, but ye have not enough; ye drink but ye are not filled with drink; ye clothe you, but there is none warm; and he that earneth wages earneth wages to put it into a bag with holes. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; consider your ways. Go up to the mountain, and bring wood, and BUILD THE HOUSE; and I will take pleasure in it, and I will be glorified, saith the Lord." (Hag. 1:4-8)

In view of the fact that only a small, seemingly insignificant remnant returned to Jerusalem to repair the walls of the city and rebuild God's house, the prophet Zechariah issued this challenging rebuke: "Who has despised the day of small things?" And why? Because despite the seemingly smallness of the endeavor, God was in it! In spite of the fact that most of Israel regarded the rebuilt temple to be "as nothing" in comparison to the surpassing splendor of the former temple, God was in it (Hag. 2:3)! Despite the fact that the elders of Israel wept in despair when they saw the tiny remnant lay down the unimpressive foundation, God was in it (Ezra 3:12)! From Gideon's army of 300 to Elijah's 7,000 in Israel who had "not bowed the knee to Baal"-from the Levitical priests who first entered the promised land to the hidden Annas and Simeons of our Lord's day who "looked for the consolation of Israel," -- God's most precious work has been accomplished through the small, the weak, and the unnoticed (I Cor. 1:26-29; 1 Kings 19:11-13).

"To be sure, the measure of success in the eyes of the world is tied to such natural standpoints as numbers, extent, size, weight, and the like. Yet the fact remains that the greatest things of God have been exceedingly small in the eyes of man. In this regard, George Moreshead insightfully asks, "is there another stream running even more deeply and more hiddenly these days among the members of the Body, a scattered people who are being taken into the depths of the revelation and experience of Christ in the most extreme measures of the Holy Spirit's dealings, emptying, crucifying a pioneer company which the Lord will need for the opening of the way for the remainder of the Body to follow -- perhaps some 'eleventh-hour laborers' now in the process of His producing?" (Excerpt from a personal letter to the author).

Along this same line, T. Austin-Sparks writes,

"What is called 'Christianity -- and what has come to be called 'the church' -- has become a tradition, an institution, and a system quite as fixed, rooted, and established as ever Judaism was, and it will be no less costly to change it fundamentally than was the case with Judaism. Superficial adjustments may be made -- and are being made -- but a very heavy price is attached to the change which is necessary to really solve the great problem. It may very well be, as in the time of the Lord, that the essential light will not be given to very many because God knows that they would never pay the price. It may only be a remnant -- as of old -- who will be led into God's answer because they will meet the demands at all costs." (Quoted from an unpublished manuscript authored by George Moreshead).

Let it be clear, then, that the call of God to recover the essence of New Testament church life is one that can only be met by those who begin on an entirely fresh ground, apart from the religious systems and customs that fallen men have constructed. And that ground is Christ.

But this does not answer our initial question of what we shall do. It simply clears away the brush so that we may see the field of God's purpose more plainly. While Scripture does not offer us any ready-made steps for the building of a New Testament church, I believe that there are several broad principles that are essential to any spiritual work that is seeking to recover God's fullest thought for His Body. They are

(1) A Fresh Revelation

Proverbs 29:18 says, "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint" (NIV). Before any attempt can be made to gather according to God's thought, it is imperative that we first receive a fresh vision of the church as God sees it. This vision must spring from a new seeing of the Person of Christ, for the church is none other than Christ in corporate expression. Such a "heavenly vision," as Paul called it, is indispensable to building the Lord's house (Acts 26:19). It is the clear teaching of the New Testament that the church is built upon the revelation of Jesus Himself (Matt. 16:15-18).

The revelation of Christ is the hub of everything in the spiritual path, and the whole New Testament is built upon it. It is through the revelation of the Lord Jesus that we are born again (Matt. 16:17), transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18), equipped for Christian work (Gal. 1:16), and gloriously translated in body (I John 3:2). Our whole Christian life -- from its inception to its consummation -- rests upon a continuous, full-orbed vision of the Risen Christ to our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, it is only when our hearts are captivated by and focused upon a revelation of Jesus in His splendor that we can receive a vision for the work that He has called us to do. As was the case with Moses, the tabernacle can only be built after we have been shown its pattern from above -- and that pattern is Christ. In short, we need a vision of the Lord before we can receive a vision for the Lord. Russell Lipton remarks,

"Paul prayed that the Ephesians would receive a revelation in the knowledge of Christ and have the eyes of the heart opened. This is our great need. Why has the church that Christ longs for been so misunderstood, so perverted, so opposed? It is due entirely to the blindness of we His people. Without revelation, how can you act? With revelation, you will know what to do." (Does the Church Matter?).

How we desperately need a fresh, ground-breaking, Spirit-inspired, matchless revelation of Christ and His church. Such a vision given from the heavenly throne is the very springboard for God to raise up a testimony that reflects His full thought for His beloved people. It is the necessary precondition for true renewal in the Body of Christ.

(2) A Paradigm Shift

In the language of the scientific philosopher Thomas Kuhn, we need a "paradigm shift" regarding the church before we can properly build it. That is to say, we need a new world-view regarding the meaning of Christ and His Body -- a new model for understanding the ekklesia -- a new framework for thinking about the church. Of course, the "new paradigm" that I am speaking of is not new at all. It is the paradigm that the New Testament furnishes us with.

In this regard, our day is not much different from that of Nehemiah's. In the days of Nehemiah, Israel had rediscovered the law of God after they had been without it for many years. This required that it be re-explained and re-interpreted to them. Nehemiah 8:8 says, "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." In the same way, 20th-century Christians must re-learn the language of Scripture with respect to the church. The original meaning of countless Biblical terms like "church," "minister," "pastor," "house of God," "ministry," and "fellowship" have been largely lost, thus eroding the landscape of the New Testament assembly.

What is more, these words have been invested with institutional power--a power that was foreign to those who originally penned them in the Bible. Therefore, a pressing need in the church today is the rediscovery of Biblical language. Joseph Higginbotham and Paul Patton ardently make the point:

"Let's face it: our language reflects our practice. It is hard to get people to occupy the ground of universal priesthood when we reserve the word 'minister' for people with seminary degrees and parchment paper ordination certificates. Linguistic gymnastics have changed the Christ who heads a whole and unified Body into the tribal god of a denomination or of a local church. It has to do with how we've been using the word 'church.' We seldom use it the way Christ used it. We speak of 'building a church,' when we should be saying that we are erecting a new building where Christ's people can meet. We speak of 'starting a church,' when we should speak of affirming, in a given locale, the church which Christ is already building." ("The Battle for the Body," Searching Together, Vol. 13:2).

Because most American Christians have learned to read their New Testaments through the modern lens of 20th-century institutionalism, there is an urgent need for us to rethink our entire concept of church and learn to see it afresh through the lens of the New Testament authors. Due to the influence of deeply buried assumptions that have been rarely excavated and seldom examined in the light of Scripture, modern Christianity has effectively taught us that the word "church" means a building, a denomination, or an organizational structure and that a "minister" is a special class of Christian.

Since our contemporary notion of ecclesiology has been so profoundly entrenched in man's thinking, it requires a conscious effort on our part to view the church in the way that all first-century Christians did. It demands that we rigorously plough through the thick and tangled weeds of human tradition until we unearth the virgin soil of spiritual reality. Therefore, only the necessary task of rethinking the church in its Scriptural context will enable us to distinguish between the Biblical notion of the church and the institutions today that pose as churches. In this connection, let us briefly isolate some of the differences between the Biblical and the institutional paradigms.

The Institutional Paradigm	The Biblical Paradigm
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + is sustained by a clergy system + seeks to energize the laity + renders the bulk of its congregants passive pews. + associates church with a building or a denomination that one joins + is rooted in unifying those who share a special set of customs or doctrines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + knows nothing of a clergy system + does not recognize a separate class called laity + makes all members functioning priests + affirms that people do not go to church nor join the church, but they are the church + is rooted in an unreserved fellowship with all Christians that is based upon Christ

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + thrusts "ordinary" Christians out of the holy of holies and chains them to a pew + places its priority on religious programs while keeping its congregants at arms length, insulating them from one another + spends most of its resources on building expenditures and pastor-staff salaries + operates on the basis that the pastor/priest is the functional head (while Christ is the nominal head) + enshrines and protects the clergy-dominated, program-centered system that serves as the driving machine of the organized church + builds programs to fuel the church and views people as mere cogs in the machine + encourages believers to participate institutionally + separates church (ecclesiology) from personal salvation (soteriology), 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + liberates all believers to serve as ministers in the context of a nonclerical, decentralized form of church polity + places its priority on face-to-face, shared life relationships, mutual accountability, openness, freedom, mutual service, and spiritual reality the very elements that were built into the fabric of the New Testament assembly + spends most of its resources on "the poor among you" and apostolic workers and missions + operates on the basis that Christ is the functional Head through the invisible guidance of the Holy Spirit through the believing community + shows a revulsion for the clergy system, for it quenches the sovereign exercise of the Holy Spirit (yet it lovingly embraces every Christian within that system) + builds people together to provide the momentum for the assembly + invites believers to participate relationally + forges no link between personal salvation and the church; sees the two viewing the former as a mere appendage to the latter as inextricably intertwined (hence, Scripture has it that when people were saved, they simultaneously became part of the church and immediately gathered together)
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To make the point better by someone else somewhere else, the Biblical paradigm represents "the winning back to God of things ordinary and the desacralisation of things made sacred (by human hands)." Yet because the traditional paradigm has been so entrenched in the minds of so many Christians, the mere notion of "coloring outside the lines" of this model and constructing a new matrix by which to think about the church can be quite terrifying.

The unfortunate result is that those who have not had a paradigm shift regarding the church will either ignore or oppose those churches that fail to fit into the traditional paradigm, even if it is at odds with the New Testament.

In the eyes of those who see the world through institutional glasses, unless a church meets in the "right" place (a building), has the "proper" leadership (an ordained pastor or priest), and bears the "correct" name (one that indicates a "covering"), it is not recognized as an authentic church. Instead, it is dubbed with innovative terms like "para-church," which subtly suggests that it is something less than an authentic church. So in the minds of those who have not yet grown weary of running on the program-driven treadmill of institutional "churchianity," that which is abnormal is considered normal while that which is normal is regarded as abnormal. This is the unhappy result of not basing our faith and practice upon God's Word. In making this same point, Jon Zens shows a wealth of insight saying,

"It seems to me that we have made normative that for which there is no Scriptural warrant (emphasis on one man's ministry), and we have omitted that for which there is ample Scriptural support (emphasis on one another)we have exalted that for which there is no evidence, and neglected that for which there is abundant evidence ("Building Up the Body: One Man or One Another?" Searching Together, Vol. 10:2).

In like manner, Alexander Hay laments the dilemma of the contemporary church saying,

"Tertullian found it necessary to say, 'Custom without truth is error grown old. ' There is not a little in our modern church order and practice that has no Scriptural warrant. Yet because it has long been the custom, it is accepted without question as an essential part of Divine order." (New Testament Order for Church and Missionary).

Because many modern Christians have given careless adherence to humanly-devised traditions and tightly-held paradigms regarding church structure, any new or fresh way of doing church is often viewed with unreasonable suspicion, even if it has far more Scriptural undergirding than the ill-fated traditional model.

In brief, nothing short of a paradigm shift regarding the church coupled with an impartation of fresh light from the Holy Spirit will engender Biblical renewal in the Body of Christ. Readjustments to the old wineskin, no matter how revolutionary -or radical, will only go so far. The only way to renew the institutional church is to wholly disassemble it and build something far different and far better. Put another way, the church doesn't need renewal as much as it needs replacement. The brittle wineskin of church practice and the tattered garment of ecclesiastical forms need to be exchanged, not just modified, with a new wineskin and a new garment (Luke 5:36-38). Accordingly, we need a paradigm shift (on a natural plane) and a fresh revelation of Christ and His Body (on a spiritual plane).

May the Lord deliver us from carelessly imposing our pattern of church organization upon the New Testament authors, and may we have the courage to discard our institutional baggage (or at least open our bags and inspect the luggage) so that we may learn to read Scripture with fresh eyes.

(3) Holding Fast to the Centrality and Supremacy of the Lord Jesus

The birth of a New Testament church emerges out of the labor pains of a company of people who embrace the centrality and Supremacy of Christ with utmost rigor. In order for God to fulfill His ultimate intention, He needs a people who are jealous for the exclusive Headship of His Son. Christ Himself must be the foundation and the superstructure of our corporate life, our fellowship, and our ministry (1 Cor. 2:2; 3:11; Eph. 2:20). Jesus must be the center of the church, and the local Body must be vitally linked to Him if it will live before God.

The issue of Christ's supremacy lies at the core of why the church is such a provocative and often confusing issue today. Because the church is so inextricably intertwined with Christ's sovereign Headship, the forces of darkness have waged a relentless spiritual onslaught against the children of God -- a warfare that is centered on keeping their eyes blind to the true meaning of the ekklesia. Thus, when a people begin to see the Lord on His throne, they begin to see the New Testament church--for the two are inseparably interwoven. In a word, we cannot build the Body if we fail to embrace the Head.

By the same token, if a group of people discover New Testament principles for church life without coming to grips with the demands of Christ's Headship, they will suffer great loss. Rather than meeting upon the basis of Christ, they will meet on the basis of a negative reaction--a reaction that can be likened unto a group of religious malcontents waging a "holy" crusade against institutional Christianity. The group will succumb to the false mentality that they are the only ones who are doing church correctly, and thus, the poison of pride will eventually enslave them. Fellowships that meet on this basis usually do not last long. They end up becoming inverted communities -- elitist, cloistered, and ingrown. Their meetings are characterized by the same chord of criticism against "the religious system," and they eventually die for lack of positive vision.

(4) Counting the Cost

In expressing his willingness to strenuously deny himself in order for God to obtain a dwelling place, King David said,

I will not enter my house or go to my bed--I will allow no sleep to my eyes, no slumber to my eyelids, till I find a place for the Lord, a DWELLING for the Mighty One of Jacob. (Ps. 132:3-5, NIV)

The Lord will never birth a fresh expression of His Body in our midst if we are not willing to pay the price that is attached to it. Among other things, this means that we must refuse to compare ourselves with other Christians and measure our success by their standards. The peril of ancient Israel rested in its proclivity to follow the multitudes that surrounded it. By contrast, we must learn to connect our obedience to what God has revealed to our own hearts through Scripture, not to what the rest of His people are doing. In Exodus 23:2, the Lord warned Israel about the peril of following after the multitudes. This warning still holds good for us today.

If God has shown us the church, He holds us responsible for obeying what we have seen. And nothing short of implicit and unreserved obedience to the heavenly vision will provide the proper context for the Spirit to raise up a local expression of the Body. Unfortunately, not a few Christians who are familiar with the New Testament teaching on the church have side-stepped their responsibility to obey Scripture. The trite excuse: "God will sort out the problem of the church someday; I'm just going to support the institutional churches until something big happens" summarizes the common thinking on this subject.

This fatalistic mentality is the enemy's clever scheme to conceal our rebellion. It is also a profound intellectual failure, for it is far easier to take refuge in the true but irrelevant conviction that God will sort it all out in the end than to do the hard work of discovering and obeying the Lord's will. It is not dissimilar to saying, "I will not obey until I see others obeying." Truly, to hold such an attitude is to court the displeasure of the Lord.

Those who are willing to obey God's Word at any cost may take comfort in the fact that thousands of believers across the globe have removed themselves from the man-made religious structures of our time and have returned to the ground of Christ alone for their corporate life. Yet even if there were only a handful of such ones who had launched out to meet according to New Testament lines, should this dissuade us from what the Spirit has uncovered to our own hearts?

Make no mistake about it, there is a price to pay in obeying the Lord's prescribed way for the church. You will have to reckon with being misunderstood by those who have wholeheartedly embraced institutional, spectator Christianity. You will bear the marks of the cross and die a thousand deaths in the process of being built together with other believers in close-knit, interpersonal relationships. You will have to grow accustomed to the messiness that is part and parcel of relational Christianity and abandon the artificial neatness afforded by the organized church.

You will no longer share the comforts of being a passive spectator, but will learn the self-emptying lessons of becoming a responsible, serving member of a functioning Body. You will have to go against the harsh grain of what one writer calls "the seven last words of the church" (we never did it that way before) and incur the disfavor of the religious majority for refusing to be controlled by the tyranny of the status quo. Finally, you will incite the severest assaults of the adversary in his attempt to snuff out that which represents the living testimony of Jesus in a company of people. But regardless of the suffering that follows those who take the road less traveled and meet in primitive simplicity around the Lord Jesus alone, the glorious benefits of living in Body life far outweigh the costs.

In sum, unless we are a crucified people, there can be no true expression of the church. It is a settled spiritual principle that the church issues from the cross. Just as the altar preceded the house in the Old Testament order, so too the cross always precedes the church. It is for this reason that not a few churches that have set out to emulate New Testament principles have seen short lives. Thus, whenever a company of believers begins to make "New Testament church order" its focus for gathering instead of Jesus and fails to go under the cross corporately, it immediately loses the Headship of Christ and finds itself in the death throes of disintegration.

Holding fast to the Headship of Jesus in a living way coupled with a perpetual self-emptying for the sake of the brethren are the essential elements that will enable a church to stand in the midst of the severest testing. Thus, without the practical working of the cross in the lives of the believers, New Testament church life becomes no more than a far-reaching ideal. Indeed, the Lord

builds on broken lives, and His house is constituted out of conflict (I Chron. 26:27). "Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore," for it is only there that we may find the Savior (Heb. 13:13, NIV).

(5) Travailing Prayer

Finally, and most importantly, we need to learn to touch the throne of God with travailing prayer. The first church was born by a group of 120 disciples who had devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 1:13-15). New Testament expressions of the Body of Christ are formed in the same way, i.e. by entering into the Lord's travail. Ideally, believers who enter into this travail will seek the help of an itinerant apostolic worker (or "church planter") who will lay the foundation for the new church. That the first-century church was built through apostolic ministry is also a New Testament pattern. (I deal with how a NT-styled church is born in other publications.)

We must never forget that the church is organic. Thus it cannot be constructed by the hasty impulses of the natural man. The birthing of the church requires the kind of travailing prayer that marked the lives of Nehemiah and Daniel. It was only when these men entered into prayerful travail over the present disorder in which they lived that God was faithful to bring others to stand by them and fulfill the vision He had deposited within their hearts (Neh. 1-2; Dan. 9-10).

Prayer, then, is a critical feature for receiving the power of the Spirit—a power that is necessary for birthing and nurturing a local expression of the Body of Christ. The church is not made with the hands of human clay, but by the breath of the Eternal Spirit. Recall how the temple of old was built without the sound of earthly machinery (I Kings 6:7). This incident establishes a crucial principle. Namely, that the church of Jesus Christ can never be formed by the toil and sweat of the natural man; it must be birthed from heaven. In the words of Russell Lipton,

"It is only by the Holy Spirit that the church is built, not by the cleverness of our schemes and plans and committees and campaigns. We are often too clever to admit that we depend on our own strength rather than on the Holy Spirit, but we do." (Does the Church Matter?).

Therefore, if we are willing to be deeply involved in the battle locally for those elements that reflect God's end and God's way for the church, He will be faithful to respond. Paul's prescription for church building sums it up rather nicely: "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). In this light, John W. Kennedy remarks,

"The extent to which God can use us to the establishing of the church is the extent of our subjection to Him, and our freedom from the bonds of tradition and other human entanglements which would hinder His working. Then the church will not need to be cajoled into existence. The Spirit Himself will bring to birth the urge that brings an assembly into being, erecting a building, or establishing the observance of the Lord's Table or a certain mode of gathering has never yet made a church. Without a burning vision of the Lord's way, and the urge of the Spirit to obey, any pattern will remain but an empty sham." (Secret of His Purpose).

A Final Call

We live in an hour in which the Spirit of God is beckoning His people to see and fulfill His ultimate intention regarding the church of Jesus Christ. This intention rests upon forming a people who are filled with the new wine of the Spirit for the single purpose of fitting them into a suited Bride for the pleasure of God's blessed Son. Yet within this context, God is summoning His people to re-examine the old wineskin of church practice. Thus, the need of the hour is for the Lord to raise up multitudes of those in the spirit of the sons of Issachar who "had understanding of the times and knew what Israel [God's people] ought to do" (I Chron. 12:32). In this vein, George Moreshead explains,

"In these times when doing (even if doing for God and for His glory) has so largely eclipsed the Biblical emphasis on, and the priority of being and becoming, it would seem to be equally necessary and important to have those with the spiritual understanding and discernment to know what the New Testament 'Israel' ought both to do and not to do! How then can there be anything to rival, as the primary need of the present time, the raising up of those who see from heaven—believers of exceptional spiritual stature and a Spirit-taught understanding of this time, for the building up of the Body of Christ to the measure of Christ's fullness? How else can the 'old men' of the new 'Israel' join in with their younger brethren in the song of victory and the shout of success over God's completed house?" ("Understanding the Times," unpublished article—slightly paraphrased).

In closing, I trust that what I have attempted to set forth in this book will provoke my readers to no longer dilute the wine of spiritual life and confine it into old wineskins. May the Lord radically transform our hearts by a fresh unveiling of the Holy Spirit in showing us a fuller Christ, enabling us to capture the vision ignited by the New Testament church. And may we allow the sweet wine of the Spirit to pour through us so mightily that the wineskins of our making -- which have obscured the Headship of Jesus and disarmed the believing priesthood -- would burst beyond recovery. My closing prayer is that God would raise up countless local expressions of dynamic spiritual life all across the globe—expressions that live simply and serve sacrificially for the realization of His eternal purpose.

The Lord help us to rethink the wineskin.

(References cited above are listed in the book).