

The Church in the New Testament

A young lady (Miss A) was instrumental in leading her friend (Miss B) to Christ. Miss B, who knew that Miss A met with local believers, asked when the service began and how long it lasted. ‘It began the moment you were converted’, came the reply, ‘and it never ends’.¹

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This is the cardinal chapter of my book. To give it its proper title: ‘The *ekklēsia* in the new covenant’.

We need to define ‘a church’, and do so scripturally. Of course, when I say ‘define’, and define ‘scripturally’, we must bear in mind that Scripture is not a mathematical, scientific or legal textbook: it does not define doctrine in the same way as such volumes might define, say, Pythagoras’ Theorem or Simple Harmonic Motion. Rather, when we define something from Scripture we have to use the principle of deduction. Take justification by faith alone through Christ alone on the basis of grace alone. While there is no simple text which states as much, we can – and must – deduce the doctrine from the arguments of Scripture.

The same goes for ‘church’.

Let us start with some negatives.

It is easy to say what a church is not. It is not only easy to say what a church is not; it is essential to do so. It is not a building. It is not a denomination. It is not a national

¹ I have taken the liberty of ‘improving’ the following: A stranger attended a Quaker meeting. After sitting for ten minutes in silence, he asked his neighbour when ‘the service’ would begin. ‘Right after the meeting is over’, he was told (see Donald F. Durnbaugh: *The Believers’ Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism*, Herald Press, Scottsdale, 1985, pp264-265).

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organisation. It is not an international conglomerate. While many talk in such terms, Scripture never does.

So much for negatives. Positively, Scripture speaks of ‘the church’ in two ways.

First, it shows us that ‘the church’ is the entire body of the elect (Eph. 1:22; 5:23-27; Col. 1:24; Heb. 12:23); but this is not what concerns us here.

Second, and what *is* central to our present concern, Scripture speaks of ‘a church’ in terms of a local group of believers – saints – who are committed to one another,² believers who have engaged themselves to mutually encourage one another³ to live in obedience to the law of Christ, as befits those who belong to the people who are known as the *ekklēsia*, ‘the called-out ones’.⁴ A ‘saint’, in brief, is one who is separated from the world by the Spirit – he is positionally ‘sanctified’ in Christ, and is being progressively ‘sanctified’.⁵

That churches are made up of saints, and only saints, separated from the world, is clear from the way the apostles addressed their letters – to ‘saints’ (Rom. 1:7; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1), to ‘the *ekklēsia*’ (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1), to ‘the churches (*ekklēsia*)’ (Gal. 1:2), to ‘the saints and faithful brothers in Christ which are at Colosse’ (Col. 1:2), to ‘God’s elect, strangers (exiles) in the world’ (1 Pet. 1:1), to ‘those who through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours’ (2 Pet. 1:1), to ‘those who have been called’ (Jude 1), and to ‘the seven churches (*ekklēsia*)’ (Rev. 1:4).

² An *ad hoc* group of believers is not ‘a church’.

³ There are 59 examples of ‘one another’ in Scripture, showing its vital importance to *ekklēsia* life.

⁴ See, for instance, my *Battle; Infant; Relationship; Pastor; The Priesthood*.

⁵ See my *Positional; Fivefold*.

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That the local *ekklēsia* is a united body of believers engaged in mutual edification is clear from Paul's extended statement to the Corinthians:

Just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say: 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say: 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand: 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet: 'I have no need of you'. On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church... (1 Cor. 12:12-31).

In the rest of this chapter, I will develop the vital consequences of all this, but for now I want to stress several key factors. The church – the *ekklēsia* – is a body of believers, for believers, and believers only, believers who are committed to each other, separate from the world, dedicated to Christ in order to glorify and serve God in their mutual edification of each other, and in doing good to one another.

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First, a little more about this vital matter of ‘separation’.

The church is separate from the world

The great divide among men is between believers and unbelievers. As John told believers:

We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power (or under the sway) of the evil one (1 John 5:19).

This he had surely learned from Christ’s great prayer as Mediator, when he said to his Father:

I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word... I am praying for them. I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them [that is, separate them unto holiness] in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world (John 17:6-18).

This separation must be maintained! Under the law of Christ in the new covenant – as for Israel in the old covenant under the Mosaic law (Ex. 23:20-33; 33:16; 34:11-16; Lev. 18:30; 20:24,26; Josh. 23:1-16, for instance) – it is a key requirement laid upon the *ekklēsia* by God (2 Cor. 6:14 –

7:1). In the old covenant, the law was ‘the dividing wall of hostility’ between Jew and Gentile. Christ has broken down that wall, making ‘in himself one new man’ – the *ekklēsia* – so that believers ‘are no longer strangers and aliens, but... fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God’. As such, they are separated from the world and separated unto Christ to form ‘a holy temple in the Lord’ (Eph. 2:11-22).

In light of this, and since they can say that Christ ‘gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father’ (Gal. 1:4), and that ‘he has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son’ (Col. 1:13), believers know they cannot possibly mingle the *ekklēsia* with the world. It must be anathema to them! So it is.

Consequently, according to the New Testament, the gatherings of the *ekklēsia* are not designed for open ‘attendance’ by the world, nor did the early believers think of them in that way.⁶ They certainly did not set out to attract unbelievers into ‘church attendance’. In the proper sense of the word, they knew that they, as believers, were ‘exclusive’, and that their assemblies were meant to be kept ‘exclusive’ – for believers only.⁷

Unbelievers might occasionally come into the meeting. While James (Jas. 2:2) seems to speak of this, Paul certainly pictures it when he tells the Corinthians how they should conduct themselves, bearing in mind that such people might be present. Leaving aside the extraordinary, the abiding principle is clear: talking of ‘... an outsider... if, therefore, the whole church comes together... and outsiders or unbelievers enter...’ (1 Cor. 14:16-17,23-25), this is how you should

⁶ See my *Relationship; Gadfly*.

⁷ Of course, the dependants of believers would be present, and, on occasion, some unbelievers might be there. See Appendix 5: ‘Gospel Preaching in Church: Eight Reasons’ in my *Relationship*.

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behave. Even so, the idea that those who belong to the *ekklēsia* would encourage – actively seek to attract – unbelievers into ‘church attendance’ is utterly at variance with what he says here. Moreover, the notion that believers would think of tinkering with the *ekklēsia* to make it acceptable to pagans, is preposterous. How different today! ‘Church’ is for everyone! How else can we evangelise them? What can we do to attract them? And so on.

Indeed, we know that in those pre-Christendom days, pagans did not think ‘church comfortable’, or think it fashionable or fun to ‘go to church’; to be a believer meant you were a freak, and liable to ostracism, privations and persecution – it cost you, and how (Rev. 2:3,7,9-11,13,17,19,26; 3:8-12, for instance)! This meant that pagans were somewhat chary, to say the least, of being associated with believers:

None of the rest dared join them [that is, the believers, the *ekklēsia*], but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women (Acts 5:13-14).⁸

None of this means that believers did not take every opportunity to talk to unbelievers (Acts 8:4; 17:17), even to preach (in the usual sense of the word) the gospel to them, wanting them to be converted. Any suggestion to the contrary is ludicrous; the history of Acts puts that beyond doubt. What the early church did not do, however, was to throw open its spiritual doors to unbelievers to attend their assemblies as an *ekklēsia*. As Acts shows, the first believers did not have ‘services’ – with prayers, hymns and all the rest – to which unbelievers were invited and took part in. Not at all! While they would take every opportunity to address the ungodly with the gospel, they never dreamt of combining this with the inward life of the *ekklēsia*.⁹ The distinction

⁸ Yes, the people respected them (Acts 2:47; 4:21), but not to the extent that the separating barrier was broken down.

⁹ See my *Gadfly*.

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between the *ekklēsia* and the world was maintained at all times.

So much for ‘separation’ – for now.

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Having established that the *ekklēsia* is for believers, and believers only, there are two further issues which need to be explored in this matter of ‘church’ – place and purpose, the where and why of their assembly. Both are extremely important,¹⁰ but since, in this present work, I am concerned with ‘purpose’, I will be (fairly) brief in my comments about ‘place’.

The church is not a place, a building; it is a company of believers in spiritual unity

Let me confirm that when talking about ‘church’ the building is irrelevant; it is the people.

Take Romans 16:5, where Paul urges his readers to:

...greet also the church that meets in [Priscilla and Aquila’s] home.

Is Paul speaking of a holy space within the couple’s dwelling? Of course not! He is speaking of the believers who meet there.

Consider the apostle’s words to the Corinthians:

The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church that meets in their home, send you hearty greetings in the Lord (1 Cor. 16:19).

Can buildings send greetings? As before, Paul is not thinking of ‘a sanctuary’ within a dwelling, but of the believers who gather in that home – ‘the church that meets in their home’.

¹⁰ I have dealt with both in earlier works. See ‘The Place of “Place” in the New Covenant’ in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume 8; The Priesthood*.

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The same goes for:

Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her home (Col. 4:15).

And:

To Philemon our beloved fellow-worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow-soldier, and the church that meets in your home (Philem. 1-2).

And then we have the following (the merest sample of such passages):

Great fear came upon the whole church (Acts 5:11).

Saul was ravaging the church, and entering house after house, he dragged off men and women and committed them to prison (Acts 8:3).

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes: To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:1-3).

Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God (1 Cor. 10:32).

I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God (1 Cor. 15:9).

Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:23-27).

The New Testament never once calls a building 'a church'; never!

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Are we to understand that when Paul, speaking of the qualifications required by an elder, asks: ‘If someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?’ (1 Tim. 3:5), he wants us to choose a man who can keep ‘the sanctuary’ in good repair, one who can unblock the drains, and fix the broken window blinds? He is, of course, thinking of the governance of the believers, not the fabric of a non-existent building.

When Paul tells Timothy ‘how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth’ (1 Tim. 3:15), he is not concerned about a believer’s decorum in ‘the sanctuary’. And does anybody think the truth is supported by ‘a sacred building’?

As for ‘the house of God’, it is believers – and believers only – who can say: ‘We are [God’s] house’ (Heb. 3:6). No building can make such a claim! ‘It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?’ (1 Pet. 4:17). God does not begin his judgment in ‘a church’, ‘a sacred building’, but starts by judging his own people first.

Take 1 Corinthians 11:18,20,33-34; 14:4-35.¹¹ We do not read of believers ‘going to church’ to have ‘a service’, but of

¹¹ In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, 21 verses contain the word ‘church’, 13 of them being in chapters 11-14. Incidentally, contrary to popular belief, 1 Cor. 11 is not primarily about head covering and the Lord’s supper, but about the *ekklesia* – especially abuses of the *ekklesia*. Take the words of Paul on the supper which he wrote just previous to that chapter: ‘The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’ (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Alongside that we have 1 Cor. 11:27,29. Do not miss Paul’s play on words here – a favourite device of his – to combine the concepts of Christ’s physical body and his spiritual body – the *ekklesia*. See Gordon

believers ‘coming together as a church’, ‘assembling as a church’. There is a world of difference between the two. Sadly, the AV (KJV),¹² which still holds sway in some quarters, leaves the unsuspecting reader to come to a mistaken conclusion, one which has very serious consequences: ‘When you come together in the church...’ (1 Cor. 11:18). From this mistranslation, such a reader can so easily – and quite erroneously – think that Paul is talking about people gathering in ‘a holy place’, ‘a sanctuary’, ‘a church’: ‘When you meet in the church...’, or ‘in a church’. Nothing could be further from the truth! I am glad to record that the NKJV rectifies the mistranslation: ‘When you come together as a church...’ (1 Cor. 11:18). Literally, we should read: ‘Indeed for of-together-coming of you in the out-called’. Clearly, the apostle is speaking of ‘a church’, yes, but he is speaking in terms, not of a place or building, but of the people, the *ekklēsia*, the called-out ones. The place is irrelevant; it is the people, the spirit in which they gather, and the purpose for which they gather, which counts. ‘When you assemble (wherever that may be, it does not matter; it is the people) as the called-out ones...’. When he says: ‘Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed [such and such] in the church...’ (1 Cor. 12:27-28), he does not mean that God made this appointment in a building; rather, God has raised up gifted people from among the believers.

In short, the church is not a building or place, but the people.¹³ I have, no doubt, overegged the pudding, but I

D.Fee’s comments (Gordon D.Fee: *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, reprinted 1991).

¹² See my *Battle for King James’* insistence that the translators of the new version of the Bible retain the ecclesiastical words. Whether deliberately or not, on this occasion they certainly kept to their master’s *diktat*, with heavy consequences, alas.

¹³ As I have already noted, in earlier works I have said far more on this matter of ‘place’. See my *New-Covenant Articles Volume 8; The Priesthood*.

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remain unrepentant: although it is so clearly written in the New Testament that the church is not a building, and should never be described or thought of in that way, it is so often – almost invariably – so described. This is far from being a trivial mistake.

Now for the other issue – the one which is far more important for my present purpose; namely, the purpose of the believers' assembly. Why are believers to assemble? To observe something? To listen? Just to be there, to say they have gone 'to church' to have 'a service'? Or what?

The purpose of assembly

Separation of the *ekklēsia* from the world is not an end in itself. Rather, believers who are committed to each other assemble as a local *ekklēsia* to do what believers in union with each other – and only believers in union with each other – can do as spiritual members of the body of Christ, each one playing a full part, exercising his/her gift as one of the priesthood of all believers. This is the function and role of the meetings of the *ekklēsia*.

Furthermore, in Scripture believers are not only commanded to do this, but to think how they can do it better:

Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day [that is, the trying day, especially the day of judgment]¹⁴ drawing near (Heb. 10:24-25).

This passage – key in this debate – is one of the most misused and misunderstood in all Scripture. How often it is quoted by those who insist that believers should 'go to church' to 'attend a church service', when it has nothing – nothing whatsoever – to say on the matter! The fact is, in those early days there was no church to go to, and there were

¹⁴ I base this explanatory interpolation on the context which follows; namely, 'a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire... punishment' for the ungodly.

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no 'church services' to attend! Indeed, far from supporting the call to 'attend church' for 'a church service', Hebrews 10:24-25, properly read and understood, is a huge nail in the coffin of 'church attendance' for 'a service' as we know it!

As always, it is vital to set the passage in its proper context:

Brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near (Heb. 10:19-25).

Let us clear the decks.

When the writer speaks of the great priest of God in the new covenant, he is referring to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to no one else.¹⁵

When he talks about 'holy places', he does not mean sacred buildings; he means 'the presence of God'. He is not saying that believers 'go to church', 'a holy place', but that

¹⁵ This must be the most obvious of remarks. I make it because Rome has virtually replaced Christ by his so-called vicar, the pope. Alas, not a few non-Romanists think too highly of 'ministers'. J.C.Ryle felt it necessary to say: 'We must be very careful that we do not insensibly give to ministers a place and an honour which do not belong to them: we must never allow them to come between ourselves and Christ... They are not mediators who can undertake to manage our soul's affairs with God... Let us never forget these things. Such cautions are always useful: human nature would always rather lean on a visible minister, than an invisible Christ' (J.C.Ryle: *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels (Matthew)*, James Clarke & Co. Ltd., London, 1954, pp299-300).

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believers are able to enter – have the right to enter – and do enter into the presence of God, and do so freely, with confidence.¹⁶

‘The house of God’ is not a building; it is the body of believers assembled in spiritual unity.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews could not be more explicit in Hebrews 10:24-25. Clearly, he is not encouraging believers to go to a physical place, ‘a place of worship’, a so-called ‘house of God’; as we have seen, there is no such place according to the new covenant. No! The writer wants believers to assemble with their fellow-saints who are spiritually united, conscious of the presence of God – Christ himself being present (Matt. 18:20) – in order to engage in the mutual ministry of the priesthood of all believers as members of the body of Christ. This is the express purpose of their gathering – so that they might encourage, stiffen, and put backbone into each other, especially in the testing days leading to the final judgment. In short, believers in union with each other must assemble in order to encourage or edify one another.

Let me stress the point. Today, ‘to encourage’ is commonly taken to mean ‘to compliment, praise, or be nice to, be sweet to, or cheer up, to egg on’. But ‘to encourage’ in its biblical sense – *parakaleo* – is far, far richer. It has the thought of ‘to instruct, exhort, warn, rebuke, strengthen, admonish, implore, even to the extent of saying things the other does not want to hear (1 Cor. 14:24-25; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:12), and all for each other’s edification’.

Note the use of ‘one another’ in Hebrews 10:24-25; it appears twice: ‘Let us consider how to stir up *one another* to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*’. Saints assemble not *merely* (do not miss the emphasis) to listen to

¹⁶ See previous note. This, too, may seem too obvious to state, but I fear it is not.

one man delivering a monologue, giving them yet more and more facts, but to engage in mutual, spiritual encouragement or edification. Moreover, this is something active, not passive; it involves speaking, teaching; and doing so, as it were, horizontally, not merely downwardly from pulpit (or platform) to pew (or easy chair).

This, of course, does not in any way rule out preaching as it is commonly understood – far from it, hence my use and stress of ‘merely’ – but Hebrews 10:24-25 goes far deeper and wider than that. Nevertheless, it definitely includes it. We know (Eph. 4:7-16) that elders should train the saints to nurture themselves and then one another.¹⁷

The stated ministry, I stress, is designed by Christ, not to produce a spoon-fed dependency, but to produce believers able to edify themselves and, above all, edify each other. Note Romans 1:11-12; 15:14 where Paul – the apostle – wanted to visit Rome to be a blessing to the Romans, yes, *but because they would also be a blessing to him*: ‘I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong – that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith... My brothers... you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another’. Why, even in the context of Romans 15:16,¹⁸ note the apostle’s emphasis on the all-body ministry (Rom. 15:14-17; not forgetting Rom. 12:3-8).

We can only experience the manifestation of the spiritual priesthood within the local assemblies of God’s people – in each particular *ekklēsia*, in every separate *ekklēsia*. This is what Christ intended and set up, and why. Every believer, therefore, has a privileged part, an essential part, to play in

¹⁷ See my *Pastor*.

¹⁸ ‘On some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God’ (Rom. 15:15-16). On the apostle’s use of ‘priestly’ here, see my *Pastor; The Priesthood; Laying*.

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this local expression of the communal ‘priesthood of *all* believers’ – each believer being a living stone in the temple and, at the same time, one of the priests sacrificing within that temple. What is more, each believer is at the same time part of the sacrifice (Rom. 12:1). And all of it is ‘living’ – ‘living’ stones, a ‘living’ sacrifice, in the temple of the ‘living’ God, the *ekklēsia* of the ‘living’ God, in the city of the ‘living’ God, serving the ‘living’ and true God, all through a new and ‘living’ way, founded on Christ the ‘living’ stone (Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Thess. 1:9; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 10:20; 12:22; 1 Pet. 2:4-5). Living! We are not talking about a mechanical organisation, an institution, but an organism, a living body. And ‘the priesthood of all believers’ plays an integral part, a vital part, a ‘living’ part, in it all. This concept of *ekklēsia* life is written large across the New Testament; namely, the total involvement of believers in glorifying God in the mutual edification of each other. Christ stipulates that *all* his people must be wholly involved in it all. I am not suggesting that all are able to address a congregation, but no child of God is without some ability to pass on a word of experience, encouragement, instruction, comfort, reproof... to a fellow-believer.

Let me emphasise all this from Scripture – and how rich it is on the subject:

For as we have many members in one body, but all members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives... I... am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another (Rom. 12:3-8; 15:14).

I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by him in all utterance and all

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knowledge... so that you come short in no gift... There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all... God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as he pleased (1 Cor. 1:4-7; 12:1-31, especially 4-7,18; see also 1 Cor. 14:1-40).

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling-place of God in the Spirit... To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift... for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ... from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love... Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers... Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God (Eph. 2:19-22; 4:7-16,29; 5:18-21).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:16-17).

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Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing (1 Thess. 5:11).

As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious. Coming to him as a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion for ever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 2:2-5; 4:10-11).

You, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh (Jude 20-23).

Is this not proof enough?

Thus, each believer is given grace for ‘mutual edification’ (Rom. 14:19), to be able to ‘edify another’, to be ‘competent to instruct one another’ (Rom. 15:14), to be ‘able... to admonish one another’, to ‘encourage each other’ (1 Thess. 4:18), to ‘comfort one another’, to ‘encourage one another and build each other up’ (1 Thess. 5:11), to ‘comfort each other, and edify one another’, to ‘warn... encourage... help’ (1 Thess. 5:14), to ‘warn... comfort... uphold’ fellow-believers.¹⁹

If I may pick just one verse from the above, may I stress: ‘Therefore comfort *each other* and edify *one another*, just as *in fact you also are doing*’ (1 Thess. 5:11)? Could Paul say this to the majority of believers in the majority of churches

¹⁹ See also Rom. 15:2; 1 Cor. 14:3-5,26; 2 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 4:25-29.

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today? I especially note the ‘just as you also are doing’. I am not talking about mere theory; ‘just as you also are doing’. Not ‘just as you used to do’; not ‘just as you once did’; not ‘just as you would like to do’. But ‘just as you also *are* doing’. This is the New Testament *ekklēsia* that Christ set up!²⁰

Even in their singing, the stress is still on the mutual edification of believers, all of them engaged in teaching each other by word, by speaking. The emphasis is certainly not on the music, whether instrumental or vocal! Nor is it that the majority watch and listen to a handful of (semi or fully professional) singers. All sing, and all must sing – and with edification in mind. If not, it becomes a performance, a performance which can so easily descend into an entertainment. And in the singing, the words – the doctrine – must be paramount. In this way, and only in this way, does singing lead to the glory of God. As Paul, addressing all the believers at Ephesus stated:

Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (Eph. 5:18-21).

Similarly, addressing all the believers at Colosse, the apostle stated:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:16-17).

In the words of Hebrews 10:24-25, all the saints – not just a handful – are to think how they might improve their contribution to this mutual stirring up and encouragement –

²⁰ See my *Pastor; The Priesthood*.

putting backbone into each other: ‘Let us – the writer and his readers, all of them – consider how...’. Do not mistake the writer’s use of ‘let us’. There is nothing weak about this phrase; it does not represent a piece of cheery, wishful thinking on the part of the writer, hoping to jolly his readers along, but it has all the force of a command. Moreover, since the writer had in mind the coming day – the judgment day – then it obviously follows – with the passage of nearly 2000 years – that this command must be even more pressing for us than for his original readers.

And when the writer urges his readers to ‘consider’, he means them to ‘consider closely, attentively, thoughtfully, carefully’; in other words, they must give very serious thought to this business, it is of such importance.

Of course only the Spirit can enable saints to do all this. Of course there are dangers – hence the apostolic warnings and teaching on the subject. Of course it is much safer, far easier, to fall in with Christendom’s institutional Churchianity. But which is going to rule the roost – Christendom or Scripture? And this is why God gives elders to his people – so that their loving governance of the *ekklēsia* will bring out the best in his people, educating, disciplining, caring for, nurturing them, and all to enable them to nurture themselves and one another. Hence the apostolic instructions to believers – elders and the rest – as to their respective duties and responsibilities. In the institutional system, one instruction would seem to cover it: ‘Keep attending and don’t rock the boat’.

Let Frank Viola sum it up:

The only sustaining force of the early church gathering was the life of the Holy Spirit. The early Christians were clergy-less, liturgy-less, programme-less and ritual-less. They relied entirely on the spiritual life of the individual

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members to maintain the church's existence and the quality of their gatherings.²¹

* * *

Three principles stand out when thinking about the purpose behind the assembly of believers. These three are not separate items; they stand or fall together. They govern – or should govern – the life of the *ekklēsia*. They are:

1. The *ekklēsia* is meant to be (in the right – biblical – sense of the word) exclusive; *ekklēsia* life is for believers, and believers only. Not only do we have the express command of 2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1, but exclusivity, separation, is a self-evident necessity. How can unbelievers edify saints? How can unbelievers be edified? They can't! They must be converted before they can possibly understand, appreciate and enjoy *ekklēsia* life. It is a truism – but a vital and necessary truism – to say that only when sinners have become believers can they take part in the mutual edification of *fellow*-believers.

2. Smallness of numbers is essential for *ekklēsia* life. To start with, Christ's words leave only one impression: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them' (Matt. 18:20). Then again, not only do we have the testimony of the New Testament (after the opening chapters of Acts) regarding the smallness of the assemblies of believers,²² but smallness of numbers is a self-evident necessity. Large gatherings make mutual participation impossible. Consequently, we have to rid ourselves of the notion that 'big – and bigger still – is best'. Smaller churches alone can enjoy *ekklēsia* life as it is set out in the New Testament. Large churches can put on spectacular showpieces, but that has nothing to do with the *ekklēsia*. Accommodating the apostle's words:

²¹ Frank Viola: *Re-imagining Church: Pursuing the Dream of Organic Christianity*, David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, 2008, p63.

²² See my *Relationship*.

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What fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the *ekklēsia* with Hollywood? (2 Cor. 6:14-16).

3. The *ekklēsia* is for mutual participation for edification of believers, each believer playing a full part. This is the essence of *ekklēsia* life; believers do not assemble merely to listen to a monologue – which large assemblies can cope with, and, indeed, is a fundamental aspect of their *raison d'être*.

So much for the purpose of the meetings of believers. This is what the New Testament teaches concerning the *ekklēsia*.

* * *

Finally, the question of ‘worship’ and ‘service’. Remember the illustration at the start of this chapter? ‘Service’ is 24/7.²³

One serious downside of the Christendom approach to ‘church’, ‘worship’ and ‘service’ is the blurring – if not the loss – of the biblical approach to both ‘worship’ and ‘service’. Although I have written so strongly against ‘worship’ in ‘a church service’, it does not mean that believers do not worship and serve God. Of course believers worship God; of course they serve him. The two are inextricably linked. And their assemblies play a vital role in this. But worshipping and serving God does not mean dutifully attending ‘a church service’ in ‘the house of God’. The believer worships God, serves God, 24/7, in all he thinks, says and does – as part of an *ekklēsia*, fulfilling his fully-active role within its corporate life. At least, the believer knows it is God’s revealed will that he should:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what

²³ See my opening illustration (and note) to this chapter.

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is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:1-8).

Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31).

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col. 3:17).

It could not be clearer: 'worship' is not confined to 'meetings', not even to meetings for mutual edification. God is glorified in such, of course, but the believer's worship does not cease when the meeting breaks up. As for 'service' there is no such thing as 'a service'. Believers serve and worship God by serving other believers:

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies – in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 4:8-11).

Consequently:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers (Gal. 6:10).

But this ‘doing good to all’ must not be pushed to the extent of allowing it to break the principle of exclusivity within the *ekklēsia*. Note Paul’s rider: ‘...especially to those who belong to the family of believers’. The two communities – the *ekklēsia* and the world – are separate, and while believers must engage in doing good, fundamentally this is an in-house concern. In the world, they act as salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16), but the world must not be brought into the *ekklēsia*. Yes, believers are to do good to all, but this ministry among unbelievers must be carried on outside the *ekklēsia*, while among believers it must be carried out within the *ekklēsia* (Gal. 6:10). There is a connection between the believers’ good works and evangelism. Paul saw it: ‘I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved’ (1 Cor. 10:33). When the world witnesses believers engaged in a deeds-ministry towards all men, when it sees love in action among the believers (John 13:34-35), and when it is moved to question them about it all (1 Pet. 3:13-17), it is then that the evangelism conversation starts. The notion that the church sets up schemes for unbelievers to attract them to church to evangelise them has no scriptural warrant.

* * *

In order to lead into Part 2, I wish to draw attention to a few key points to keep in mind.

1. Who should gather?
2. Why do they gather?
3. How do believers serve and worship God?

Christendom has long since ruined all three, as the churches’ reaction to this present crisis is clearly showing.