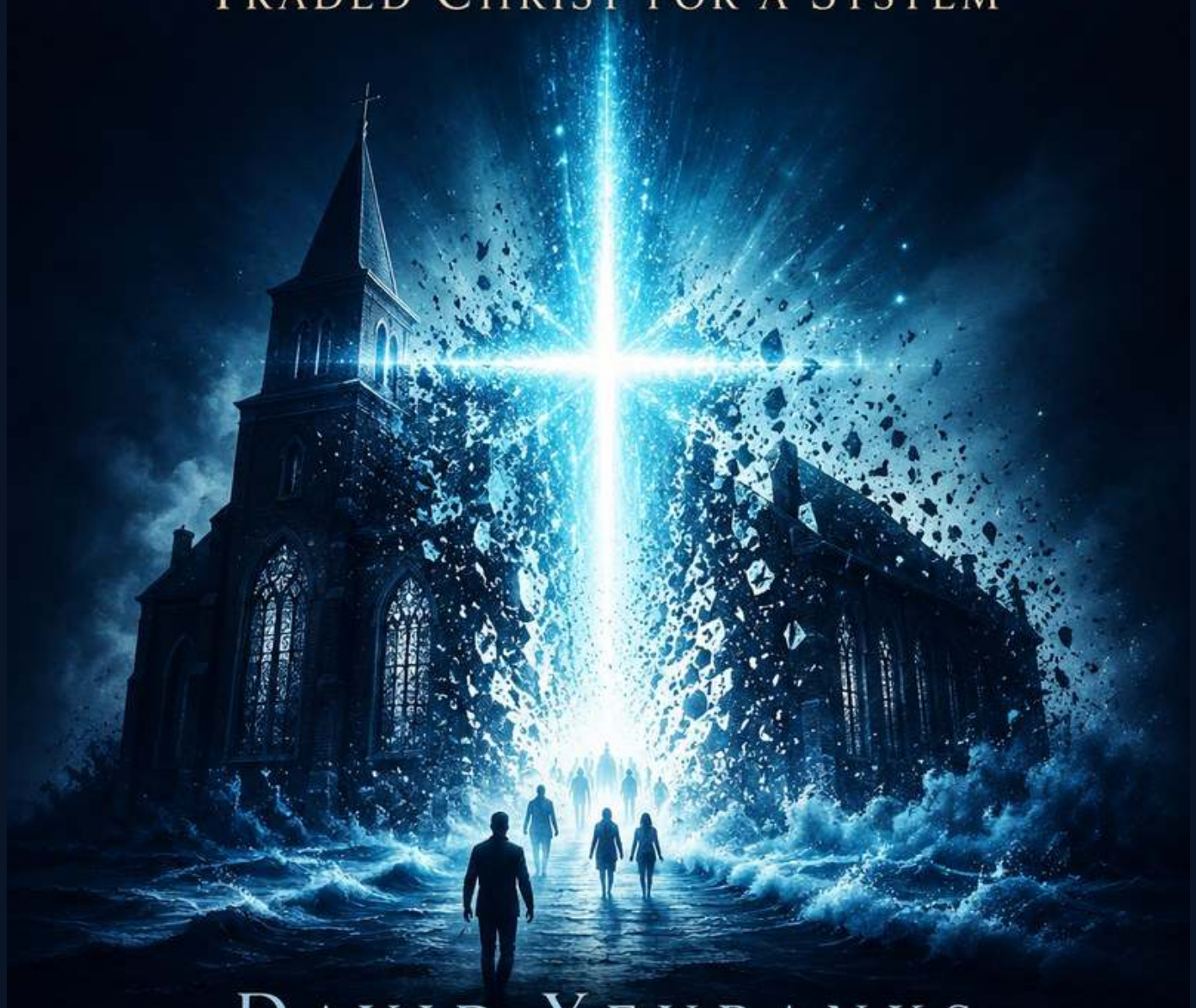
Modern Churchianity

How the Church Traded Christ for a System



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What is “churchianity”? Is this even a real word? Sure, why not? ;) Ok, maybe you won’t find this word in the dictionary (yet), but the concept is very much a reality. My point here is to make emphasis of how the modern institutional church system has, for the most part, attempted to replace Christianity with its own brand of organized religion. This subtle deception has taken more than 1,700 years to develop and permeate society and typical Christian thought, but develop well it has… So well, in fact, that even some of the greatest ministry personalities of our time have made the mistake of thinking that Christianity and organized religion are one and the same… but they are not. What’s wrong with organized religion you say? Did you suppose that’s what Christianity was all about? Did you suppose that its origins are biblical? And what’s the big deal anyway? Does it really matter if the Lord’s people are more “organizationally” or “institutionally” minded than they are “relationally” minded? If these questions describe your sincere hope to understand the answers… and even if these questions spark some contention with my opening statements, or perhaps your confusion and/or curiosity, I’d like to invite you to take a brief look at biblical and early Christian history with me here as well as compare this to the modern product I call the “institutional church.”

First, some definition may be in order here. By “institutional church” I essentially have in mind the modern day church system (which is largely identified by its buildings (i.e. religious institutions), denominational and clergy designations, programs, static routines and Sunday services - and the mission to advance the building of such organizations and structures as frequently and in as many places as possible). In other words, it is “Christianity” as most of the world recognizes it - a religious institution or a system comprised of religious institutions. Real, biblical Christianity (in this author’s perspective) is something far more simplistic and organic; it is a global, spiritual community of believers in Jesus who find their identity in HIM (not in meeting places, programs, denominational titles, and religious rituals). This is not to say it is wrong for Christians to meet in a building, but buildings and programs should never be the focus for they do not define, embody or validate true Christianity as the Scripture teaches it. Often times I may also use certain terms interchangeably. For example: institutional church, church, the system, etc. I hope you will get a feel for how I used these words in the context of my message here as you read.

One does not have to look far to realize that Christianity today (what I prefer to call “Churchianity”) actually looks very little like what we have read about in the Scriptures. The biggest deception of all being that the Church (i.e. the Body of Christ) and organized religion are one and the same thing. My friends, they are not! And there is also, what I see, to be great evidence that today’s well-oiled religious machine is not really helping the cause of Christ

anyway - but, more often than not, hindering it and distracting from it. Sure it boasts its share of statistics to convince and impress the masses that this must be God's tool to evangelize the world and mature the body of Christ - but what about the other statistics most church folks don't often hear about? They are mind-blowing and should bring every church-attending Christian to his knees in repentance and prayer for God to come shake us to remove all that displeases Him and distracts us from what is important. People, 1.6 billion of them, are going to hell while the institutional church system keeps stuffing itself full, catering to its own selfish desires.

The World Christian Trends report (by David Barrett & Todd Johnson of the William Carey Library) remark that "some 250 of the 300 largest international Christian organizations regularly mislead the Christian public by publishing demonstrably incorrect or falsified progress statistics ." These are statistics which are generally used to manipulate church members in matters of giving money or to think that they are accomplishing great things for Christ while they (in reality) continue to remain largely passive and still build up their little religious kingdoms (denominations & churches) and stuff themselves fat with all manner of comforts that have, really, nothing to do with true Christianity. It becomes an excuse (a means of self-deception actually) to keep doing business as usual and feel good about it, thinking they are doing God service, while ignoring that all is not well in Zion.

The same report also stated that "annual church embezzlements by top custodians exceed the entire cost of all foreign missions worldwide"! The report accounts that $16 BILLION PER YEAR is being ripped off by trusted church treasurers! That's a billion dollars more than the total amount spent on Christian foreign missions! In case you're thinking this is just because there are a few bad apples out there that have made a bad name for the rest of us, I would challenge that (aside from the fact that $16 billion is an awful big amount of bad apples) this probably doesn't mean that all of these church treasurers were intentionally corrupt but have found themselves trapped in a system that fosters this kind of regular behavior and so masterfully rationalizes it or gets away with it through intimidation. People sometimes deceive themselves into participating in some pretty strange things that they might otherwise reject when under the influence of organized religious concepts.

I know of people in institutional churches that were promised promotions or the threat of losing advancement in ministry ranks if they would not comply. In one church I attended some years ago, it was discovered that the pastor (who was barely a year new to the fellowship) was dipping into the building funds to give himself and his staff raises, buy himself nice cars, nice

clothes, a nice house, remodel the interior of the church building, etc. We're talking about a church organization of less than 100 people attending, spending literally tens of thousands (potentially hundreds of thousands) of dollars on these kinds of things. The treasurer (a dear woman whom loved the Lord very much) noticed inconsistencies on the books and when she confronted the pastor, she was asked to keep quiet or lose her job. She eventually resigned and shared this information that would have otherwise remained a secret.

At the time, my parents were members there (had been for 30 years) and when my father (and a few others) raised sincere questions about the spending, him and my mother and a number of their close friends were removed from fellowship there! Despite being disfellowshipped , my father continued to attend and even held prayer meetings in our home to pray for the leadership that God would convict their hearts and restore them to truth. The pastor confronted my father about these home meetings as well in an attempt to silence them. Of course, dad refused to be told what to do in his own home and the prayer meetings continued and he continued (along with the others) to show up Sunday morning for church. It got so bad they actually blocked entrance to the doors with guarding ushers who would not allow those that were ousted to return. This was about 15-16 years ago or so.

Years later I spoke with some friends that still attended there. The organization continued to spend incredible amounts of money with only a small number of people attending. They paved the church parking lot for $250,000 (apparently gravel just wasn't good enough for "the Lord's parking lot") and they painted the church building for $15,000. They also rented out one half of the building to another church that meets in that wing at the same time on Sunday. Meanwhile they were existing in a neighborhood filled with impoverished families and no community outreach. I visited a service there to see some old friends and was sickened as I listened to the pastor, standing there smiling in his expensive suit, manipulating the Scriptures to coerce giving to pay for all these expenses. And I watched in amazement as these members continued to support him and the "work" there. Sigh… And here's the even sadder part of the story, eventually the money ran out and the hireling moved on (just like Jesus said would happen - John 10). The church was reduced to members sitting in the pews literally watching a projector screen of another church's Sunday service! Eventually, the church had to sell off the additional wing and then they sold the rest of the recreational part of the property to the city to use. The church itself is completely dissolved and the building is now owned by a public school.

Some friends of mine were associate pastors in another church in the area here. Eventually they stepped down from leadership and left organized religion altogether in favor of simply

meeting in their home together with family and friends on occasion. While they were still serving at the church organization, my friends were starting to “burn out” and needed a vacation. They were instructed by the pastor’s wife to just do what she and her husband do all the time; Take a full vacation and attend at least one conference there so they could write it off as “ministry” and have the church pay the whole expense for the trip! Apparently, this was regular practice of the pastor and his wife who were frequently away attending religious conferences “for the good of the body.” And that’s merely the tip of the iceberg! And you have to understand, this pastor was a really nice guy. A very likeable guy, who knew the Bible and was a great teacher . Their church had a fantastic worship team and a really good program. No one would ever suspect corruption looking on the surface of things, but it was there, operating behind the scenes in full force.

The odd thing is, even knowing this kind of corruption was present and even considering my current disgust for how these things too often seem to plague religious groups, I still find it difficult to believe that the leadership was intentionally "evil" and I say that because I knew them and was around them often enough to be persuaded that they were good people. My heart wants to believe that they simply were caught up in a mindset and practice that the system seems to, almost naturally, lend itself to these kinds of activities. I doubt that the pastor was literally thinking, "mua-ha-ha-ha, my evil plan is working perfectly... I will take these offerings people are donating from their own hard-earned labor, and misuse it for my own selfish pleasures, bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!!!" Yeah, no, that's probably not realistic. Doesn't matter though because this is still making my point. This ungodly invention of a system regularly fosters this kind of behavior and error. It pushes attendees and pastors toward misguided practices, false concepts, and distraction that pulls their attention away from the central focus of Christ Jesus and His body.

Some other close friends of mine were members of a denomination in Alaska . I had the chance to visit this church and the pastor. The church would often have large potlucks where everyone was invited to come and fellowship. There was a really great atmosphere. The pastor, in our conversation, seemed like a sharp guy with a good heart and a sincere love for God. But apparently, the denomination was putting pressure on him to solicit the congregation for more money because the denomination was getting tired of financially carrying them after pushing them to build a formal building for meetings and programs. After a time, the financial burdens of maintaining organization caused nearly every sermon to be about giving money and paying tithes. My friends eventually left and no longer attend church but are pursuing relational, biblical Christianity in opposition to the systems of men.

I know of another church on the east coast (whose pastor fancies himself as an apostle and became good friends with the pastor of the church I used attend back in 2000 - before I left “church world” altogether) that actually teaches the congregation that you can only be a legitimate son of God if you submit yourself to an earthly “spiritual father” and faithfully attend church. One of the pastors from an associate fellowship of this group actually teaches the congregation that failure to tithe money to their church will send you straight to hell. These kinds of stories are not rare exceptions either; I could tell you many more that transpire often in a number of differing denominations.

I attended a church organization (for more than 10 years) that I never would have suspected did anything questionable concerning finances (they rarely even mentioned tithing from the pulpit) and they did plenty of apparent good on the surface (even donated $500 to my mother and gave shopping certificates after my dad died - a kind gift that we were thankful for), but when they feared that I might potentially influence others with my perspective on giving, they attempted to intimidate me behind closed doors to either align with the church’s teaching on the subject of tithing or never go anywhere in ministry there. Perhaps if I had been seeking the promotion of men, this would have persuaded me. But, thank the Lord, this was just another detail that God used to begin opening my eyes and draw me out of this corrupt system of churchianity.

I remember another occasion, traveling to one of our newly established sister churches (in another city) to help with music for the worship service. I was riding back (after the service that morning) in the car with one of the “covering” pastors (who was the head of the organization and merely helping the new church’s pastor get installed on his first Sunday). His wife was also there and she counted the money from that morning’s offering while the pastor drove (keep in mind this was the covering pastor [a.k.a. “apostle”], not the senior pastor of the new church himself). To backup just a bit, something very significant happened this particular morning at the church’s inaugural service. There were only about 30-40 people attending that service and the pastor stood before the congregation at the start of the service, weeping, sharing how he did not want to fall into the trap of just a weekly religious routine but wanted to reach out to the community (even to have worship in the parks and visit homes and what not) and he also shared how the Holy Spirit had instructed him not to burden the people with an offering. I was amazed that I was hearing all this. It was exciting. I thought, “could it be that this man has a real shepherd’s heart, who doesn’t want to just have people line pews but actually be the Church (the manifested Body of Christ) in their community?” Time would tell. Or at least it would tell if tradition held a more powerful grip on things than was being demonstrated at this

time of the apparently sincere intent of this man's heart. So, that service, he didn't take up an offering, and we moved right along with worship music. There was a hat sitting on the table in the back of the room, by the door, and by the end of service that hat was full of money! Not one plea to give and this hat was filled! I was riding in the backseat of the covering pastor's car on the way back home and his wife was counting the money and the pastor said, "so, how much did we take in?" The very phrasing of things that way struck me odd (sadly, not unlike what one thief might say to his buddy after they "pull a job"), but I sat and awaited her reply. "a thousand dollars," she said. I was shocked. No offering and all that money came in with only about 30 people present. The covering pastor replied, "not bad for a first Sunday." This nearly broke my heart. They didn't even notice this small miracle that happened that morning, where a pastor obeyed God and refused to even pass a plate and yet $1,000 came in. It appeared that, to them, this was just business as usual. Sigh. The senior pastor stuck to this conviction for the next few weeks and there were no offerings taken - yet the money continued to come in. But eventually, this changed and things returned to the traditional passing of the plate and call to give. Sigh…

Today, according to reports from attendants, that little church is struggling with only a small handful of people attending. The last I heard, from the former worship leader there, the church was not at all engaged in any type of community outreach, there's no worship services in the parks, the services are dry, and the pastor was rather discouraged and attending conferences and reading books to try and figure out how to grow the church. Things are simply "business as usual." Also, this worship leader (and his wife) were replaced by the pastor himself, because they were financially struggling and had apparently neglected to tithe during this time. Amazing!

Not so long ago I visited another church organization by request of a family member who attended there. The pastor was using a passage in Zechariah chapter 3, which was actually a very clear prophecy about Christ, and he (this pastor) manipulated the text to justify himself as the high priest of his church and all his associate ministers as priests over the congregation as well. Contrary to the Gospel, this man set himself up over the people even using a passage that plainly states that the high priest mentioned was a symbolic type of Christ. The broader context of the passage has to do with salvation and the Lord washing us clean and removing the stain of our sins. But this man completely ignored the context and used it to lift himself up over the people. This is not the first time Ive heard these kinds of concepts. In fact, probably most pastors of most institutional churches fancy themselves as some form of modern-day Levitical-type priest.

It took time for me to realize that, through allowing me to observe these kinds of things (even first hand), God was demolishing the pedestals I had been placing men on in my heart and utterly destroying my taste of contentment with organized religion and, in turn, creating a fresh passion for Him (as well as a desire to discover true body life as He intended it, not as church world had portrayed it in distorted fashion). Rather than cause me to grow bitter (though I did experience temptation in this regard at first because of the some of the things I had to work through in leaving), it made me yearn to know the truth and separate completely from the lie (of course, some institutional church folks tend to interpret any dissatisfaction with the system as being bitterness so it's tough to win with these folks either way). Some leaders warned me that if I continued down the path of examination I had started, I would likely become demented in my thinking, further deceived and may even turn from Christ. But none of this happened (though I suppose it is likely that all of this will give some of them that impression anyway, since it is critical towards a system they still espouse to be true).

Instead I became a more intent and thorough student of the Scriptures wanting to understand them for myself, not merely according to some teacher's viewpoint who stood telling me what to believe. I started to realize how many Christians are so severely ignorant about the Scriptures because they are content to have a preacher do all the studying for them rather than seeking to hear the voice of the Spirit as they study the Scriptures for themselves and learn to discern truth from error and exercise their spirit and build their faith. My Heavenly Father brought the Scriptures to life for me and I can't remember a more exciting time I ever experienced studying the Scriptures than at this time.

I also began to spend more time talking with the Lord than ever before (and not just talking, but more listening too). I started to realize that I talk too much when it comes to "prayer". Consequently, I hadn't learned to really hear or even know for sure if or when I was hearing His voice. This continues to be a process of growth for me, but it's a wonderful journey and I thank God every day the opportunity to learn to be still and know that He is God and not become so impatient or anxious and always full of so much words, but learn to just wait and let Him teach me as He ordains.

I began to understand more deeply (not merely "theologically") that the "Word of God" is not simply a book of written instructions (called "The Bible") that we're suppose to drag with us to meetings and turn to page such and such when the pastor instructs us to this or that verse, but the Word of God is literally the living Christ Himself (John 1:1; Colossians 3:16; etc.) and His Message that He gave to us and ministers to us (and through us) by His Spirit so that we might

make Him the very center of our lives and show the world truly that we are His disciples (1 John 3:18-24). This means that it's not just an "ok" idea to find out what Jesus taught and then "maybe" follow it or sit around presuming "what would Jesus do" as though we are supposed to guess, but it is absolutely ESSENTIAL to follow what He taught and what He speaks to us now by His Spirit because Jesus called His message COMMANDMENTS (John 14:15, 21) and the very WORD OF GOD! (John 5:24, 38-40; John 8:31; etc.) This is something I understood theologically, but its truth was working its way even deeper in my heart.

It is easy to see why the (religious, law-keeping, Scripture-quoting) Jews were so offended at Him; because He claimed that the words He spoke, not merely the old written Scriptures (i.e. "the letter" or "the Law of Moses") BUT HIS OWN WORDS, were the WORD of GOD! In fact, He even told the Pharisees that they would not find Him merely by searching the Scriptures, but they had to receive HIM!

> **JOHN 5:37**
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> *40 - "And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form. But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe. You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.*

Today so many institutional church folks know all kinds of aspects of the Old Testament Scriptures and many try to implement them into some kind of modernized legalistic religious practice while claiming they believe and practice the "Word of God". But I began to realize that there is a great deal more to understanding what the New Testament means when it often speaks about "the Word of God." These passages aren't written to make us expert legalists in following rules and rituals. I of course knew that "theologically", but the conviction was nailing me in a more astounding way than ever before. The New Testament is not like the Old Testament (a law etched in stone). It is not a Christianity "of the letter." We have the mind of the very Spirit of God WITHIN US, directing us, revealing to us the very thoughts and purposes of God! That is not at all to suggest that the written Scriptures are insignificant. Not at all! We would not know of these truths if it were not for them and it is those written words that keep us accountable to the truth and not deviating off into the mind of the flesh via mere human wisdom. Again, I reiterate, I am not suggesting that the Scriptures are not important. But I am suggesting that the New and Living Way of Christ is to believe and comprehend that He writes HIS LAWS (not the Old Covenant) on our hearts. HIS SPIRIT leads us into all Truth.

Christians err greatly when they pick apart the Old and New Testament and make for themselves a new “letter”; a new written Law on stones, meant simply to coerce people with external religious observation, rather than comprehending that Christ leads us (EACH ONE OF US) by instructing us through the promptings of the Holy Spirit and in accord with the doctrine that Jesus Himself preached (as is written in the New Testament) - and which eventually got Him killed!

This excited me because it caused me to not only rely even greater on the strong teaching of Scripture (particularly the Gospel of the Kingdom which Jesus preached and commanded us to also follow and preach), but it taught me to place even greater emphasis than I had before on the bold reality that the Spirit of Christ Himself (who is THE WORD OF GOD) dwells within me and I do not merely need some “teacher” or some program or ritual to instruct me how to follow Him (which is largely how the institutional church system is structured - with a constant reliance on human mediators and routine programs that teach us to “know the Lord”).

> **1 JOHN 2:26**
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> *27 - These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you. But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him.*

> **HEBREWS 8:10**
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> *11 - This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.*

> **MATTHEW 23:10**
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> *And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.*

Yes, as I left the ordered religious systems of man, I discovered that worship became more to me than a song service that lasted about 40 minutes once a week. The drudgery of singing the same stale old songs in practically routine order every Sunday morning (deceiving me to think this rote practice was “worship”) was replaced by the revelation that true worship is not a song service at all, but is represented by a life who follows the Lord in spirit and in truth.

> **JOHN 4:20, 21, 23, 24**
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> *So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?"Jesus replied,"Believe me, the time is coming when it will no longer matter whether you worship the Father here or in Jerusalem... the time is coming and is already here when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for anyone who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth.*

Suddenly the pressure of feeling that I was somehow "missing God" because I didn't attend a 40 minute song service once a week was gone. That was, in fact, an Old Covenant mindset (where "worship leaders" PERFORMED worship and the children of Israel followed in procession - because the Holy Spirit was not dwelling in each one). Of course I am not suggesting there is anything wrong with singing together with other people or even that there is anything wrong with "worship music" (though plenty of the lyrics in a lot of the songs people have sung over the years are actually quite far removed from Gospel truth - Christians are still singing songs about "going past the outer courts into the Temple and the holy of holies" and all kinds of Old Covenant concepts that have no function in the New Testament the way these songs sometimes imply.... WE ARE THE HOLY OF HOLIES - WE ARE HIS TEMPLE). I am not suggesting that worship is not also encompassed in the midst of a congregation singing songs to the Lord together. I believe that is also possible. I am just saying that the legalism and deception that rote attendance of song services in formal church meetings really has nothing to do with Christianity and there is not a shred of Scripture that commands us to engage in such things to be made right with God or to be guaranteed closer fellowship with Him. Worship services can be highly emotional, which is fine, but the problem is that many Christians can't tell the difference between emotion and "the anointing". You can sing all day, close your eyes, raise your hands, and dance your brains out and still not worship the Father in spirit and in truth! Only when we walk before Him with a life of sincerity, following the lead of His Spirit every day of the week are we able to truly worship Him. Now, for those of you still curious, when I first left regular "church" attendance, I entered into the simplicity of me with my guitar singing spontaneous songs of worship to the Lord in my room (something I was accustomed to do anyway on occasion, but engaged in far more frequently now and with greater anticipation). The intimacy involved in just singing songs directly to Jesus without anyone around was incredible. No show, no performance, no artificially-stirred emotion... Just my heart pouring out unto His. And there was no time of boasting to anyone afterwards about how wonderful

service was or how wonderful the “worship service” was. This was my relationship with Christ purely being actuated in spirit and truth.

Sharing conversation and mutual prayer with real brothers and sisters in Christ (whether over the phone, through e-mail, or in person) became so meaningful, apart from the often impersonal, shallow kind of “fellowship” common in the two-hour weekly program. Sincerity became more valuable to me than a Sunday show to make myself look “spiritual” and falsely feel righteous before others. And, to my surprise, as much as I found myself growing severely agitated with organized religion (not to mention more vocal about that agitation), I also found myself repenting for the religiousness that still flowed in my veins and manifested itself through my speech and actions. This is a process that God is still working in me, but I yield to it willingly. I suddenly began to discover, as I fled the decaying chamber of organized religion (and institutional churchianity), the true joy of walking with Christ without some human priest or system getting in the way. In many ways, a far more difficult path, but one worth the price. I love how the Message Bible quotes the following verse:

> **HEBREWS 8:11**
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> *They won’t go to school to learn about me, or buy a book called God in Five Easy Lessons. They’ll all get to know me firsthand, the little and the big, the small and the great.*

But isn’t that just what “church” has become all about? Attend services regularly, go to Sunday School, follow these 5 simple steps and you’ll become more prosperous, more anointed, closer to God, bla bla bla … The church organization deals in rules and regulations in an attempt to control external behavior and avoid sin (usualy by sidestepping the cross), but God says His New Covenant works differently:

> **HEBREWS 8:10, 12, 13**
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> *This new plan I’m making with Israel isn’t going to be written on paper, isn’t going to be chiseled in stone; This time I’m writing out the plan in them, carving it on the lining of their hearts. I’ll be their God, they’ll be my people… They’ll get to know me by being kindly forgiven, with the slate of their sins forever wiped clean. By coming up with a new plan, a new covenant between God and his people, God put the old plan on the shelf. And there it stays, gathering dust.*

> **COLOSSIANS 2:20**
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> *23 - So, then, if with Christ you've put all that pretentious and infantile religion behind you, why do you let yourselves be bullied by it? "Don't touch this! Don't taste that! Don't go near this!" Do you think things that are here today and gone tomorrow are worth that kind of attention? Such things sound impressive if said in a deep enough voice. They even give the illusion of being pious and humble and ascetic. But they're just another way of showing off, making yourselves look important.*

During my later years in "church world" I began to notice how, time and again, the Holy Spirit was treated as if he was apparently not good enough to orchestrate a meeting and move people as He willed - so that men, in their lofty positions of man-appointed hierarchical rule, orchestrated and manipulated everything. I saw how God's Spirit was constantly stifled and quenched. Emotional experience was (and is) most often mistaken for "the anointing". Put another way, we might even say that emotional experience has all but replaced the anointing (and most cannot even tell the difference). The sad truth is that church has primarily become a place of religious entertainment not mutual body edification. The problem is, it is not thought of so simply as that (as entertainment); Instead it is held to be the very order and design of God, a holy thing, and participation is expected if one is to be recognized as a legitimate Christian by others.

As people become deceived with the notion that God commands this dead routine, it's not long before they essentially become "dead" themselves in many ways; losing the joy of their salvation (have you ever noticed how a new Christian has so much excitement but it quickly fades as they are introduced to all the rules and regulations of religious organization), they lose the excitement to hear the Holy Spirit for themselves, and the freedom to live as Christ leads and follow Him with abandon. The life of the Spirit is replaced with the death of tradition, ritual, routine, rules, regulations and subservience to religious authority figures who are imposed as being mediators and spokespersons for God. The believer eventually trades his own priesthood in exchange for a system that promises to govern and mediate his relationship with God for him if all he will do is submit to it and pay his tithes. Since they have decided (having been taught by their leaders) to settle and embrace religion instead of wholly and purely Christ, they (in effect) quench His Spirit, and therefore are left with a thirst to replace the hole they've created with something else. At that time, the program takes up full residence in their heart (can you see how this is actually idolatry?). Everything becomes about building a better, more exciting program to satisfy the congregation's "needs". The most wretched deception of all is

that people convince their minds that this nicely ordered routine equals “spirituality” and makes them feel righteous before God. In this state they are easily pacified, distracted from biblical reality, controlled by their leaders and easily manipulated by heretical teachings.

People tend to become man-centered and meeting-centered rather than Christ centered. In fact, one of the most common things people seem to express in their search for a “good church” is to find one that “meets their needs.” But friend, the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ (His true royal assembly) is not about meeting your felt needs. The Church is about HIS NEED not our selfish desires for being entertained, feeling fuzzy inside, and all that. It’s not about how witty and lively the preacher is. It’s not about how good the choir sings. It’s not about how lovely the grounds are kept or how spectacular the sanctuary looks. The Church (the Ecclesia - as Scripture calls it) is the body of Christ; not a building, not a program, not a meeting. It is Christ’s royal, spiritual assembly of saints. This is why “church” as most know it today is little more than a distraction, blinding millions from the true Church (the Ecclesia), which only Christ alone can build and in whom Christ dwells.

God opened my eyes to witness many of things many people don’t see as they have become consumed with the routine as I had been myself for years. So much so that I am convinced that there is so little true spiritual good that is wrought from participation in organized religion that it would be better to leave it behind completely and follow God without those strings attached. Entertainment is fine, but entertainment is not what the Lord’s Church is all about.

So many of those in leadership in institutional churches today have been severely corrupted by a counterfeit system. They have locked in and not only believe in it, they propagate it and defend it with all their might (even if it means ostracizing others who question or refuse it). All of that to say that I’m not suggesting that all of these leaders are wrought with evil intent in every case. Even among some of those I’ve know personally in the churches I’ve been associated with, I presume that many of them started out with a pure intent to serve God and maybe some of them still have that core desire, despite whatever forms of deception they have embraced. Even among some of the more apparently corrupted leaders as I described earlier, perhaps (in their minds) they generally intended to do good - just as the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, even Paul himself when he was still one of them, believed they were the righteous leaders of the people, doing God’s will, but these acts revealed a condition of the heart, something they too had learned through years of tradition so that it had become commonplace and actually worked corruption in their thinking. Nothing about their actions were illegal, but I wanted to share this to illustrate how that statistic of $16 billion deals with fraudulent cases, not to

mention the many cases like what I described here that will never be staticised for review. Only a stubborn and ignorant man will deny that there are major problems like this present in nearly every organized system of religion. In fact, it is almost a trademark of religion. One that the world often is the first to spot. Thinking again of the Pharisees, whom the people regarded as the trustworthy religious leaders of the day, Jesus boldly pointed out the root of their evil (something that no one dared speak aloud) that they were lovers of money and loved the praise of the people; to be elevated above them and proudly walk around glorying in their titles and serving themselves while attempting to appear as holy.

How many Christians have heard pastors preach from the following verse to encourage congregations to give their fair share to the church so that God would count them trustworthy?

> **LUKE 16:10**
>
> *12 - "Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?*

Quoting a verse like this usually leads into a tithing sermon of some sort or a prosperity message (i.e. if you're not faithful in little things like tithing… you know the rest), but the really interesting part is that Jesus was talking to His disciples here (with the Pharisees right there in audience) - in other words, with the "leaders" - and not merely to the masses! He was not preparing to take up an offering either. In fact, His instruction was to remind them that, as their labors produce some kind of harvest, a good steward shares that harvest with others in need; concerning himself with storing up treasures in heaven, not for himself!

> **LUKE 16:9**
>
> *I tell you, use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. In this way, your generosity stores up a reward for you in heaven.*

It was understood that "worldly resources" generally referred to the corrupt use of money, for selfish schemes and the attitude of subservience to this system; the mindset that wealth is to be concentrated upon, even in the service of God. I think of those who believe that without expansive organized religion, the Gospel cannot be spread - these believe that God is somehow crippled without money. But here, Jesus calls His own (His disciples) to use their wealth

unselfishly and not to invest in mere temporal things but to invest in the lives of others. The Pharisees were offended at His message and began to scoff at him. He discerned their hearts and knew their secret practices and motives; that they loved money. The rest of passage records:

> **LUKE 16:13**
>
> *15 - "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.*

The KJV uses the word "mammon" instead of "money" and this is actually more accurate - not to mention a sharp and striking term for Jesus to refer to. The Greek word is "mammonas" and actually refers to the Syrian god of riches. This was the harsh connection He placed with the religious leaders who think they can serve both God and money (in harmony); In essence, they are serving a demonic spirit (operating under its influence). We ought to consider how reliant on money is the massive machine of organized religion . How many sermons have been preached with the threat that if people neglect to be faithful in giving money to the organization, then "God's work" (that organization) may have to cease operation. This is not true, however, when Christ remains at the center of all relationships in the body of Christ.

In another place, Jesus spoke in equally harsh manner concerning the propagators of organized religion in His day:

> **MATTHEW 15:7**
>
> *11 - "You hypocrites! Isaiah was prophesying about you when he said, 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far away. Their worship is a farce, for they replace God's commands with their own man-made teachings.'" Then Jesus called to the crowds and said, "Listen to what I say and try to understand. You are not defiled by what you eat; you are defiled by what you say and do.*

In other words, Jesus was saying, "Don't you know that anything that is swallowed works its way through the intestines and is finally defecated? But what comes out of the mouth gets its start in the heart. It's from the heart that we vomit up evil arguments, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, lies, and cursing. That's what pollutes. Eating or not eating certain foods,

washing or not washing your hands, following religious rules and regimens — that's neither here nor there."

> **MATTHEW 15:12**
>
> *14 - Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you realize you offended the Pharisees by what you just said?" Jesus replied, "Every plant not planted by my heavenly Father will be rooted up, so ignore them. They are blind guides leading the blind, and if one blind person guides another, they will both fall into a ditch.*

So we see how Jesus repeatedly dealt with a very similar problem in His day. Many people were swayed by some who appeared religious. He noticed how good their show was before men. They had all the right words and even demonstrated religious actions that gave an appearance of godliness. But Jesus noted the real motivations of their hearts by putting their actions in perspective. It became clear that many who claim to walk rightly before God are full of deceiving hot air and it will only lead them and those who follow them straight into a ditch.

Another institutional church that was a sister fellowship of the place I attended had a pastor who was one of the most charismatic and persuasive teachers I know of. A passionate preacher who was skilled in orating the meanings of the Greek and Hebrew texts. His sermons were bold, convicting, and often humorous. He could really stir you up and his altar calls filled the front of the sanctuary. He was the star favorite preacher at church conferences. His church had a pretty successful program too; great worship music, and great people attending. But there were a lot of problems under the surface. The pastor engaged in a number of adulterous relationships (including one with a visiting prophetess minister), which were covered up by the mother church's leadership time and again. Angered at the opposition from those who were "under" him (many of which complained that this man needed to be removed from leadership), he all but drove his own elders out (even following one of their wives home after a disagreement and attempting to intimidate her)! Eventually, the pastor resigned completely and left his wife and kids to "live in sin" with another woman. Amazingly, the covering church organization's leadership still tried to cover this up. They merely announced the reason for his leaving as having to do with a "moral failure" and called members to pray for him and his family. Moral failure? What's that? It could be just about anything!

Following the "pedestal crash" of this institutional church's star minister, the building was painted a different color, the name changed and a new pastor installed. The first time I drove by the building after the change, I thought they had sold the building to another church… until

I recognized the new pastor's name. This appeared to be an obvious attempt to dupe the community into thinking a new church had come to town (thus removing any stigma that might have still existed because of the former association). While some may reject this notion, they ought to consider the fact that this was the first of the churches in direct association with the "mother organization" that did not title itself by the same name. The whole thing appeared to be little more than a clever business tactic, employed so that the organization could save face (and, no doubt, increased financial loss).

Just try and compare any of these modern uses and abuses of the term we call "church" to that which Jesus identified as His Church (Ecclesia) that He would build Himself; the spiritual house of living stones in a singular global assembly of people He called out unto Himself, and you will certainly have to agree that there is little (if any) similarity between the two. Christians, we have bought into a grand scale deception about what "church" is. God's Word reveals there is but ONE. There are not many. The Scripture defines the word "Church" (Ecclesia - original Greek) as meaning those who have been "called out" by God into fellowship with Christ and who have been made as part of His one Body. Consider this truth as you read these next passages of Scripture and consider how opposite what God's Word says about our union together with Him is compared to what most of us have learned about "the church" (not to mention the kinds of things I have been describing as happening in various church groups all over today). Can a building be called out into fellowship with God? Can a program? Can a ritual? Can an organization? Does God save buildings, organizations, and song services with organs, pianos and drum sets? Or does He save people and draw them unto Himself? Is God building one body or many? Most Christians who attended churches think there are at least two churches; the One Church which is the body of Christ and then the other that they attend. But is Christ's body like a Siamese twin or is it ONE BODY? What does the Scripture say? The following verses even stand against most everything else man has defined as essential for the believer (in terms of our traditional, non-biblical concept of "church") and we will look at more later on in this writing. Can we look honestly at the following passages and really believe that God approves of our divisions we call "denominations" and our isolated "church vision statements" and differing facets of "faith" to the point where we divide ourselves and isolate and build "churches" as though we actually think this is God's design for His people? We will look deeper at this subject of "church" as Scripture relates to it in a moment, but for now, consider these passages and keep it in mind as you read on:

> **EPHESIANS 4:1**
>
> *6 - Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Always keep yourselves united in the Holy Spirit, and bind yourselves together with peace. We are all one body, we have the same Spirit, and we have all been called to the same glorious future. There is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and there is only one God and Father, who is over us all and in us all and living through us all.*

> **1 CORINTHIANS 1:9**
>
> *10 - God will surely do this for you, for he always does just what he says, and he is the one who invited you into this wonderful friendship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Now, dear brothers and sisters, I appeal to you by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so there won't be divisions in the church (the ecclesia). I plead with you to be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.*

Galatians 5:19 (remember, Paul said these things to Christians) - When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, your lives will produce these evil results: sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, participation in demonic activities, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group ...

Isn't it interesting that many of things I have already shared from observance of activities in a number of local institutional churches fit the list of things mentioned in the last passage of Scripture? How often have we heard these kinds of things happening in church organizations; sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, participation in demonic activities, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, the feeling that everyone is wrong except those in your own little group? Isn't it obvious that none of these things are attributes of the Church of Jesus Christ but only the product of groups who are following worldly concepts? Paul is drawing the line and making it clear! With this next statement he slams the nail in the cofin of religion and denominationalism. He clearly states that such is the activity of those who demonstrate that they do not appear to be Christians at all.

> **1 CORINTHIANS 3:4**
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> *When one of you says, "I am a follower of Paul," and another says, "I prefer Apollos," aren't you acting like those who are not Christians?*

> **1 CORINTHIANS 3:16**
>
> *23 - Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? God will bring ruin upon anyone who ruins (spoils or corrupts by any process) this temple . For God's temple is holy, and you Christians are that temple . Stop fooling yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you will have to become a fool so you can become wise by God's standards. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God . As the Scriptures say, "God catches those who think they are wise in their own cleverness." And again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are worthless." So don't take pride in following a particular leader. Everything belongs to you: Paul and Apollos and Peter; the whole world and life and death; the present and the future. Everything belongs to you, and you belong to Christ , and Christ belongs to God.*

Granted, I'm probably not going to win too many friends who disagree with me or who are offended by my assesment of the problems in these "churches" I've been associated with in the past. That matters little to me at this point. I have been careful not to name these men, in the event that they may actually repent and turn from their sin to follow the truth; however, the example of what has transpired in these places still serves to reveal an astounding truth that I am not ashamed to expose for the sake of people's eyes being opened and their hearts and minds restored to truth and full dependance on Jesus rather than the schemes of religious men. The point is the example, not merely the detail that men sin. Obviously men blow it all the time in every type of environment. The concerning difference, however, with the modern church system is that it arrogantly sets itself up as the perfect standard for all to follow, and as the principle mediator between people and God and the primary validator of Christianity. In other words, the logic goes, "if you are a real Christian, you will have to associate yourself with this system." It's important to recognize that this system holds none of the importance it demands be attributed to it in spiritual reality, but rather is wholly the invention of men and, most often, a total distraction from true Christianity. In fact, it holds no essentiality and no significance in correlation to biblical Christianity at all.

I've given you but a few examples of the kind of problems rampant in this system. But, sadly, the bad news doesn't stop there... Have you ever heard a church member, pastor or evangelist defend organized religion by saying it is essential to the effective spreading of the Gospel

throughout the world? Well, educate yourself. It may make you ill. But it may also wake us up! The World Christian Trends report states that it has been calculated that 95% - NINETY FIVE PERCENT - of all church budgets in the US are spent solely on church comforts and programs . LESS THAN 1% IS SPENT ON EVANGELISM TO THE MOST UNREACHED! 91% of all Christian outreach/evangelism does not target non-Christians but targets other Christians in already-evangelized countries or people-groups. Christians spend more on the annual audits of their churches and agencies ($810 million) than on all their workers in the non-Christian world! The percent of Christian resources in countries that are already more than 60% Christian is 99.9%. The percent spent in countries where less than half the people have EVER heard of Jesus - 0.01%. More than 90% of all Christian materials are printed in English, but only 8% of the world speaks English. It is estimated that Christians worldwide spend around $8 BILLION dollars PER YEAR going to the more than 500 conferences to TALK about missions . That's more than TWICE the total spent DOING missions. 818 unevangelized ethno linguistic peoples have never been targeted by any Christian agencies ever. Hundreds of millions have never even heard the name of Jesus!

Over 20 centuries, Christians have announced a calculated 1,500 organized plans to evangelize the world; most every one failed; 250 plans focused on AD 2000 fell massively short of their stated goals. Point of fact: ORGANIZED RELIGION IS NOT GETTING THE JOB DONE ANY BETTER! How is it that believers cannot see this? When in the book of Acts 3,000 people were saved in one day (Acts 2:41) and the total reached more than 5,000 just days later (Acts 4:4), on and on and on - so that the Bible actually records that this small rabble of persecuted, impoverished and worldly unpopular Christians turned the world upside-down in such a short period of time - how in the world can anyone think that organized religion has somehow matched, exceeded or matured beyond the humble beginnings of the early Church?

But most Christians are completely ignorant of these kinds of things. Out of the 648 million Christians who profess belief in the Great Commission, 70% of them say they have never even been told about the world's 1.6 billion unevangelized individuals (spread across 38 different countries). This points to the fact that the majority of institutional churches are internally focused and, despite whatever speech they make on occasion about supporting missions and the heart of the Lord to take His Gospel to the nations, actions speak louder than words.

As for divisions (something the Bible expressly forbids there being in the body of Christ), currently there are over 33,000 "Christian" denominations in the United States ! THIRTY THREE THOUSAND!!! That may even be a conservative figure. Compare this to the fact that

there is no teaching in all of Scripture to “denominate” the body of Christ. And consider this, out of these thousands of denominations of faithful church-attending folks out there, 78 countries each have Great Commission Christians whose personal incomes exceed US$1 billion a year. US Christians control TRILLIONS in assets while at any given time 200,000,000 Brothers and Sisters starve. Again, I ask you, does it not seem obvious that organized religion is not any help to the body of Christ, except to divide her, drain her resources, and distract her people from simple devotion to the Lordship of Jesus?

Again, even despite all of these statistics, the bottom line at stake here is not about what church you attend or what style of meeting with other Christians you think is most beneficial, but it is simply whether Christ is remaining central in our lives and that we are walking a true path of sincerity in our relationships with God and other people.

God certainly has all of us on a unique path to bring each of us into the place where He desires us. Each of us must live true to our convictions, true to our comprehension of the Word of Christ, and true to the way we discern that God is leading us in (after Him). To do anything less would merely be the practice of dead religion and insincerity. The Scripture teaches us that God is looking for those who will worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24), and as I remember my pastor friend, Colin, once saying in a message he gave, “truth is the function of freedom.” If we will live in the truth, God’s truth, we will walk in true freedom. So we have these two things that must walk hand in hand; truth and freedom - and God desires both for His sons and daughters. God is interested in absolute sincerity before Him and that no one rob us of our freedom and confidence in Him. These things (not religion) are what is essential in th Christian life!

> **JOHN 8:36**
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> *So if the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free.*

> **2 CORINTHIANS 3:17**
>
> *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.*

> **GALATIANS 2:4**
>
> *6 - This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. As for those who seemed to be important—whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance—those men added nothing to my message.*

> **GALATIANS 5:1**
>
> *It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*

> **EPHESIANS 3:12**
>
> *In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.*

> **JOHN 8:31**
>
> *32 - To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*

> **JOHN 18:37**
>
> *You are a king, then!"said Pilate. Jesus answered,"You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*

> **ROMANS 1:17**
>
> *18 - For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness*

> **1 CORINTHIANS 13:6**
>
> *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.*

> **GALATIANS 5:6**
>
> *10 - For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough." I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be.*

> **1 TIMOTHY 6:3**
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> *9 - If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.*

> **2 TIMOTHY 4:3**
>
> *5 - For the time will come when they will not take the true teaching; but, moved by their desires, they will get for themselves a great number of teachers for the pleasure of hearing them; And shutting their ears to what is true, will be turned away to belief in foolish stories. But be self-controlled in all things, do without comfort, go on preaching the good news, completing the work which has been given you to do.*

> **GALATIANS 4:30**
>
> *31 - There is a Scripture that tells us what to do: "Expel the slave mother with her son, for the slave son will not inherit with the free son." Isn't that conclusive? We are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.*

Obviously, God desires that His children live free, walking in the truth, and not bound and fettered by anything. When Christ truly becomes the Lord of our hearts, we will listen to Him and we will know the truth and walk continually in that freedom. Organized religion often looks pleasing and good in the sight of man, but it becomes a stench in the nostrils of God

when it sets itself between the Creator and His creation. It becomes a chain around the neck when it attempts to legislate and dictate morality, when it defines righteousness apart from the finished work of Christ, and when it suggests that it has some role to play in a person's salvation and maintenance of their intimate relationship with Jesus. The big problem is that organized religion actually tends to drown out the voice of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life by taking His place (albeit ever so subtly in the beginning). Many Christians are so addicted to organized religion that they do not realize this is transpiring and they become slaves to religion. The most deeply "religious" often see liberty and truth as the greatest threats to religion and indeed they are. It is for these reasons that I submit to the reader my opinion; that organized religion is largely anti-Christ in nature - because it seeks to place itself in a position of mediation between the believer and his/her Lord. It seeks to speak on behalf of (even in place of) the Holy Spirit. It also attempts to work conviction and correction (often through guilt and manipulation) rather than leaving these works to the Spirit of God. It attempts to provide counsel and comfort, guidance and direction through its scheduled programs, creeds, rules and regulations, which have been wrought by the hands of religious men. It is nothing more than an obstacle to true faith and living freedom in Christ. It is as deceptive as the devil is cunning.

One problem I see today is that many Christians (particularly church-attending believers) have convinced themselves that the end justifies the means. One conservative radio talk show host I sometimes listen to, who happens to be a Jew and not a Christian, often praises the efforts of Christianity and organized religion in general because he sees the end justifying the means. While I agree that programs and religious organization can effect some positive general good in society, the simple fact is that so can many secular programs. The reality of apparent external good is not a substitute for the Gospel. If a person believes the Gospel then he must believe that it is Christ in us that effects change according to the leading of His Spirit - not by following the rules of men. Anyone can follow rules and reach a specified outcome. That does make the one following those rules right in the sight of God. In the end if we become more interested in the outcome of our own religious devices (proud of what our efforts have accomplished), then although we may look good to ourselves and appear to be effecting some positive change in society, we may miss the purpose of God altogether in the process. We may find ourselves gaining the world and losing our soul… or even worse, letting others lose their souls because we were to busy trying to follow what seemed right in our own eyes and neglected the direction of God. There is coming a day when the whole world will unite in a kind of "spiritual unity" under an anti-Christ system. It will look pleasing to the eyes of man. It will have an appearance of godliness and moral good. Many will be deceived to follow it. In fact, I believe that the world is

already being prepared for this coming deception (a deception which has already begun to permeate society and many churches). If Christians do not wake up and throw off this “end justifies the means” mentality, they will walk straight into deception and utterly miss the plan of God - and, potentially, lose their own soul in the process!

The circumstances of life we each find ourselves in will no doubt vary from one person to another and God knows just how to use those particular circumstances to lead us the way He is choosing to lead us. That way is to His plan and purpose for our lives; the way He is molding and preparing our hearts to serve Him. This is why it is our responsibility as Christian brothers and sisters to edify one another to this end and not get distracted with imposing religion on each other. I do not say that any one need follow some prescribed ritual or formula, wrought by any human design - just follow Jesus wholeheartedly! Encourage one another! Obey the truth! Live sincerely! Too often Christians impose religious things on one another, even at the expense of sincerity. The devil has used this to manipulate believers away from the truth, away from victory, and from coming into God’s full will for their lives.

My comments here are suggestions based upon my own study of the Scriptures and history and the path God is leading me along. I pray it will be of help to those who have perhaps found themselves on a similar path and who may have asked some of the same questions or perhaps have never thought to ask some of these questions before, but have been feeling a stirring inside to awake out of just being a part of some religious routine and really experience a new inspiration to pursue Christ intimately. My agitation with religiosity is not just agitation for the sake of finding something to pick on about “church world.” Jesus is my closest friend and anything that distracts believers (including myself) from that pure and simple focus of intimate relationship with Him is intolerable to me.

It is my opinion that today’s Church employs programs mostly for three reasons… One, because there is no real manifestation of the power of God operating in believer’s lives. Two, there is such little willingness to deal with individual sin and so the Church devises programs to overcome these sin-related problems by other means (i.e. deliverance programs, counseling programs, retreats, seminars, etc.). Three, many of these programs I believe are essentially devised for the principle purpose of personal “religious comfort”; to create a general perception (dare I say “deception”) of spiritual maturity, acceptance, fulfillment, accomplishment and success… In other words, a human approach and attempt to meeting a spiritual need. The practice of religion also becomes more about “our” felt needs that it does about the Lord’s needs of us. The whole arrangement amounts to a self-centered religious system where Christ

is only Lord in loose concept but, unfortunately, not generally in lived-out reality. Constantly, people's focus is placed on something else (whether it be a program or a person) besides the all-sufficiency of Christ and His Lordship. Often times churches will try to produce the appearance of godliness by organizing activity. I think this is probably not always a conscious thing, but a deceptive cycle that is constant repeated from habit.

Please note, I am not saying this is exactly the case in every single church group across the board, but for many (if not the majority) I would suggest to you that it is true. Consider how one of most the common phrases used today among believers is, "what church do you attend?" Why is not the most common question, "hey, what's the Lord doing in your life?" Can you see how the first question has the potential to immediately build a wall and separate two Christians, whereas the second question invites testimony about Christ and is an extension of relationship among brothers and sisters in Jesus (whatever other affiliations they may hold outside of the one great assembly of Christ - His body)? Why do we always place so much importance on attendance to some organization, as if attending a religious organization (i.e. a church) somehow validates a person's faith and whether or not they belong to Jesus and are growing in Him (let alone whether or not we feel ok about receiving them as a brother or sister in Christ that we would want to associate with and engage relationship with)? The sad truth I have found is that, often, this is exactly what people seem to have in mind when they ask such questions (as "where do you go to church?"). It's kind of an instant religious check-up system. And for many, this phrase will set the tone for the rest of the conversation (if there is one). If a person answers, "no where," generally the asking party will immediately have certain suspicions and/or other questions aroused (and often the perspective is a critical one). Again, this is not to say there are never exceptions to this generality, but I believe we need to take a look at the generality because it really is prevalent and I believe it only hurts the body of Christ. Christians today are constantly judging one another in the body of Christ on the basis of this this thing we call "church." Isn't it a fair statement to say that believers often set the issue of church attendance on or near the same level as salvation? It would seem so as much as we talk about it. As much as we spend all our efforts and invest so much money to build and maintain it. As much as we so often try to think of ways to convince people to come, join and attend. And as much as we sometimes shun those who choose not to. It is a very serious point to consider.

I may create an inbox full of angry e-mails for saying this, but I sincerely believe that the Church (meaning the body of Christ - especially those present within organized churches) desperately needs to come to a revelation that religion will not save her and it will not bring true revival. Religion does not equal relationship with Jesus and it is not a gage for spirituality.

It cannot save, heal, deliver or produce true godliness in a person's life. Only an unfettered relationship with the living Christ will restore the kind of passion and action that marked the early Church. My prayer is that this truth will prevail in our hearts and that we will all be so captivated with Christ we will stop being simply religious.

If you just cannot relate or agree at this point, that's ok, please don't be offended at me and please don't presume that I am disgruntled with you if you cannot agree; just keep following the Lord as you know in your heart He is leading you along and stay focused on His Word. He will bring to light in your understanding what is necessary for your own spiritual growth and development. If this is already more than you care to endure, please stop reading now because its about to get heavier. I don't presume to know where God has everyone and the way He decides to lead each one along. It may certainly be a different path than my own. That's great! Be true! Seek Jesus! Some, I believe, will readily be able to relate to these words well and my hope is that what I share here will help some to take their eyes off of "religion" and fix them solely on Christ and His perfect will for their lives. The prayer is that we all come to discover what it truly means to be the body of Christ and members of His Church.

Ultimately, my perspectives on anything are nothing more than simply that if they are not weighed against the sure Word of God as revealed in Holy Scripture and the true report of historical Christianity. I invite each one of you reading this to investigate me fully and search these things out in your Bibles and in the writings of early Church history as I will reference frequently in this article. My reference of historical Christianity is not meant to imply an authoritative prescription for Christian practice (I do not mean to suggest a formula here at all), but only to show how concepts of Christianity have changed so drastically over the centuries and how far we are in practice and manner of thinking today from those early saints who lived so closely to the apostles and Christ and held in such earnest their full teachings. I think it can be beneficial to look at early Christian history, not for direction so much as for contemplation; so that we are inspired to look again at the teachings of Christ in the Scriptures and embrace what the Lord deems as essential for our lives, even if it is not necessarily comfortable to our traditional religious ways. That is what I personally find so inspiring about the writings of early Church history - those believers were so fixated on obeying Christ and emulating Christ that nothing else took that place. It is interesting, however, to read that as the centuries passed, mindsets changed and that early passion eventually faded and we were left with religious organization more than relational Christianity. Of course there have always been exceptions. The very Reformation is evidence of that fact (and I recommend the movie Luther, released in theaters - 2003, and now available on DVD - great, inspiring story), but looking at history can

be very inspiring and convicting and I believe God can use it. Just know , I am in no way suggesting that history is in any way equivalent to the authority of Scripture. Sometimes the early Church fathers of the faith (as well as the reformers) missed it and were distracted by emerging religion. It is my desire to point out how far we have come… and I do not mean that in a positive way. So much of the Church has moved almost 180 degrees away from that simple, early passion for Jesus that marked early century Christianity. I pray we can recapture it. I believe we can! Otherwise I would not even waste the time with such an article.

One of the first obstacles, however, that must be overcome is the thinking that the Church today (with all of its ritualistic program) is somehow a "matured" version of the original Church. I have spoken with a number of church attending Christians who defend the modern system, despite its gross conflicts with Scripture, because they say the Church has grown up from infancy. In other words, when looking at the example of the early Church in Scripture they say, "that was back when the church was young, inexperienced, weak and immature… now she is older, wiser, more advanced in knowledge of the truth." Yes, people actually believe this (in fact, the last time I heard this logic expressed it was from the lips of a pastor/elder of an institutional church that I used to attend). It just astounds me how this is one place where even Bible believing Christians will reject the example of Scripture and favor today's distortion. They completely forget that Paul warned that things were going to deteriorate after his departure, not improve.

> **ACTS 20:29**
>
> *30 (NLT) - I know full well that false teachers, like vicious wolves, will come in among you after I leave, not sparing the flock. Even some of you will distort the truth in order to draw a following.*

> **2 TIMOTHY 3:13**
>
> *17 (GW) - But evil people and phony preachers will go from bad to worse as they mislead people and are themselves misled. However, continue in what you have learned and found to be true. You know who your teachers were. From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures. They have the power to give you wisdom so that you can be saved through faith in Christ Jesus. Every Scripture passage is inspired by God. All of them are useful for teaching, pointing out errors, correcting people, and training them for a life that has God's approval. They equip God's servants so that they are completely prepared to do good things.*

And just in case you think Jesus had a more positive outlook for the end of the age, consider what He told his disciples:

> **MATTHEW 24:10**
>
> *12 (NLT) - And many will turn away from me and betray and hate each other. And many false prophets will appear and will lead many people astray. Sin will be rampant everywhere, and the love of many will grow cold.*

Still we have these people running around teaching that the early Church was immature and weak because of its newness and that today, after 2,000 years of growth she is now far wiser and far less susceptible to corruption than she was back then. What a crock! What a complete lie! Part of the problem with this mindset is that it overlooks some major details. One, that the Church was not birthed as an organization or building or program, yet today that is exactly what men label the Church and organization of religion, housed in temples made with hands. The second major detail overlooked is the fact that, as we have already observed, the Church is built by Christ and the gates of hell cannot prevail against her. That was true the day He birthed it! To say the Church was inferior back then is to declare that Jesus is a feeble, inadequate, incapable Shepherd who hasnt a clue what Hes doing. Apparently, only the accumulated wisdom of man over these last 2,000 years has been able to make the Church what Christ never could accomplish in its simplicity and early purity. Can you see the subtle logic at work here? It is the logic that man knows better than God!

I think that one great way to deal with such an opinion is to take an in-depth second look at the historical Christian Church and then compare it with today's institutional church system. We should look again at what the Bible teaches and then compare the early Church's example with our own.

Contrary to what a lot of Christians today may think, "church", from a biblical perspective, doesn't mean the exact same thing most Christians understand it to mean (because of what most all of us have learned from tradition). The early Christians had no concept of the church the way we know it, for "church" wasn't even a word in use back then (by "back then" I mean the first century and early second century church), not to mention the fact that their concept of meeting together was something far more relational, simplistic, family-like and non-organizational.

In our modern English Bibles, the word "church" is supposedly translated from the Greek word "ecclesia" (Strong's #1577), which simply means: people assembled. I say "supposedly

translated" because, while most of our modern Bible translations use the word "church" in place of "ecclesia," the striking reality is that the two words are actually not synonymous and "church" is a poor translation because it is really not a translation at all. Does that statement totally shock you? It did me too the first time I discovered this, but I promise you it is wholly the truth. So, before you decide to take me out right now and stone me, please hang with me here for a few moments longer so I can explain.

There are several uses of the word "ecclesia" (a.k.a. ekklesia) in the New Testament. All of these uses have the same basic meaning but are emphasized specially according to their context. We will briefly go through these uses and then examine the word itself a little later on. The earliest societal meaning of ecclesia was merely a "public assembly" of people. Acts 19:39 refers to settling something in a lawful assembly. This describes the word's secular understanding. Secondly, in Christian use, the word means "the Lord's Assembly", or, all those who have been called out by God and joined together (assembled) in His family; the body of Christ. To put it another way, we could call this an "unassembled assembly" in the sense that it does not mean that all Christians (the entire population of them - every born again Jew and Gentile) everywhere in the world meet in the same place together (literally assembled), but that all of them belong to the same global, spiritual assembly - whether or not they are physically assembled together (hence they are an unassembled assembly). The first apparent use of this word in a Christian context was by Jesus Himself in Matthew 16:18 when He said, "…I will build My Church…" Again, it did not refer to a building or to organized religion.

John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible (re: Church) says, "by the church, is meant, not an edifice of wood, stones, &c. but an assembly, and congregation of men; …the elect of God, the general assembly and church of the first born, whose names are written in heaven; and especially such of them as were to be gathered in, and built on Christ, from among the Jews and Gentiles. The materials of this building are such, as are by nature no better, or more fit for it, than others: these stones originally lie in the same quarry with others; they are singled out, and separated from the rest, according to the sovereign will of God, by powerful and efficacious grace; and are broken and hewn by the Spirit of God, generally speaking, under the ministry of the word, and are, by him, made living stones; and being holy and spiritual persons, are built up a spiritual house: and these are the only persons which make up the true and invisible church of Christ…"

People's New Testament Commentary says, "…the church, the spiritual temple, formed of living stones, and built upon the rock. So is every confessor of Christ."

The third use of the word ecclesia also refers to “an assembly” but in context of smaller local groups of believers (who are all part of the same global, spiritual assembly - in this sense they are completely synonymous… in fact, they are exactly synonymous). Still again, the word holds no connotation of a building (i.e. a temple, cathedral, church, etc.) or a program - only an assembly. Actually, to be even more precise, it represents that members of that SINGULAR global spiritual Assembly, which is the ONE body of Christ, are gathered locally. Technically, there are not “bodies” of Christ, but only ONE BODY of Christ. This is important to keep in mind when reading the New Testament - it is a detail that is far too easily overlooked because of all the meaning that has been invested in the word “church” because of religious tradition.

For example, when reading a verse like Acts 15:41, which says (in the KJV), “And he went through Syria and Cilicia , confirming the churches.” It might rather sound like this, “And he went through Syria and Cilicia , strengthening and building up the believers assembled throughout those regions.” Or, a passage like 1 Corinthians 16:19, which says, “The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house,” might better read, “The saints who assemble together throughout the province of Asia … Aquila and Priscilla greet you affectionately in the Lord, and so do the people that meet together in their home.”

You can see, just from this example, how “assembly” paints quite a different picture in the mind than does the word “church” how we commonly understand it; as a “place” of meeting and all that goes on there, rather than placing emphasis on “those that meet” and “who they belong to.” I mean to emphasize here completely and emphatically, that this is precisely why it makes no difference whatsoever what “church” someone attends; because THERE IS ONLY ONE CHURCH - ONE BODY OF CHRIST! If you are born again, you cannot attend it - you are it! This detail cannot be overlooked! It must be confronted! I cannot “go” to church because, biblically, “church” is not some “place” that anybody can go to - In other words: I belong to only ONE BODY of Jesus Christ. I am a member of that ONE BODY. This is the ONLY “Church” that exists in the New Testament referring to believers in Christ. I cannot be a member of that body and then also another body; FOR THERE IS BUT ONE BODY! However, in our modern religious thinking, it is quite different. There is indeed that “one Church” that represents the singular, global, spiritual body of Christ (I don’t think any pastor would disagree on this point); HOWEVER, there is also “another church” that many Christians believe in just as strongly. The local, physical, man-built temple called church. You hear pastors refer to it constantly in their Sunday morning welcome speeches and sermons, saying, “welcome to the House of the Lord… let the ushers come forward to take up the offering so we may bless the

House of the Lord." Intense reference is made to this building we call "church". A building we actually invest with the title "the House of the Lord" on ZERO authority from Scripture. It is immensely evident to me, and a growing populous of believers in Christ that too many Christians today in churches all over the globe do not understand the meaning of the biblical word "ecclesia". I feel it is utterly important that we examine this and deal face to face with the truth. To ignore it only helps to keep the body of Christ lame.

Ok, well come back to ecclesia again a little bit later, but now let's talk about the origin of the word "church" and how it came to be used in place of ecclesia.

First of all, I wish to express that this discussion pertains to the actual origin of our English term and concept of "church". Our modern word "church" is actually derived from the Middle English word "chirche", which is from the Old English word "cirice". Isn't that special? (grin) Wait there's more to it than that… There is some speculation about how the word originally came into being, but many scholars believe that it comes from (or perhaps I should say "was inspired by") the Greek word "kuriakon", which is a derivative of "kuriakos". Stay with me here (the details are important)…

Kuriak os is used in the New Testament (twice) and means "of, or belonging to a lord, master, etc." In the context of Scripture, it refers more directly to something belonging "to the Lord" (examples of use: 1 Corinthians 11:20; Revelations 1:10). Prior to Christian use of the word, kuriakos was typically used to refer to things belonging to the Roman Emperor .

Kuriak on (the word scholars believe "church" is derived from), literally translated means "the lord or master of a property" and really has no religious connotation by itself; however, it has also been translated to mean "the Lord's house" (hence some scholars are under the presumption that this Greek term inspired the word "church" since church is regarded commonly as being "the Lord's house" - this is likely ascertained from other historical derivatives of the word church, such as the Scottish derivative, "kirk", and the German derivative, "kirche", etc.), but oddly enough, kuriak on is not ever once used at all in the entire New Testament! NOT ONCE! What does this mean? It means that "CHURCH" is not in the Bible (not in the original languages)! Even several dictionaries tell us that the word "church" used in the Bible probably was added because of traditional influence and comes from this Greek word "kuriakon". Then why isn't "kuriakon" in the Bible? Good question!

The words "kuriakon" and "ecclesia" are NOT synonymous! And even though some may want to take the word kuriakon into use metaphorically (i.e. the Lord's House) in reference to

believers, the problem is that, not only is kuriakon not used at all in Scripture, but it doesn't mean the same thing as ecclesia so it is completely improper to use it in its place. Simply stated: kuriakon pertains to a building, or to physical property that is in the direct control/possession of some authority figure (in early times, this would be the Roman Emperor and later the Pope - Christian use would later apply this term to their religious buildings and designate them under the Lord's name, but this was not so in the first century - the Bible NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER uses ecclesia to refer to a place of worship).

Easton 's Bible Dictionary (1897) says, "There is no clear instance of its (ecclesia) being used for a place of meeting or of worship, although in post-apostolic times it early received this meaning."

Ecclesia, by stark contrast, refers to people assembled . In a biblical context, ecclesia refers to the Lord's people (who are His body) - and bears no connotation whatsoever of an earthy building, temple or shrine . In the 16th Century, men of God like William Tyndale (Greek scholar and translator of the first printed English Bible) knew it and did not translate "ecclesia" as "church"... They (the religious leaders of his day) called him a heretic and burned him at the stake all because he translated the Scriptures from Greek and Hebrew into terms that more closely identified with their original meanings!

For example: instead of using the word "church" in his translation, Tyndale used the word "congregation" to place emphasis upon the Congregation of God who assembles ONLY under the guidance of the Holy Spirit; themselves being "the church." Tyndales emphasis was deliberate and true. It is obvious to see how this offended the religious leaders of his day, just as it probably would many of the religious leaders of our day; because Tyndale's emphasis on people being the Ecclesia of God (united on a spiritually global scale - i.e. the one Body of Christ) distracted readers from seeing organized religion, hierarchical leadership and the buildings dedicated for religious service as pertaining to and even defining the Church.

Tyndale further showed his contempt for the word "church" by using it just one time in Acts 19:37 to describe, not Christian, but pagan temples. This is interesting because the Greek word for "church" in this passage is not "ecclesia", but another Greek word, "hierosulos" (Strong's #2417), which means "a temple despoiler." This is the only occasion in Tyndale's New Testament where "church" appears. It is also the only place in the KJV where "church" is not translated from "ecclesia". This is an important detail that most Christians have no clue about. It appears that Tyndale was making a rather strong (not to mention controversial) emphasis of distinction, but his emphasis was (and is) in complete harmony with the original languages.

He was entirely correct to make this distinction because “churches”, historically (from the biblical era forward), were raised up under mostly pagan influence. I say this because the very idea to “build a church” (as in a temple) was regarded wholly as a pagan concept. The early church did not entertain any such concept as building a “church” building or a “temple” for they well understood that they were the Ecclesia of God; His royal assembly. They were the only temple Jesus dwelt in on earth as it were. They understood that the Lord’s house is a spiritual house made of living stones (1 Peter 2:5) and is fashioned by God Himself, not man (Matthew 16:18; Psalm 127:1; Acts 7:48-49; Acts 17:24; Hebrews 9:24; etc.). As a matter of fact, the early Christians were very much against erecting temples in dedication to God. Such was seen as an insult against the holy temple that God had ordained so clearly in His Word (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16). This is an amazing fact to consider when we look at how “temple/church building” is perceived today in contrast. To put it bluntly and literally: THERE ARE NO “CHURCHES” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ECCLESIA!!! THERE IS NO DIRECTIVE IN SCRIPTURE TO ATTEND ONE! THERE IS NO CALL TO BUILD ONE! A “CHURCH” IS SOMETHING CREATED BY MAN - NOT GOD!

This is important to recognize, though I will also admit that many Christians do have “the ecclesia” in mind when they use the modern word “Church”. I have the tendency to still use the word myself (generally by capitalizing the term Church) and this is precisely why a clear definition and show of contrast between the traditional use and Scriptural reference are in order. Please make note of this important distinction in this letter, for when I use the term “Church” in application to the body of Christ - I indeed mean “the Ecclesia”. All other uses of the word church are in contrast to the teaching of Scripture, for (as stated previously) there are no “churches”, per say, in Scripture - not akin to what most designate as “church” today. I hope this truth is becoming much clearer.

In early Christian times, it truly was only pagans who built temples to honor their idols and false gods… In fact, most of the pomp of religious ceremony that so many believe to be essential in church services is derived entirely from pagan concepts that influenced and corrupted the early Church. This is undisputable historical fact! It is clearly evidenced in early Christian writings (which we will observe more closely in a moment). Observe the following two comments from the book Ecclesiastical History:

“The pagans had been accustomed to numerous and splendid ceremonies from their infancy, and they saw the new religion (i.e. Christianity) destitute of temples , altars, victims, priests, and all the pomp which the pagans supposed to be the essence of religion ; for the

unenlightened persons are prone to estimate religion by what meets the eyes. To silence this accusation, the Christian leaders thought they must introduce some of the rites and ceremonies which would strike the senses of the people… .

“Before the second century was half gone, before the last of the apostles had been dead forty years, this apostate, this working of the ‘Mystery of Iniquity,’ had so largely spread over the East and the West, that it is literally true that a large part of the Christian observances and institutions, even in this century, had the aspect of the pagan mysteries” (Mosheim in Ecclesiastical History , Century 2, part 2, chapter 4, paragraph 1).

The Christians understood what it meant to “come out from among them and be separate” (2 Corinthians 6:13-18), for this is even the most essential and literal meaning, which the word “ecclesia” is derived from (its root compounds: “ek” meaning: “a calling out from” - “kaleo” meaning “to call aloud”); not only does it refer merely to an assembly of people, but it means “those called out from among.” As Christians we have been called out by God into His Assembly; His family. I personally think it is no coincidence that ecclesia has this very thought in mind. It makes perfect sense! For not only has God, in His Word, shown that we have been called out from among the world, but also the RELIGIOUS world!

The book of Hebrews talks about a separation from the old religion of Judaism and a drawing unto Christ alone. This was a hard message for the Jews to hear because Judaism was their whole life and their whole perceived connection with God. But the author places his message in no uncertain terms, “you must leave that camp and join yourself to Jesus Christ.” This message is true for everyone that would desire Salvation, whether Jew or Gentile. God called the Jews unto Salvation and He also chose to graft the Gentiles into the same tree. Christ is the vine of whom we have all be called into so that there is but one body. We do not have a city or a building on this earth that represents the Lord’s Temple . Anyone who teaches such does not teach the truth. Our “temple” is holy; it is comprised of God’s people. Our city is not of this world, so why bother with trying to build one here? It is time we look again at the early Christian believers, to see what they embraced. It is time we seek to refresh our understanding of the Ecclesia of God; that it is not defined by a building or a religious program. We must leave all that old religion behind and passionately follow Him. It may mean that we won’t be so popular among the religious community. We may be misunderstood or even rejected completely. But we can take comfort, knowing that so was Christ and we can share in His blessing because we have left all to follow Him.

> **HEBREWS 13:12**
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> *14 - That is why Jesus suffered outside the gates of Jerusalem . He suffered to make the people holy with His own blood. So we must go to Him outside the camp and endure the insults He endured. We don't have a permanent city here on earth, but we are looking for the city that we will have in the future.*

So far we have looked at only a fraction of the history that so many Christians are unaware of. There is so much about this issue that could be said. Does it amaze and frustrate anyone besides myself (considering the enormous resource of information, concerning history and the original writings of Scripture, we have available at our very fingertips) that we are still to this day using a term (i.e. church) not actually found in Scripture? A term that has been "translated" from a Greek word that is not even used once in all of Scripture (kuriakon)?

The Ecclesia of God is not built with human hands. It wasn't really until sometime after 150 A.D. that these opposing concepts began to frequently merge and the Ecclesia started to be referred to more in terms of a religious meeting place (and its religious program). The first recorded mention of ecclesia with a double-meaning (one part "the assembly" and one part "a physical building") shows up during the middle of the third century. As the terms began to change and concepts began to transform, Christians slowly started engaging in the, formerly taboo, practice of building specially designated houses of worship. About this time in history, many of the other (arguably unbiblical) concepts that are the norm today, also began to influence the Christian Church (Ecclesia). German-American theologian and church historian, Schaff , Philip (1819-1893), stated the following in his book, History of the Christian Church, Vol. 2:

"Until about the close of the second century the Christians held their worship mostly in private homes, or in desert places, at the graves of martyrs, and in the crypts of the catacombs. This arose from their poverty, their oppressed and outlawed condition, their love of silence and solitude, and their aversion to all heathen art (p. 198)."

"The first traces of special houses of worship occur in Tertullian , who speaks of"going to church", and in his contemporary, Clement of Alexandria, who mentions the double meaning of the word ecclesia. About the year 230, Alexander Severus granted the Christians the right to a place in Rome … . After the middle of the third century the building of churches began in great earnest… ." (pp. 199-200).

This “building of churches in great earnest” mentioned by Schaff , refers to what happened after the entrance of the Roman Emperor, Flavius Valerius Constantinus (or simply “Constantine”). As the Roman Empire grew and monopolized its version of Christianity, the term “church”, speaking of an edifice and the rituals attributed to it, had virtually become set in concrete. Once Emperor Constantine (312 A.D.) took power, the building-up of organized religion plowed ahead, full steam. Seeking power, dominance, wealth, and to spread his pagan beliefs, He made Christianity the legal religion of the state and plundered many of the pagan temples, confiscated their pagan treasures and deposited them into his treasury, and called the pagan priests to convert to Christianity (i.e. Catholicism) and many were made priests over Christian religious temples. Many of the pagan idols were transferred with Christian symbolism and thus massive pagan culture began to infiltrate the Christian arena. It was a brilliant scheme and IT WORKED! Constantine was a sun-worshiper prior to his conversion - however, many scholars doubt whether his conversion was sincere in light of what we have just discussed. Constantine continued to allow his pagan influences to meld themselves into Christian practice, which permitted him to propagate his personal religious persuasions by cleverly masking them with Christian icons. The online encyclopedic resource, roman-empires.net, accounts the following:

“Though despite this turn toward Christianity, Constantine remained for some years still very tolerant of the old pagan religions. Particularly the worship of the sun god was still closely related with him for some time to come. A fact which can be seen on the carvings of his triumphal Arch in Rome and on coins minted during his reign.”

Another resource titled “Roman Catholicism: Christian or Pagan” states the following:

“Prior to the time of Constantine ‘s ‘conversion,’ Christians were persecuted not so much for their profession of faith in Christ, but because they would not include pagan deities in their faith as well. Then, with Constantine ‘s emphasis on making his new-found Christianity palatable to the heathen in the Empire, the ‘Christianization’ of these pagan deities was facilitated. For example, pagan rituals and idols gradually took on Christian meanings and names and were incorporated into ‘Christian’ worship (e.g., ‘saints’ replaced the cult of pagan gods in both worship and as patrons of cities; mother/son statues were renamed Mary and Jesus; etc.), and pagan holidays were reclassified as Christian holy days (e.g., the Roman Lupercalia and the feast of purification of Isis became the Feast of the Nativity; the Saturnalia celebrations were replaced by Christmas celebrations; an ancient festival of the dead was replaced by All Souls Day, rededicated to Christian heroes [now Hallowe’en]; etc.). A

transition had occurred — instead of being persecuted for failure to worship pagan deities, Christians who did not agree with the particular orthodoxy backed by the Emperor were now persecuted in the name of Christ! 'Christianized' Rome had become the legitimate successor of pagan Rome ! This is the sad origin of the Roman Catholic Church."

Continuing with another excerpt from the same document:

"Constantine , from 312 A.D. until his death in 337, was engaged in the process of simultaneously building pagan temples and Christian churches, and was slowly turning over the reigns of his pagan priesthood to the Bishop of Rome. However, the family of Constantine did not give up the last vestige of his priesthood until after the disintegration of the Roman Empire — that being the title the emperors bore as heads of the pagan priesthood — Pontifex Maximus — a title which the popes would inherit. (The popes also inherited Constantine 's titles as the self-appointed civil head of the church — Vicar of Christ and Bishop of Bishops.)

Constantine, who imposed himself as the Vicar of Christ (literally meaning "the substitute"), making himself the "head" of the Church, also imposed his Roman-styled, top-down official rule of government in religion, this influence has (ever since) remained predominantly in tact and virtually unchallenged, even though the Scripture does not support it (e.g. Luke 22:24-27) and history shows that neither did the early Church support it, for the first few hundred years after Calvary (as we shall see in a moment in some of the early writings from the second century).

NOTE: Just for you history buffs out there (and maybe even some of you conspiracy theorists too)... There is an interesting detail regarding the subject of early institutional churches that I would like to mention here (mostly for fun). There are some who would argue that there is record of Christians engaging in the building of religious edifices as early as the latter part of the first century A.D. and that under the directive of some of the earliest Christian leaders (mentioned in the Bible). One of the most popular legends is of the Glastonbury Abbey in Britain; believed by some to be the first above-ground Christian church building in history. The Roman Catholic historian in 1120 known as William of Malmesbury attributed this ruin as the ancient building project of Joseph of Arimathea (the wealthy member of the Sanhedrin who donated his tomb for Jesus' burial). Legend continues that Philip, the apostle, sent 12 evangelists to bring the Gospel to Britain, among whom was Joseph of Arimathea. Supposedly, Joseph built the Glastonbury church around 64 A.D., which (if true) would make it the oldest known institutional church building in history. This story, however, is complete myth (part of Celtic lore), which even the official historical resource for the abbey affirms that there is no

such verifiable history to this building. In fact, most archaeologists and respectable historians believe it to have been erected as a Celtic monastery between the 4th and 5th Century! There is also some speculative evidence that the site itself was used in pagan worship rites prior to “Christian” use. Mention of the site apparently also exists in Celtic legends, full of reference to the god of the underworld, magic rituals, fairies and the like! The likelihood of this structure having any connection to apostolic intention is ludicrous at best.

When the King James Bible was published in 1611, it had been a deliberate order by an appointee of the King, named Bishop Bancroft, to refrain from translating the Greek word “ecclesia” to anything other than “church.” This is historical fact! Not only was the word “church” to be left as is and not translated into more appropriate terminology (such as Tyndale did), but the other ecclesiastical terms were to be left according to their traditional definitions as well and not according to their actual textual meanings. As a result we have a Bible translation that truly is tainted by a devious conspiracy, where men who supposed themselves to be authorities over the Lord’s Assembly tried to destroy the revelation that all God’s children are priests unto God through one High Priest; Jesus Christ. This conspiracy sought to place self-appointed leaders in mediation between men and God, usurping the authority of Christ. This conspiracy, wrought of men, sought to alter the Bible text just enough to make it appear supporting of their hierarchical rule and false authority. This conspiracy is recorded in history and anyone can do the research themselves and find it to be true.

Thanks be to God, the true Message prevailed, even through all the deceitful tactics of men. When you study the history of the Bible in translation throughout the centuries, it is easy to see why those in authority sought to hide the original languages from the common people’s understanding - for those original texts (as men like William Tyndale knew) would incriminate them completely and show their authority to be utterly false. In case you are concerned that I am saying there is a problem with your modern Bible translation, understand that a translation is not “inspired.” It is the original writings that are inspired, for they are what the apostles penned directly by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. These we can trust! I am not saying you should throw away your Bible… God forbid! But understand it is a translation and we all need to rely strong upon the voice of the Holy Spirit to reveal to us the meaning of the Scriptures as God intended them. We should trust that the Scriptures are indeed inspired by God and are profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness. We should flee all ignorance and hold fast to the truth as God reveals it to our understanding.

> **2 TIMOTHY 3:16**
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> *17 - All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right. It is God's way of preparing us in every way, fully equipped for every good thing God wants us to do.*

I hope it is becoming clearer to us all that from the earliest influence of Roman Catholicism, pagan tradition, and even facets of early Orthodox Christianity right up to the present day, "church" has been typically understood according to its traditional definition, NOT according to its biblical one! This is a large part of why I say that Christianity today is largely "Churchianity" in light of the influence it has derived from traditional, NOT biblical, teachings. We have bought into a myth that "church" is about maintaining a routine and mandatory program that God is not able to work without. We have been led to believe that this "activity" of attending church and "plugging in" to its programs is the most essential part of being a Christian. So our lives, as believers, tend to center more around this thing called "church" than it does simply around the Lord and the revelation that WE ARE HIS CHURCH (His Ecclesia; His assembly; His people)!

But what historical evidence (other than the Bible and that which we have already discussed) is there to show that the early Christians did not concern themselves with building religious edifices or thinking that such things had anything to do with Christianity? Plenty, in fact! Let's take a look at a few references from the writings of early Christian history:

"The Word, prohibiting all sacrifices and the building of temples, indicates that the Almighty is not contained in anything." - Clement of Alexandria (195 A.D.)

"We refuse to build lifeless temples to the Giver of all life... Our bodies are the temple of God . If anyone defiles the temple of God by lust or sin, he will himself be destroyed for acting impiously towards the true temple. Of all the temples spoken of in this sense, the best and most excellent was the pure and holy body of our Savior Jesus Christ... He said to them, 'destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it again. This He said of the temple of His body.'... When they reproach us for not deeming it necessary to worship the divine Being by raising lifeless temples, we set before them our temples." (meaning, of course, the "temple" of their bodies) - Origen (248 A.D.)

"You mistakenly think we conceal what we worship since we have no temples or altars. Yet how can anyone make an image of God? Man himself is the image of God. How can anyone build a

temple to Him, when the whole world cant contain Him? Even I, a mere human, travel far and wide. So how can anyone shut up the majesty of so great a Person within one small building? Isnt it better for Him to be dedicated in our minds and consecrated in our innermost hearts - rather than in a building?" - Mark Felix in "Octavius" (2nd Century A.D.)

"You say that we build no temples [to the gods] and do not worship their images... Well, what greater honor or dignity could we ascribe to them than that we put them in the same position as the Head and Lord of the universe! ...Do we honor Him with shrines and by building temples?" - Arnobius (305 A.D.)

It remains for me to tell you about the temple, how these wretched men who had been deceived put their trust in the building, as though it were God's house, and not in God who made them. For almost like the gentiles they made him holy in the temple. But know what the Lord said in nullifying the temple: Who has measured the sky with a span, or the land with his hand? Haven't I ?, says Yahweh. The sky is my throne and the land is the footstool for my feet. What kind of house will you build for me? Or what will be my resting place? Know that their hope is worthless Now let's ask whether there is any temple of God . There is, in the place where he himself declares to make and complete it. For it is written, And it will happen, when the week is complete, that God's temple will be built gloriously in the name of Yahweh. Therefore, I find that there is a temple. So how will it be built in the name of Yahweh? Know that before we trusted in God, the dwellings of our hearts were corrupt and weak, like a temple truly built by hands. For it was full of idolatry and was a house of spirit beings, because we did whatever was opposed to God. But it will be built in the name of Yahweh. So pay attention that the temple of Yahweh will be built gloriously, and know by what means that will be. In receiving the forgiveness of our sins and trusting in the name of the Lord we became new, created again, as from the beginning. For this reason God lives truly in our houses within us. How? The message of his trust, the calling of his promise, the wisdom of the tenets, the precepts of the teaching, he himself prophesies in us, he himself lives in us, opening the door of the temple for us who had been in bondage to death. This is the mouth of wisdom, having given us repentance, leading us to the incorruptible temple This is the spiritual temple of the Lord. The Letter of Barnabas; Chapter 16 (96-100 A.D.)

(You) being stones of the temple of the Father, prepared for the building of God the Father, and drawn up on high by the instrument of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, making use of the Holy Spirit as a rope, while your faith was the means by which you ascended, and your love the way which led up to God. Ye, therefore, as well as all your fellow-travelers, are God-bearers, temple-

bearers, Christ-bearers, bearers of holiness, adorned in all respects with the commandments of Jesus Christ, in whom also I exult that I have been thought worthy, by means of this Epistle, to converse and rejoice with you, because with respect to your Christian life ye love nothing but God only. The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians; Chapter 9 (30-107 A.D.).

Let us therefore do all things as those who have Him dwelling in us, that we may be His temples, and He may be in us as our God, which indeed He is, and will manifest Himself before our faces. Wherefore we justly love Him. The Epistle of Ignatius to the Ephesians; Chapter 15 (30-107 A.D.).

“Rusticus , the perfect, said, ‘Where do you assemble?’ Justin Martyr replied, ‘Where each one chooses and is able. Do you imagine that we all meet in the very same place?’” - Martyrdom of the Holy Martyrs (160 A.D.)

“We assemble together with the same quietness with which we live as individuals.” - Mark Minucius Felix (200 A.D.)

“For where there are three persons - even if they are laity - there is a church.” - Tertullian (212 A.D.)

“At another time it was opened in me that God, who made the world, did not dwell in temples made with hands. This, at the first, seemed a strange word because both priests and people use to call their temples or churches, dreadful places, and holy ground, and the temples of God. But the Lord showed me, so that I did see clearly, that He did not dwell in these temples which men had commanded and set up, but in people’s hearts; for both Stephen and the Apostle Paul bore testimony that he did not dwell in temples made with hands, not even in that which He had once commanded to be built, since He put an end to it; but that His people were His temple, and He dwelt in them.” - George Fox (1647 A.D.)

[Pagan Antagonist:] “They [the Christians] despise the temples as dead houses… They laugh at sacred things.” - Mark Minucius Felix (200 A.D.) NOTE: Felix was a Roman lawyer that converted to Christianity and wrote one of the finest apologies of early Christianity in the form of a dialogue between a Christian and a pagan; hence, this quote is intended to be a pagan’s expressed agitation with the Christian’s perspective on things .

Clearly, things have changed a great deal from the mindset of those early believers in Christ. Not only do we have “church buildings” today, but we have “mega-sized” churches. This phenomenon really began as late as the 1800’s! In other words, the mega church concept is

relatively new. The first record of a “mega church” in the USA appears about 1847 with a man known as Reverend Henry Ward Beecher of The Plymouth Church (he was the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe). Most church-attending folks have no idea about the history of the mega-church phenomenon and its root in man-centered worship. Henry was a theological liberal preacher who attributed a huge following because of his lively preaching style and inventive program. He was also well known because of his support for women’s rights and his opposition of slavery. Even dignitaries and other famous individuals knew of his fame and came to visit his meetings to see what the buzz was all about. For a time he was actually regarded as the most famous man in America and some positive accomplishments do indeed follow his “career” if you’ll allow the term. Some scholars have referred to this period of history as the “Protestant Century” because it was a time when preachers often held an almost celebrity status among the people. Henry Beecher was no exception. He had it all; looks, braun, smarts, and charisma. He was a man loved by his followers… In particular, a series of very attractive women… ahem… of whom it has been said that ol’ Henry was very “close” to, while his own wife was regarded as “unloved”.

The other side of the story is that, as popular as Henry was, scandal, greed and corruption of doctrine also followed his fame… As biographer Debby Applegate wrote in her book about Beecher, “He developed a passion for jewels, which he carried, unset, in his pockets, taking them out for comfort when he was tired or in low spirits.” Ok, yes, my eyebrows are raised reading that too. ;) What kind of person feels comforted by jewels? There can be no question that Henry was a very wealthy man. His church held seats for 3,000 people and he had many more admirers than that. His was, indeed, the first “mega-church” in American history.

To add to the darker side of his story, in 1870 he was tried on charges that he had committed adultery with a friend’s wife, Elizabeth Tilton, who had confessed to her husband, Theodore Tilton, that she had had a relationship with Henry Ward Beecher. Despite the fact that even one of Henry’s own sisters stood against him in the scandal, Henry’s congregation stood behind him. In fact, it seemed like anyone who dared speak up in opposition of this hugely respected man’s private activities was put to shame. In the Woodhull and Claflin’s Weekly newspaper on November 2, 1872, writer Victoria Claflin Woodhull claimed that America’s most renowned clergyman was secretly practicing the free-love doctrines which he, at the same time, denounced from the pulpit. This was on fairly good authority, for Elizabeth Tilton’s own husband had apparently confessed to others that his wife told him about her affair with Pastor Henry. Eventually Victoria was arrested in New York City and imprisoned for sending “obscene material” through the mail and Theodore was excommunicated from The Plymouth Church,

while they exonerated Henry. Two years after the ordeal had died down, Elizabeth confessed of the affair publically again and the church excommunicated her as well.Strange how this story isn't so uncommon from how a lot of congregants respond today when their star leaders are held up to scrutiny and even exposed. Often it seems the victims and the ones who take the risk of speaking out are the ones who are rejected by all and treated like dirt while the obvious offenders are praised and forgiven. In any case, here you have the evidence of a massive congregation following the fame of, not Jesus Christ, but of a man.

An article like this one will not provide adequate space to deal will every historical evidence of the origins of our modern religious practices, which so many of us have just accepted without question as being "Christian" practices, approved by Scripture. As the scales begin to fall from our eyes, I think we often tend to react a little like Adam and Eve did when they realized they were naked and tried to cover themselves . In a similar way, the Christian Church has tried to cover itself with all manner of religious "clothing." From erecting buildings in the name of God to setting up governments patterned after the world's system (i.e. religious hierarchy), we have done little more than cover ourselves with "fig leaves." It is so beautiful to see how God, in His mercy, clothed Adam and Eve with skins from an animal. There was a shedding of blood necessary for this to transpire; a picture of the covering to come - when Jesus would be sacrificed as a Lamb for our sin and we would be covered by His blood. This is the only covering that holds any importance for a believer. All other coverings are false entirely!

But let's now take a look at some other kinds of "coverings" that are popular today and see how the early Christians thought about them. I'm referring to our "Sunday best." Why is it that we tend to have the opinion we must "dress up for God" or dress up to "honor the house of God"? Why do we sometimes equate reverence with clothing? We do you know? This was even true in Bible times:

> **JAMES 2:1**
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> *5 - My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim that you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people more than others? For instance, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in shabby clothes. If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, "You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor"-well, doesn't this discrimination show that you are guided by wrong motives? Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the kingdom God promised to those who love him?*

> **1 PETER 3:3**
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> *4 - Don't be concerned about the outward beauty that depends on fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. You should be known for the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God.*

> **1 SAMUEL 16:7**
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> *(the Lord speaking to Samuel) "...People judge others by what they look like, but I judge people by what is in their hearts.*

Christians are quick to say that they know "God looks at the heart," but then why do we dress up and hold this standard for others to follow as if we think it makes one bit of difference to Him? Some call things like wearing a suit Sunday morning "reverent." Why? No really, I want to know why some people think that. Who is to be impressed by that and why are we trying to impress them with appearances? Who exactly does it show reverence for? Does that person actually think God will favor him more and help him grow spiritually because he's wearing an expensive taylored Brioni ? And how 'bout those churches where the pastors (bishops, elders, etc.) wear fancy purple robes and sacred hats? Do they really think such things are necessary in God's kingdom?

Ever heard the phrase, "you need to make yourself look presentable"? Think about that statement. Presentable for whom and why are we trying to make ourselves "presentable" before God or each other? In the body of Christ isn't it only Christ who makes us presentable before the Father? Isn't our acceptance of one another in the family of God to be based on Christ's acceptance of us rather than anything external? And besides, do we really act this way around our natural families? Why does that snappy $60 tie from Nordstroms get wrapped tightly

around the neck, the sweaty wool suit draped over the torso and those stiff patent leather shoes get put on your feet for church instead of the comfortable jeans, sneakers and t-shirt you were wearing the night before when hanging out with your friends or family? Why do we regard our Christian family “in church” so formally and so differently (not to mention artificially) from our natural families and the informal, sincere relational interaction we have with them?

In the writings of the early Church, post biblical era, we find quite a different view of this issue of looking swell for God. Let’s take a look at a few examples:

“[John the Baptist] was preparing the lowly and chaste ways of the Lord. For how could he possibly have worn a purple robe? After all, he turned away from the pomp of cities. Instead, he retired to the solitude of the desert to live in serenity with God.” - Clement of Alexandria (195 A.D.)

“That famous purple and the gold used as an ornament of the neck - these were marks of dignity among the Egyptians and Babylonians… The purple and other marks of dignities and powers were originally dedicated to idolatry. They were later engrafted as marks of dignity and power. So they caryy the stain of their own profanation… What is the point, then, to use the garment, if you do not administer the functions of it?” - Tertullian (200 A.D.)

“The Lord walked in humility and obscurity, …unadorned in dress. Otherwise, He would not have said, ‘Behold! Those who are clad in soft raiment are in kings’ houses.” In short, He was lowly in countenance and appearance, just as Isaiah had also prophesied… He shrank back from being made a king, for He was conscious of His own kingdom. Therefore, He in the fullest manner gave us the example of turning completely from all the pride, dignity, and garments of power.“- Tertullian (200 A.D.)

“The blood of the Lord serves as your purple robe.” - Tertullian (211 A.D.)

[Pagan Antagonist:] “They [the Christians]… Half naked themselves, they despise honors and purple robes.” - Mark Minucius Felix (200 A.D.) NOTE: Felix was a Roman lawyer that converted to Christianity and wrote one of the finest apologies of early Christianity in the form of a dialogue between a Christian and a pagan; hence, this quote is intended to be a pagan’s expressed agitation with the Christian’s perspective on things .

“I say, then, that man requires clothes for nothing else than the covering of the body, for defense against excess of cold and intensity, lest the inclemency of the air injure us.” - Clement of Alexandria (195 A.D.)

“Those who glory in their looks - not in their hearts - dress to please others.” - Clement of Alexandria (195 A.D.)

“If anyone thinks that vestments, jewels, and other things that are considered precious [by men] are valued by God, he is altogether ignorant of what God is.” - Lactantius (304-313 A.D.)

Believe it or not, that is but a few of the many quotes in this regard. My favorite is Tertullian’s quote about Jesus, “He shrank back from being made a king, for He was conscious of His own kingdom.” Wow! How would it be if Christians were truly conscious of whose children they are and what kingdom they belong to? They would never again place so much value in material things, calling them holy, reverent, honorable, etc. They would ascribe all such glory to God alone. The early saints were very sensitive about how clearly they glorified Christ with their lives. If it meant giving everything they owned away and wearing the poorest clothing for the sake of removing all attention from themselves and directing toward Christ, they would do it. And they didn’t count it for sorrow. It was a joyful thing to give up all for Christ. To be known as a lowly servant who takes no honors for himself but always (ALWAYS) glorifies Christ at every turn. How far we have come today!

Do you know, aside from pagan influence, when it was that Christians first started to “dress up for church”? It was during the Roman Emperor Constantine’s rule. He used to make a habit of showing up unexpectedly in churches to observe the ceremonies. People started wearing their best clothing to meetings just in case the Emperor happened to pop in. So there you have it; dressing up for church was actually started with intent to honor a man who called himself the substitute (Vicar) for Christ. In other words, we are talking about an anti-Christ mindset here. God help us.

And how ‘bout those dreadful neckties that no guy really likes to wear (and can’t wait to take off after service when he gets home)? Some of the history of the necktie is reported on tieguys.com:

“In 1660, in celebration of its hard-fought victory over Turkey , a crack regiment from Croatia (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), visited Paris . There, the soldiers were presented as glorious heroes to Louis XIV, a monarch well known for his eye toward personal adornment. It so happened that the officers of this regiment were wearing brightly colored handkerchiefs fashioned of silk around their necks. These neck cloths, which probably descended from the Roman fascalia worn by orators to warm the vocal chords, struck the fancy of the king, and he soon made them an insignia of royalty as he created a regiment of Royal Cravattes .”

While reading some comments about the history of the necktie on one particular website, the essence of the tie was expressed in this aphorism of an anonymous Frenchman of 1820: “With the tie I take perfect care: it is the true ritual of elegance…” Another site simply put it this way, concerning the various displays of the necktie through the centuries: “the message of all these affectations is simple… ‘I am special’.” There you have it; the purpose for the necktie was essentially to glorify the self-acknowledging individuality and handsome appearance of man and boast it before others. It’s completely devised to bring attention and admiration to one’s self, not God. But isn’t this the core truth about “dressing up for church”? We say it’s about reverence for God or “the house of the Lord”, but in truth, it is to call attention to ourselves; to make ourselves bear an appearance of “righteousness” (that is, according to the way man perceives righteousness, which is nothing less than self-righteousness).

The subject of traditional church practices is one that would take an entire book to cover in detail (and look, we are already writing it here aren’t we??? hehehe). My intent with this article is to just give you enough data to think about some things. My point is not to dissuade you from the desire to meet together with other believers for fellowship or corporate worship (or to even make you stop wearing neckties, if that’s something you enjoy doing), but to help all of us stop venerating man-made traditions; investing notions of spiritual worth and importance in them and engaging in such things even to bring attention to ourselves rather than Christ. Many of us have been taught over the years that being a Christian is about attending a church and “plugging in” to its program. Not only do we buy into this fiction, but we impose it on others and try to convince them to gage their spiritual worth and validity as a Christian according to what organization they belong to and how “involved” they are in religious programs. The great problem is that God does not gage true spiritual growth by any of these means. Neither does He qualify our Christianity by them. When each of us stand before Him on judgment day, Christ is not going to point to our record of church attendance to see how we measured up. He is not going to reward us for being involved with religious programs and for speaking in Christianese . His only concern will be whether or not we knew Him; really knew Him intimately, and how that relationship effected our lives and the way we responded in relationship with others. In the end it will not even be spiritual gifts and how “anointed” we thought we were. Knowing Him and allowing Christ to be Lord of our lives is all that ever matters!

> **MATTHEW 7:21**
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> *23 - (Jesus said) "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'*

So, is it really important whether or not we wear a suit and a tie when we meet together with other believers? Not really. It is important though if you invest in that clothing anything other than the fact that it is just there to cover your body and protect you from the elements. The minute you attribute spirituality or even the appearance of spirituality to clothing, there is a problem and you have entered into some deception. The same is true for the concept of where to meet together. It matters not to God whether Christians meet together in a hall, in a barn, in a living room, or a car for that matter. It doesn't matter if it's over the phone, on the Internet or through hand-written letters (as was common among the apostles in the first and subsequent centuries). The building means nothing and the method is not really important. What's important is: Are believers edifying one another and is Christ wholly central in all things?

Unfortunately, too many Christians today do not think so simply about the place and method by which they meet together. Erroneously, Christians have learned that the building they meet in is "the holy temple of God ." IT IS NOT! We say we understand that it is the body of Christ who are His temple (His Church; His Ecclesia), but then why do we attach all these other rules (whether written or unwritten) to our meetings (i.e. take your hats off, don't talk loudly or keep silent entirely out of reverence, don't wear anything casual, always address the Pastor according to his proper ministry title, give your tithes to help maintain "the house of the Lord" and whatever you do - don't be real, smile whether you feel like it or not - remember, you're in "church" - this is not the place to act like you do the rest of the week)? We say we believe that the Church is people, but we aren't willing to let go of the idea that "church" is also the place we attend each week… I still have to persist in my question: "ACCORDING TO WHAT?" There is no other "church" in the Bible than the people of God. There is never a place, a building, called by this name. Why do we insist it exists and requires our attendance?

Recently I attended a meeting at one of the churches I attended in my youth. The pastor preceded his invitation for people to give into the offering by reading from the book of Ezra where the people brought much gold and it was dedicated for the temple by the priests. He followed by saying that, in the same way, we should "take care of the house of God." The

implication of course being that the church building is that house; that “temple.” Despite my personal agitation with analogies like this that are so opposite the teaching of Scripture, even more does it frustrate me that so many Christians in general believe the same kind of nonsense.

The other night I was watching a video of the inaugural service of Lakewood Church (Joel Osteens corporation); the current largest church organization in the United States (averaging approximately 50,000 adult attendees every week and approximately 3,500 children - as of 2005) and one whose pastor (Mr. Osteen himself) routinely charges anywhere from $10 to $165 to hear him preach on traveling engagements! Lakewood s television program alone reaches an approximated 200 million homes! They were celebrating their new church building. What struck me funny (sick rather) was here you have this massive multi-million dollar structure; thousands of people gathered in rows facing a magnificent platform/stage with colored lights everywhere, an incredible sound system, amazing musical performances, huge projection screens displaying full color, high-resolution video close-ups of the ministry staff and worship team, on and on (a most stunning experience for all the senses)…

…but then Osteens wife stands up there and makes a comment about their beautiful new building and follows it up with a comment about how of course its really the people in this place who are the Church of the living God. I laughed in amazement. Yeah right Mrs. Osteen, you sound like you really believe that not! She threw that in as sort of a disclaimer to say, oh yeah we actually believe the Bible that says His people are the Church, but every sight and sound dazzling the senses said, This is our church! This is what you need to be forcefully aware of! This is what its all about! The very service itself was advertised as such to introduce their new church building. It had nothing to do with the people except to show off how much money they all have contributed to build and maintain this massive waste of electricity. The ministry staff also continued to use terms like house of the Lord and such to describe the building they were gathered in. It is painfully obvious (regardless of Mrs. Osteens little disclaimer) they do not simply view Gods people as the Church themselves. This building was and is the altogether central focus. The people are there to finance it and make millionaires of the staff thats the truth!

Just for fun, after that, I hopped on the web to take a look at some of the other massive houses of God around the world. Paul Yongi Chos massive basilica, Yoido Full Gospel Church of Seoul, South Korea, is home to 700,000 members. The building itself is a massive structure. The inside sanctuary has a huge round dome full of colored lights. It literally looks like a UFO landing right in the middle of the service! As with virtually every church structure on earth,

everything is aligned to face a platform and a massive pulpit where one man will be the central focus each service and, heres a hint, it aint Jesus.

...

I could go on and on and I think I will for a just a bit (grin). T.D. Jakes church for example, The Potters House, is also a massive structure. The building alone, of which the main floor is roughly the size of two football fields, cost $30 million to build (acousticdimensions.com). The structure is home to 28,000 members (as of 2002) and, apparently, God Himself (wink). This is without mentioning all the other expenses of this church organization, like the $40 million dollar television studio right in the church! How much of that tithe money do you think God gets to spend?

A few years back I had the pleasure of visiting a very famous church in California Garden Grove Church (a.k.a. The Crystal Cathedral); a place I affectionately like to call Robert Schullers Kingdom. Now in case you think that sounds a little sarcastic, youre right; however, I personally dont think thats too far from the truth, considering that (according to one news source) it is the building itself that made Robert Schuller one of the most famous people in the western world. The church building itself is an enormous structure with more windows on it than Microsoft. I shutter to think of the cost to maintain these windows alone (all 12,000 of them).

The Crystal Cathedral is the largest all glass structure in the world! The church boasts 10,000 plus members, has one insanely HUGE pipe organ, the most incredibly manicured gardens youve ever seen complete with huge bronze statues depicting various Bible scenes, a large pond with fountains and a statue of Jesus walking on the water in the center, a glass prayer tower (complete with a rotating crystal cross), and more! But the most nauseating structure of all is the enormous statue of Robert Schuller himself that greets you as you walk into the sanctuary of the church! Yes, thats right, a bigger-than-life bronze statue of Robert right in the sanctuary. In fact, the little old lady that welcomed us to the Cathedral actually introduced us to her pastor as if the statue was actually him in the flesh. We were also asked to remove our hats in this “holy place”. At least we didnt have to kiss his ring.

It may interest some to observe the literal definition and historical use of the word “Cathedral”. In the Greek New Testament there is a word called “kathedra”, which Jesus used in his comments about the Pharisees. He said, “they sit in Moses’ seat” (kathedra) - meaning “chair of authority”. In other words, the Pharisees presumed they were the modern day mouthpieces

for God as Moses was and they believed they had the same authority, position and role as Moses over the people. I can't tell you how often I have heard the same argument made today by men who claim that a pastor is the modern-day equivalent of the role of Moses! But Jesus' comments to His followers actually pointed out the great lack of similarity between the two. He instructed them to only follow Moses' teachings and DISREGARD the corrupted doctrine of those who presume to sit in Moses' seat. As we read further in the text of Scripture, we find exactly why Jesus could so confidently recommend Moses - BECAUSE MOSES' TEACHINGS POINTED TO HIM! Not to another "pastor" or some other mediating figurehead over the people, but HIM ALONE!!!

> **JOHN 5:39**
>
> *40 - (Jesus said to the religious leaders) "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life.*

> **JOHN 5:45**
>
> *46 - "But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me.*

> **LUKE 24:25**
>
> *27 - He (Jesus) said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself.*

In order for the Pharisees to keep the attention and subservience focused on them, they had to deceptively claim to occupy the seat of Moses. Interestingly enough, our modern word "Cathedral" is translated from the Latin form of the word kathedra , which specifically means the THRONE OF THE BISHOP/PASTOR!!! In Roman Catholicism the Cathedral is recognized as (and I quote directly from the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2006) "the principal church of a diocese, containing the bishop's throne ." Look it up in a dictionary yourself! Is it not abundantly clear that this is an anti-Christ mindset? Is it any wonder that Jesus told the people that they wouldnt err in following Moses teachings (which ultimately led to HIM), but not to follow the Pharisees themselves (who presume to sit in Moses' seat of authority). I say to us all, BEWARE OF THE BISHOPS CHAIR; those who sit on their religious thrones,

presuming spiritual authority over others. Cathedral is such a perfect word because it proves by its very definition what todays religious system is largely centered around MAN!

It is interesting to consider the mighty, awe-inspiring architectural wonders of the Roman Catholic Church (see the pics below). Many of the most impressive structures show so clearly how all is centered around the “throne” of a man. It’s virtually the same in the majority of “Protestant” Christian church structures, where the seating is curved around center stage, elevated by stairs (often referred to as “the altar”) and centrally focused on a pulpit where one man stands before all, claiming to be the mouthpiece for God to the people. You simply cannot convince me that the majority of Christendom today does not center its focus on buildings, human leaders and organizational program. They revel in the massive creations of their own hands. I believe this grieves the heart of the Lord greatly.

Perhaps more often than necessary in my articles I have reiterated the absolute biblical fact that the Bible NEVER designates a church building as being “the house of God” or “His Temple.” NEVER!!! Dear pastor friend reading this, please stop distorting the Scriptures in order to bolster support for the maintenance of your religious edifice and weekly program. Stop misleading your congregation by telling them that the building they gather in is “the house of the Lord.” There is no other “temple” in the New Covenant than the one that is not made with hands! Anyone who fails to realize that the place of meeting is nothing more than corruptible wood and stone (and maybe slick vinyl siding), has been deceived and is likely helping to spread this deception. Such concepts have too long been used to manipulate people into investing large amounts of money into non-essential things (but things which people are being led to believe by their leaders are essential). God is very jealous about His holy temple; His ecclesia. It’s not an insignificant matter to just ignore these things. If they were important enough for God to reiterate them all throughout the New Testament then who are we to call them unimportant? Christians pass judgment on one another (saved or not) all the time based on things that have absolutely nothing to do with His kingdom. It’s very important that we embrace the truth and leave this kind of ignorance behind. It is not helping us grow as a body and it’s, in fact, distracting us from reality.

There are just so many details of traditional church practice that have become so commonplace today that it often strikes us as offensive if they are ever challenged. I remember how I used to think that the Seventh Day Adventist church was so off balance because they didn’t attend church on Sunday like every other “real” Christian in the Protestant world. Heck, even the Catholics got that one right didn’t they ? Hmmm… Well, while I’m not here to tell you that I’ve

become a member of the Seventh Day Adventist denomination (whom I regard its members just as strongly to be members of the body of Christ as anyone else who has believed on the name of Jesus), I have studied enough to know that there is some very strong, biblically and historically based, reason behind their beliefs about what day of the week Christians might rather desire to meet together on. The fact is that Sunday being designated as a “holy day” is not a product of biblical origin or even Christian design!

The origin of Sunday worship (brace yourselves) comes right out of pagan tradition. Ok, I know, some are thinking that now I’ve gone too far. I know this is hard stuff to think about at first, especially if you’ve always learned something one way. Just hang on with me here and I will explain and, as always, I invite you to search out the historical record on these things yourself. I assure you, it is true. Official Sunday church services did not originate with Christians. It originated with sun worshiping pagans. It came directly from Babylonian culture. Why is this important? Please understand , I am not saying there is anything wrong with worshiping the Lord on Sunday or Saturday or Monday or Tuesday or any other day. The day itself is not the issue. Personally, I think it’s just fine to meet on any day of the week, even Sunday. But it is the importance with which some people place on that day. Likewise I understand why the Adventists choose to worship the Lord on Saturday, but I still disagree if too much importance is placed on the day itself. Whenever a day or anything else is given more place than Christ, it is out of line.

To so many, if not most Christians today, much value is placed on the day of the week that Christians meet together. And many, if not most, Christians believe that day is Sunday. But why do they believe that? Aren’t you just slightly curious? Well, I’m going to be a swell guy here and tell you so that forevermore from this day onward you will no longer be ignorant of the truth. No longer will you be able to think that Sunday is any more “holy” or special that any other day of the week and no longer will you be able to tell another person they need to make sure they attend church every Sunday if they expect to call themselves a Christian.

First of all I want to give credit to an author by the name of Ulrike Unruh, who did a great deal of research concerning portions of the history I am about to discuss. Some of the following comments are paraphrased from her writings in order to preface and summarize my own discussion of the historical origins of “Sunday worship.” Thank you Ulrike for your efforts to present the truth.

In Genesis chapter 10 we read about a man by the name of Nimrod who founded a great empire in the area of Babylon and Assyria . Nimrod, whose name literally means “rebellion,” was one

bad dude; he was a fierce warrior, a cruel oppressor and a tyrant who murdered innocent men, was rebellious against the Lord and was known as a mighty man in sin. Nimrod compelled people to leave their obedience to Jehovah and follow him instead. Many hailed him as a god.

At his death it was proclaimed that Nimrod be exalted to his rightful domain as the sun god, who would ensure that his people would have warmth, light and abundant crops. The people believed that worship of him would bring down blessing upon them.

Nimrod had a wife by the name of Semiranmis . She was the queen of Babylon . After Nimrod's death Semiranmis was found to be with child. It was believed that this was a divine conception and the child was heralded as being the Son of God; the "Father" of course being Nimrod. Semiranmis came to be known as the "Mother of God" (since only a god can beget a god) and she installed herself with the title "Queen of Heaven." Any of this sound familiar to any of you?

Ulrike accounts that, "the story was invented that she (Semiranmis) was a virgin sprung from the sea, and therefore a gift from the gods. Her name was later Hellenized to ' Sammur-amat ' or 'gift of the sea.' Most goddess worship as well as sun worship can be traced right back to Samiranmis . This one woman had such a lasting impact upon world history that the land from which civilization arose, (lower Mesopotamia) was known as the ' Land of Sammur ' or when translated into Hebrew becomes 'the land of Shinar '. Genesis 10:9-10 - 'Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD. And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel , in the land of Shinar .' Later, Daniel tells us that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem, and besieged it and carried the people as well as the vessels of the house of God: into the land of Shinar to the house of his god. (Dan.1:2)"

Babylon 's worship of the sun infiltrated Israel . The influence of Babylon is mentioned all throughout Scripture. The first day of the week became known as "the venerable day of the sun" and this is where our word "Sunday" comes from. Now, jump forward many hundreds of years, all the way up to the 4th century A.D. when the Emperor Constantine started the first official church and instituted his rendition of "Christianity" for all to adhere to. Many Christians, and Catholics alike, do not realize that Constantine was himself a sun worshiper. In fact, on March 7th, 321 A.D. he issued the formal decree: "Let all judges and townspeople and occupations of all trades rest on the VENERABLE DAY OF THE SUN." He changed "the Sabbath day" (which was traditionally the seventh day, "Saturday") to the day of the sun god (the first day, "Sunday") to coincide with his religious beliefs.

Constantine not only made Sunday the official day for Christian gathering , he also converted pagan temples for Christian use. Rather than eliminating all forms of pagan worship and idolatry, he instead redefined their applications into his own brand of Christianity. Mary, the mother of Jesus, became “the Queen of Heaven” and “the Mother of God”, equivalent to Babylonian religion. Jesus became “the Sun God.” Constantine ‘s money had an image representing the sun god engraved on it. Temples were adorned with similar imagery. Priests were required to turn and bow to the image of the Sun before approaching the Emperors throne. Statues to pagan deities were re-defined with Christian names. Constantine saw great profit and power in Christianity… and anyone who did not submit to Constantine ‘s new brand of Christianity was deemed a heretic and often tortured or killed. Pagan priests “converted” immediately to Christianity to maintain their livelihood, authority, and prominence (not to mention their lives) and remained presiding over religious gatherings bearing the title of “priests”, “bishops”, “pastors”, etc. Finances were extracted in the form of “tithes” to pay for Constantine ‘s elaborate church building programs during the 4th century.

As a side point here, the origin of the practice known as “tithing” that is actuated in today’s institutional churches is a practice borrowed, not from Scripture, but from Roman Catholic tradition. There is no speculation about this statement… it is verifiable, historical fact! As we already stated, the Roman Emperor (Constantine) is believed to have been the first to introduce the concept of monetary “tithes” to finance churchianity during the 4th century. We place “tithes” in quotations because, though it is generally agreed by many historians that the taxes and contributions Constantine levied were styled in the form of tithe mandates, no specific or “official” law on the matter would be recorded until many years after his reign. The Catholic Encyclopedia states that Constantine “gave a legal existence to churches as corporate bodies, permitting them to receive donations and legacies and to hold the same in perpetuity (Cod. Theod ., XVI, 2, 4). He ordered contributions of grain to be given annually to the clergy out of the public granaries. He contributed large sums from his own resources for the support of the clergy in Africa , and exempted the Church from imposts in an edict imposing a general tax (Cod. Theod ., XI, i , 1).” The Council of Tours in 567 and the Council of Macon in 585 enacted official regional church decrees for tithing on its members and excommunication of non- tithers . These are some of the first recorded historical evidences of a mandatory tithing ritual attempting to be imposed on Christians by religious authorities (though initially they were not successful). Tithes were made obligatory by civil law in the Carolingian empire in 765, but it was not until (I believe it was) the year 777 that Emperor Charlemagne legally allowed the church to collect tithes and Pope Adrian I in 787 was the first to formally recognize tithes.

Tithes were not made obligatory in England until the tenth century (more than one thousand years after Calvary).

In the 1500's the great reformer Martin Luther led his opposition against the false teachings of Rome. He also opposed the greed and error of religious leaders who, throught the religious system, exacted taxes and tithes of the common people. There is more I have to say about Luther here, but we'll come back to this subject a little bit later in more detail…

Shortly after Luther arrived on the scene, another group of Christians also refused to accept the ways of Rome (including their oppressive tithing requirements and other false teachings). These Christians were labeled "anabaptists" (which means to baptize again) because they rejected infant baptism ordered by the Roman Catholic Church as a mark of salvation and citizenship. While happy about the positive effects of Luther's revolution, the anabaptists were concerned that many in the Protestant movement (including Luther himself) were already making too many compromises with Rome in their theology and practice and so they separated themselves even from many of the Protestants, seeking to follow the Lord instead of the doctrines of men. They were persecuted and many were tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus. Sadly, their concern turned out to be prophetic, for the Protestant church did take on many of the rituals of Roman Catholicism and simply Christianized them.

Most Christians who are fans of Luther, seem to generally think that the mixture of Roman Catholic doctrine and practice with Protestant Christianity stopped at the Reformation, and don't realize that the great compromise between truth and false teaching continued and worsened after his death. But there were other "reformers" God rose up to stand for the truth. As late as the 1600's (just under 400 years ago) a man by the name of George Fox was impacted by a radical truth that severely opposed the religious system of his day. Fox is best known for the groups of Christians that followed his beliefs who later became known as "the Quakers". Fox believed that Christians are saved, not by their works or attendance to or membership in religious organizations or keeping of religious rules, but because of their belief in Christ and, therefore, rituals can be safely ignored, as long as one experiences a true spiritual conversion. Fox also believed that the qualification for ministry is given by the Holy Spirit, not by ecclesiastical study. This implies that anyone has the right to minister, assuming the Spirit guides them, including women. Fox also taught that God "dwelleth in the hearts of His obedient people" and religious experience is not confined to a church building. Fox refused to apply the word "church" to a building, using instead the name "steeple-house", a usage maintained by many Quakers today. Fox preferred to worship in fields and orchards, believing

that God's presence could also be felt in the natural world. (see Wikipedia reference "George Fox") These were radical concepts for Christians to hold to in Fox's day. The Christian Quakers resisted the dominant religious system of the day and refused to submit to the unbiblical mandate of monetary tithing, which they boldly and correctly asserted as being "a popish innovation". Their complaints resulted in a massive court dispute with the State, resulting in a treatise analyzing the legal, ethical, and religious arguments for and against forcible tithing. The case was won by the Quakers and the conclusion was made that the practice is corrupt and in violation of Scriptural principles and had originated, not from Scripture, but by the device of Rome!

The Catholic Encyclopedia states that "as regards the civil power, the Christian Roman emperors granted the right to churches of retaining a portion of the produce of certain lands, but the earliest instance of the enforcement of the payment of ecclesiastical tithes by civil law is to be found in the capitularies of Charlemagne, at the end of the eighth century." It is obvious, therefore, that monetary tithing is essentially a "new" doctrine to the Church, for it was not taught or practiced for literally hundreds of years after Calvary and even then was only introduced in the confines of a corrupt pagan-laden religious system of organized religion. History also records that there was constant complaint by the lay masses concerning these new religious obligations. In the beginning believers shared their possessions with each other according to individuals needs and such was actuated from freewill volition and love. Over the years, organized religion trampled on these mindsets and forcefully replaced them with its own unbiblical concepts, which served little more than to financially oppress the people while fielding millions of dollars into lifeless structures of religion and lining the pockets of those who stood in rulership over.

For a detailed history of the practice of monetary tithing I recommend reading theologian Russell Earl Kelly's article on the subject: .

I wonder, if Christians really understood the origin of their routine practice called "tithing money to a church", if they would continue to practice it and dare call it the commandment of God. In truth the practice has far more pagan origins than any biblical ones… In fact, there is not one mention of a monetary tithing system at all in the entire Bible! Sadly, I think there are plenty of those in positions of professional ministry who do know it and yet refuse to teach the truth about tithing because it may jeopardize their livelihood and the control they hold over God's people.

Following are just a few quotations by some of the Early Church Fathers (2 nd through 4 th centuries), which illustrate the way early Christians thought about things like giving and tithing:

Justin Martyr - c. 150 (First Apology, chapter 67):

And the wealthy among us help the needy when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgiving, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succors the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds and the strangers sojourning among us

[In accordance with the first century Scripture, “presidents,” or church leaders, are only capable administrators, and not necessarily pastors or teachers of the Word. - R.E.K., Ph.D .]

Irenaeus - c. 150-200 (Against Heresies, book 4, chap. 13, para . 3) emphasis added :

And for this reason did the Lord, instead of that [commandment], You shall not commit adultery, forbid even concupiscence; and instead of that which runs thus, You shall not kill, He prohibited anger; and instead of the law enjoining the giving of tithes , to share all our possessions with the poor; and not to love our neighbors only, but even our enemies; and not merely to be liberal givers and bestowers , but even that we should present a gratuitous gift to those who take away our goods

Irenaeus (c. 180, E/W 1.484, 485) - Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs (p. 645):

...[The Jews] had indeed the tithes of their goods consecrated to Him. In contrast, those who have received liberty set aside all their possessions for the Lord’s purposes, bestowing joyfully and freely not the less valuable portions of their property, since they have the hope of better things.

Tertullian - c. 150-220 (Apology, XXXIX, 1-18):

Our presidents are elders of proved worth, men who have attained this honor not for a price, but by character. Every man brings some modest coin once a month or whenever he wishes,

and only if he is willing and able; it is a freewill offering. You might call them the trust-funds of piety; they are spent on the support and burial of the poor.

Tertullian (c. 207, W) - Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs (p. 394):

We do not now deal with the Law any further than [to remark] that the apostle here teaches clearly how it has been abolished - by passing from shadow to substance. That is, it has passed from figurative types to the reality, which is Christ.

Tertullian (c. 197, W 3.46) - Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs (p. 9):

Though we have our treasure chest, it is not made up of purchase money, as of a religion that has its price. Rather, on the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation - but only if it is his pleasure and only if he is able. For there is no compulsion; all is voluntary.

Hermas (c. 150, W 2.20) - Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs (p. 9):

Give to all the needy in simplicity, not hesitating as to whom you are to give or not to give. Give to all, for God wishes His gifts to be shared among all.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 195, E) - Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs (p. 541):

Riches are then to be partaken of rationally and given lovingly.

Ignatius (c. 105, E) - Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs (p. 393):

If we still live according to the Jewish Law, we acknowledge that we have not received grace.

Origen (c. 248, E) - Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs (p. 394):

We do not regulate our lives like the Jews. For we are of the opinion that the literal following of the laws is not the thing that conveys the real meaning of this legislation.

As a final point of interest, let me just expound a bit more with some comments on the Reformation period (the great separation of a large segment of the organized church from Rome). Some may want to know more of Martin Luther’s opinion on the matter (re: tithing). Most Christians generally believe that Luther did a great deal to rid the Church of doctrinal error, which had been propagated by the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. I agree with that general statement - at least to a certain extent. For many, Luther is a hero of sorts. As one writer put it, Luther is “the man who is celebrated for calling into question the authority of a corrupt Church, for initiating religious freedom in an age of spiritual feudalism, for initiating

free universal education, for freeing the Scriptures from the bondage of a dead language, for… Well, you get the idea." On these general themes, I agree. Luther did help to refocus many believer's sights back onto Bible truths; however, Luther also continued to teach a number of heretical concepts even after his conversion from Catholicism. Perhaps some grace is in order since we are dealing with a man who spent his entire adult life as a servant of Rome . There was no one to mentor him in the way of truth. I think he fared rather well, but obviously missed the mark on several occasions. Many Christians are familiar with the story of Luther's "just will live by faith" revelation, but they have never read many (if any) of his works. Sadly, as much as Luther is to be commended for the good things he accomplished, he is also to be blamed for the existence of a lot of the unbiblical mindsets that still exist in the Church today and which are carry-overs from Catholic doctrine and practice.

For example, there were parts of Scripture that Luther had trouble with and rather than deal with the possibility that he lacked wisdom in a particular area, he would often just outright suggest that this portion of Scripture did not belong in the Bible and should be ignored. The book of James gave him great trouble. On one occasion he said, "…the epistle of St. James is an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical." ('Preface to the New Testament,' ed. Dillenberger , p. 19.) On another occasion he said, "The book of Esther I toss into the Elbe . I am such an enemy to the book of Esther that I wish it did not exist, for it Judaizes too much and has in it a great deal of heathenish foolishness." (The Facts About Luther, O'Hare, TAN Books, 1987, p. 202) Luther also taught that Christians should pray to Mary: "Our prayer should include the Mother of God What the Hail Mary says is that all glory should be given to God, using these words: 'Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus Christ. Amen!' You see that these words are not concerned with prayer but purely with giving praise and honor We can use the Hail Mary as a meditation in which we recite what grace God has given her. Second, we should add a wish that everyone may know and respect her He who has no faith is advised to refrain from saying the Hail Mary ." (Personal Prayer Book, 1522). Luther also believed in the Confessional. One of his instructional booklets on the subject remarked plainly, "a person receives absolution or forgiveness from the confessor, as if from God Himself, without doubting it, but believing firmly that his sins are forgiven by God in Heaven through it." Luther also believed in and taught the Sacrament of Holy Communion (please note: Luther's concept of Communion that he learned from Rome is quite different than what the Bible itself teaches - Catholicism teaches that the bread and wine are transformed into the literal flesh and blood of Jesus through the Mass - it represents a continual sacrificing of Christ's flesh for sin - for sin cannot be forgiven

without the shedding of blood). Luther stated, “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under bread and wine for us Christians to eat and to drink, established by Christ Himself.” He continued to say that “the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given to us through these words in the sacrament.” Luther also believed that water baptism was necessary for salvation. In his own words he said, “In Baptism God forgives sin, delivers from death and the devil, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what he has promised.”

For these reasons (and others) Luther, in my opinion, is only a very marginally trustworthy resource on the subject of Christian doctrine. The believer has to keep his eyes open when reading his works. There is much good and it’s exciting to read of his progress of revelation and his devotion to know the truth, preach it boldly and live by it, but there is plenty of Roman influence still present in his works.

“The Lutheran Church which he (Martin Luther) established was a compromise between his Scriptural ideals and his earthly loyalties. At the same time it carried over much that was extraneous and wrong from Rome itself. It developed into something far from the churches of the New Testament, a fact which the reformer himself recognized, a vast mixture of the godly and the ungodly, tied to the State, an ecclesiastical system stamped by the same intolerance of those who differed from it as Rome.” - John W. Kennedy (The Torch of the Testimony, c1965; Gospel Liturature Service - Page 143)

Still, remains the question, did Luther ever mention the subject of tithing? This was a detail that I had to engage considerable efforts to track down an answer to. He did not often preach on this subject. It is known among historians and scholars that the Catholic Church mandated tithing during Luther’s lifetime. Of course, the Catholic obligation far exceeded anything remotely similar to the tithe mentioned in Scripture. It was highly oppressive. Luther hated the greed of the papacy and the distraction of money so prevalent in churches. Luther also very firmly rejected the idea that any of the Mosaic ordinances of the Law held any application for Gentile Christians. On one occasion Luther boldly said:

“Now if anyone confronts you with Moses and his commandments, and wants to compel you to keep them, simply answer, ‘Go to the Jews with your Moses; I am no Jew. Do not entangle me with Moses. If I accept Moses in one respect [Paul tells the Galatians in chapter 5:3], then I am obligated to keep the entire law.’ For not one little period in Moses pertains to us.”

Luther looked to the Scriptures and compared them with the modern practices and boldly rejected many of Rome ‘s modern applications of biblical subjects (which they distorted

terribly). This is not to say he disagreed with the tithing concept entirely, but he certainly approached this more honestly than even most tithe teachers today do. In a sermon dated August 27, 1525, Luther was preaching about God laws being written on our hearts, bound in the very conscience of men. He stated the following concerning the tithe:

“But the other commandments of Moses, which are not [implanted in all men] by nature, the Gentiles do not hold. Nor do these pertain to the Gentiles, such as the tithe and others…”

He admitted that the tithing ordinance has no bearing on the Gentile Church , even though he personally believed that if the Roman Church would cancel all other taxes and only follow Moses in the regard of tithing it would be less oppressive and more beneficial. In other words, Luther saw benefit in the tithing concept ONLY as a matter of State governmental taxation and NOT the Church. Luther understood that even the Mosaic tithe was not as oppressive as the tithe which the Roman Church was teaching (and which is still taught today in Protestant churches). Luther also demonstrated that he well understood that not everyone in Israel tithed, for as he remarked in the same sermon mentioned earlier,

“suppose I had ten cows; I would then give one. If I had only five, I would give nothing.”

Luther at least did not re-invent the tithe, he looked at what was written and examined it according to context as it was written… and, again, we point out that Luther saw tithing in the context of government taxation - not as something that should be brought out of the old Law and imposed on Christian practice. Luther continued,

“as things are now, I must pay the Gentile tax even if the hail should ruin my entire crop. If I owe a hundred gulden in taxes, I must pay it even though there may be nothing growing in the field. This is also the way the pope decrees and governs. But it would be better if things were so arranged that when I raise much, I give much; and when little, I give little.”

Luther was disgusted with the fact that so much money was collected of people for the purpose of “things” and not to benefit actual souls. In one particular discourse of his he said, “the distracted world attempts to serve God by setting apart houses, churches, cloisters; vestures, gold-trimmed, silk and every other kind; silver vessels and images; bells and organs, candles and lamps; the money for which expense should have been appropriated to the poor if the object was to make an offering to God.”

While I appreciate the grace I hear in much of Luther’s language about God’s view of His people, my main disagreement with him comes from the fact that he sought to “reform” the

system rather than simply focus on Christian truth and live by it. He still viewed, in a large sense, the Church as being an institution of organized religion. Rather than disregard that which God never invented in the first place and simply concentrate on the truth, he sought to reform it and ask for God's blessing. I am at least encouraged that, later in his life, Luther remarked that he knew his Reformation was not enough. He knew and even admitted that many of the evils of Rome were still present among Christians, even in their churches. He looked at the New Testament and did not see a present-day manifestation of that early Christian mindset and it saddened him. He longed for it though. He believed it was possible… one day. Sadly, Luther's faith failed to believe it was possible in his day. Instead he gave in to many of the traditional pressures of religion and simply concluded that there was nothing more he could do except to keep preaching Christ in hopes that one day believers would take the truth so in earnest that they would live it out completely without compromise. I pray this generation will discover this reality and believe God's Word and embrace the truth without hesitation.

So, as the centuries passed, Christianity became a political power and a massive organization of religion, but this was not until hundreds of years after Calvary . Sadly, it has never recovered from this great ill. Christians still regard things like tithing, Sunday church services, priests, pews, pulpits and church buildings as essential holy things - even though most of our modern church practices and the religious titles we give its "leadership" have no origin in the Greek text of Scripture or the earliest centuries of Christianity.

Martin Luther, in his reformation accomplished much and we are grateful for his efforts and accomplishments, but unfortunately his reformation left too much of the pagan influenced practices in place. It can even be found in his writings that he was painfully aware of the incompleteness of his revolution and how so much Roman influence still plagued the Church. Martin prayed for the day when Christians would so take the Scriptures in earnest that they would not settle for anything less than Christ and His Word. During his lifetime people were already labeling their religious groups after his name (they called themselves "Lutherans") and he despised this trend and spoke very critically against it.

"I pray you to leave my name alone, and call not yourselves 'Lutherans,' but 'Christians.' Who is Luther? My doctrine is not mine. I have not been crucified for anyone. St. Paul would not permit that any should call themselves of Paul, nor of Peter but of Christ. How, then, does it befit me, a miserable bag of dust and ashes, to give my name to the children of Christ? Cease, my dear friends, to cling to these party names and distinctions; away with them all; let us call

ourselves only ‘Christians’ after him from whom our doctrine comes.” (“Life of Luther,” by Stork, page 289.)

Charles Spurgeon, whom some herald as one of the greatest Baptist preachers of all time once said this about the denominational title “Baptist”:

“I look forward with pleasure to the day when there will not be a Baptist living. I hope they will soon be gone. I hope the”Baptist“name will soon perish, but let Christ’s name last forever.” (“Spurgeon Memorial Library,” Volume I, page 168.)

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, also condemned denominationalism. In one of his sermons he said:

“Would to God that all party names and unscriptural phrases and forms which have divided the Christian world were forgot ; that we might all agree to sit down together as humble, loving disciples at the feet of a common Master, to hear his word, to imbibe his Spirit, and to transcribe his life into our own.” (“Hardeman’s Tabernacle Sermons,” Volume V, page 60.)

Isn’t it strange how even so many of the great preachers of our past, who actually took a stand for the truth in these matters, are so largely ignored today (even by the very denominations that were titled by their names). The passion with which they preached Christ was eventually converted into religious organization, legalism and denominationalism. “Churches” (i.e. denominations) were born and the greater vision of the Lord’s ONE CHURCH (the Ecclesia) was de-emphasized and distracted from, even by the very structuring of these groups of religion. Today, unfortunately, we still have Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans and denomination after denomination. Many who pledge allegiance to these groups are offended when someone speaks against denominationalism as I am evidently doing here. But why are they offended? Are we not all Christians in the body of Christ? Don’t we all have the same united designation as sons of God? Where has Christ ever called His people to become Charismatics , Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Catholics, or whatever? Today Christians still ignore the words of Scripture (Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; Titus 3:9-11; etc.) and divide themselves into individual groups under the banner of some organizational head or leader… and then have the nerve to call other believers who choose not to participate in such sectarian behavior “loose cannons”, “uncommitted”, “back- slidden”, “rebellious”, “isolationists”, “those who are not under cover”, etc.

Of course, so many believers on the accusing end don't realize their own ignorance. I pray that one day their eyes will open. The years that have led up to my writing of articles like this one have been challenging, painful and liberating. I have had to repent for much and leave behind traditionalism for truth. This is a process that continues still. Some of the old ways of thinking can be very hard to let go of and sometimes it takes a long season to work through the things I am learning and which I do not always readily understand. I thank God for the work He is accomplishing in other people's lives as well where all such things are concerned. I only pray that informational articles like this one may be a blessing to the body of Christ in this process. My prayer is truly that God will restore us to truth and shake off all that is of man and not of Him.

It is a verifiable fact that the majority of our Protestant concepts of "church" stem directly from Roman Catholic, pagan influence. This is one reason why the Seventh Day Adventists refuse to embrace Sunday as a holy day for Christian worship, because of its strong pagan origins and the fact that Sunday worship historically represents men placing a false god in place of Christ. While I personally have reserves about the extremes to which they magnify "Sabbath" worship (in light of what the New Testament teaches concerning such things Colossians 2:16-17), I appreciate many of the principle reasons they refuse to embrace Sunday as some "official" Christian holy day. To them, it would be the same as yielding to pagan religion and anti-Christ theology. But it is important that non-Adventist Christians also understand these things. Perhaps it will help us better understand one another and also stop placing so much value in "days" of the week and impressing other believers to make sure they don't neglect Sunday meeting. The day is not important! The building and its program are not important. Christians assembling together is good, but we must stop imposing our faulty traditional religious concepts on one another and suggesting they are essential and biblical when they are really nothing of the sort. Christianity is about Christ… and Christ in us! If He remains at the center, these tangents will not distract us.

Coming Home

I have spent these many pages doing something that gives me no pleasure: pulling back the curtain on a system most of us were handed as though it *were* Christianity itself. We have traced the history — how, more than three centuries after Calvary, the simple gathering of the called-out ones hardened into an institution; how a Greek word that never once appears in Scripture (*kuriakon*) crept in and quietly displaced the *ecclesia*; how emperors and, later,

popes shaped the thing we now call “church”; how money and buildings and titles and holy days came to matter more than the living Christ they were meant to serve. We have even heard the great reformers — Luther, Spurgeon, Wesley — plead with their followers not to wear their names, and then watched those very names get carved over doorways anyway.

If you have read this far, let me be clear about what I am *not* saying. I am not asking you to burn anything down, to storm out of your building, or to add “anti-church” to your list of causes. That would only trade one religion for another. The point of all this was never the walls — it was never even the history. The point is Christ.

Here is the whole matter, as plainly as I know how to say it: Christianity is not a place you go, a program you join, or a name you wear. It is a Person you belong to, who has come to live inside you. The Church — the real one, the only one Scripture ever speaks of — is not a building with a steeple; it is you and I and every blood-bought believer on the earth, knit together as one body under one Head. You did not join it by signing a roll. You were born into it the moment you believed. There is nothing more to join. There is nothing else to join.

So what do we do with all of this? We come home. Not to a better denomination or a purer program or a more sincere institution — but to Christ Himself, and to one another as family, the way it was in the beginning. We let Him be the center again. And when He is at the center, the tangents lose their grip — the endless arguing over days and buildings and titles and who is “covered” by whom simply falls away, because none of it was ever the point. The wind of His Spirit begins to blow where it wishes again (John 3:8), and it will not be shut up inside four walls.

I know how hard this is to receive. It cost me years — years of repenting, of laying down things I had held dear, of being misunderstood by people I dearly love. I am still walking it out. I do not have it all figured out, and I never claimed to. But I would not trade the freedom of simply belonging to Jesus for all the religion in the world.

So this is my prayer as I lay down the pen: that God would restore His people to the simplicity of Christ — that He would shake off of us everything that is of man and not of Him, and leave standing only what is truly His.

One flock. One Shepherd. Christ in us, the hope of glory.

Grace and peace to you, friend. Be free in Him.

— David Yeubanks

About this work. *Modern Churchianity* was written by David Yeubanks (begun in 2004) and completed and lightly revised for this edition. You are free to copy, print and share it for non-profit use — quoted in context and with credit to the author. Please never sell it. Scripture quoted or referenced from various translations, including the KJV, NKJV, NLT, and The Message.