

Chapter Three – “Re-Examining Our Concepts of Church – Part II”

In the last chapter, we looked at biblical Church and examined more closely what characterizes the concept of Church at a fundamental level. In this chapter, we'd like to look at the contrast: what is often called “church” today in western society. While our expressions of ourselves as *the* Church will vary from culture to culture, and age to age, the Scriptural principles that reveal God's plan for the *ekklesia* remain constant. It is our concern that the Church today has lost sight of these fundamentals which God purposed for the *ekklesia*. We believe that we've also lost the life and power inherent in these attributes that were once part of the Church's identity!

Before we go any further, however, it must be emphatically stated that we are **NOT** anti-church!!! The Church is God's plan, His Bride, His Body, His Temple, and the object of His fervent passion. We believe wholeheartedly in the gathering together of God's people for the purposes of corporate prayer and worship, fellowship, teaching, equipping, and ministry to one another. This chapter is simply intended to help us re-examine some of the assumptions that we have formulated about “church”. We also seek to uncover how much of our life together has been guided by religious tradition rather than by the Spirit of God and get a better idea of how far we have strayed from God's original intent and purpose.

First: A Modern Church Parable

Lucy drove around the parking lot six times before she could find a space. It was so far from the gleaming edifice called New Hope Church that her dress shoes were pinching her feet before she made it to the front door. By that time, she was already ten minutes late and the service had started. As she raced through the doorway, breathing hard, a smiling usher in coat and tie thrust a bulletin in her hand. His smile never faltered as she grabbed it and ran. *Who was that?* Usually she at least recognized the ushers' faces, though she rarely knew their names. This must be a new one.

She raced up the stairs to the balcony because she knew she was too late to find a seat in the main auditorium. *Great, they are still on the first worship song. I haven't missed too much.* Lucy hated to miss the singing because that was her favorite part of the service. It was the only time she felt a real connection with God. All too quickly, the singing was over and, after the usual exhortation about God loving a cheerful (and generous) giver, they began to take the offering. She studied the interior design of church while the plate went around. It was beautiful, but it still reminded her of the local hospital for some reason. It seemed a little too perfect and somewhat artificial. She mused a bit. *Could they have used the same commercial interior design firm?*

Next came the sermon as the pastor, Dr. Kimball, mounted the platform and shared from the pulpit. All eyes were on him as he skillfully exegeted the Scriptures, his well-modulated voice booming through the expensive sound system as he presented three main points with some illustrations. Though Lucy tried hard to concentrate, her mind kept wandering to the problem she was having at work. She wished she could talk to someone here about it, but there never seemed to be an opportunity for things like that. She glanced to the side and saw a young teenager fighting back tears. *I wonder what that's about? It looks like she's had an upset of some kind today and she's hurting. Look, no one even notices! I wish I could go over and pray for her, but it would probably cause a disturbance if I tried to move closer...*

The music interrupted her thoughts as strains of the Doxology wafted across the building, signaling an end to the service. Instantly, the teen was up and away, heading for the doorway quickly through the crowd. Lucy tried to catch her, but the girl reached the foyer before she could get close. As the young girl reached the door and bolted through, Lucy overheard the usher exclaim loudly, “See you next Sunday!” She saw the teen mumble something, and wondered what must have been going through the girl’s mind.

Lucy followed more slowly, her own mind preoccupied. She couldn’t help overhearing a well-dressed woman nearby as she spoke loudly to her companion.

“What an eloquent sermon today!” she exclaimed to her friend. “I love Dr. Kimball’s preaching! He’s certainly one of the best speakers I have ever heard.”

“Oh, I agree completely!” the companion excitedly responded. “You know, that’s why I come to this church. Dr. Kimball is just so wonderful!”

I’ve never even had a chance to talk to the wonderful Dr. Kimball, except to say hello when he shook my hand. Lucy shrugged. Well, he’s on a different level. He’s an important person and understandably doesn’t have time for someone like me...

With a sigh, she looked around, didn’t see anyone she knew well, and headed briskly for the door. The same usher stood like a sentry in the cavernous foyer, still smiling and clutching his sheaf of bulletins. “See you next Sunday!” he called after her as she headed to her car, leaving church behind for another week in the “real” world.

Western Church in Modern Times – A Brief Look

The Barna Research Group has compiled some interesting statistics on “churchgoers” from their research of American Christians, which George Barna shares in his recent book, *Revolution*. These statistics might be shocking to some, and serve to highlight the present state of affairs in the Body of Christ. How so? According to Barna’s research ... Only 9% of born again adults have a biblical worldview; most believers have no other worship time outside of worship services at church; 8 out of 10 believers do not feel they generally enter into the presence of God or connect with Him during worship services; 50% of believers say they have not experienced the presence of God or connected with Him in any way in the past year; 3 out of 4 believers believe that worship is about them and what they get out of it, not about Him!¹

When Dave read Barna’s statistics, he responded, “Gee, no wonder I have such a burden for the Church!” Barna echoes Dave’s distress over our anemic condition, sharing honestly, “One of the greatest frustrations of my life has been the disconnection between what our research consistently shows about churched Christians and what the Bible calls us to be.”²

In fact, most of us have never experienced *being* the Church in a vibrant and powerful way! *Church is something outside of ourselves, which we add to our lives, rather than an expression of who we are.* Church has become something we “go to”, and something we depend upon for our faith. It has become an entity apart that we have allowed to shape and define who we are and what we do as Christians, as opposed to the Lord Himself shaping and forming us in His image and directing our lives in obedience to Him.

¹ George Barna, *Revolution* (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream IL, 2005) pp. 31-32

² *Ibid*, p. 31

It is important to recognize that the typical model of “church” in western society these days is not necessarily biblical. As Barna points out,

“the Bible neither describes nor promotes the local church as we know it today ... the local church many have come to cherish – the services, offices, programs, buildings, ceremonies – is neither biblical or unbiblical. It is abiblical – that is, such an organization is not addressed in the Bible ... Sometimes we forget that the current forms of religious practices and community were developed hundreds of years ago, long after the Bible was written ...”³

Although our church experiences are all probably quite different, there are a number of things we will likely find in common. These common threads, woven throughout the modern expression of Church, reveal how far we have moved over time from God’s plan and purpose.

Church = Institution, Building or Worship Service

If someone says the word “church” to us, we frequently think of what we *do* on Sunday or of a *building* in which Christians meet. Sometimes we think of the *institution* itself, comprised of the congregation, leadership and the programs offered through its ministry. It is rarely a group of *people* who first come to mind. Yet that is what the *ekklesia* is – people! We are a people called to reveal His glory, a kingdom of priests, living stones being built together as a holy habitation for the living God. We are His Body on earth, designed to be vessels of honor through whom He can move. A heartfelt understanding of the living and organic nature of the *ekklesia* has been robbed from us in modern times. Church has been reduced to a club, a meeting or an organized pile of bricks and glass.

Though church buildings did not exist before the third century,⁴ a church without a building is often considered strange, impoverished, or not a “real” church. Allow us to share an experience we had a few years ago with a woman who worked for the State of New Mexico. We had been notified that our ministry might need to begin submitting an annual report and fee to the state Attorney General’s office. However, we were urged to phone them to find out if we might be exempt from this requirement. The paperwork they had sent us described any legitimate Christian ministry as exempt. However, this woman insisted over the phone that we *must* have a building that people worshipped in on Sunday mornings “like the Catholic Church” or she would not consider us to be a real Christian ministry! Where do you think she developed such an idea?

Modern Church Defines and Often Hinders Relationships

What we call “church” today often defines our relationships with other Christians. Our friendships are based upon and exist around a local church and its activities, rather than flowing out of and resting upon the basis of mutual love for Jesus. *In other words, we are related to one another through the church rather than through Jesus Christ.* Our local church becomes the mortar that holds us together and the foundation upon which our relationships rest. If the institution fails for some reason, such as a moral failing on the part of the pastor, or the occurrence of a church split, then the mortar holding our relationships together often cracks and falls away, leaving people to drift in isolation. Because Jesus is *not* the foundation for our relationships, this foundation can be rocked! If Christian friends leave “our” church and go somewhere else, more often than not the relationship does not remain intact. They are no longer part of our circle, because our circle is defined by our church.

³ Ibid, p. 37

⁴ Gene Edwards, *Beyond Radical* (SeedSowers, Sargent, GA, 1999), p. 20 and Guy Duffield and Nathaniel Van Cleave, *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology* (L.I.F.E. Bible College, Los Angeles, CA, 1983), pp. 422-423

Not too long ago we were made aware of a situation being faced by a dear friend. Some of the folks in his local church, with whom he had a close relationship, had chosen to move on and fellowship with a different group of believers. Because our friend stayed in contact with this family and continued to be friends with them, he came under persecution from his pastors, who felt he was not being “loyal” to them. His pastors were operating under the misconception that the local church, not Jesus, should define our relationships.

Church structure often affects the level of intimacy we are able to experience with fellow believers also. True *koinonia*, the kind of fellowship and communion that takes place on a heart or spirit level, is hindered by the rigidity and inflexibility of modern church structures. Even churches that operate on the cell principle, or that offer home groups, still frequently miss the depth of relationship and intimacy which God has purposed for His people. In our first pastorate, we learned a lot about the importance of deep relationships. In time, we adopted the motto, “the church that plays together stays together.” This motto reflected our commitment to developing deep relationships by spending time with one another and having fun together outside the confines of services, prayer meetings and Bible studies. Even then, however, we were only able to scratch the surface of the depth of transparency, honesty, openness and understanding which the Lord desired for us to corporately experience as His Body! We learned how to play together, but we never really discovered how to flow together as one in our corporate expression of His Body on earth.

Modern church frequently defines our relationships in another way, subtly mandating the *kinds* of relationships we have within the Church. There are usually levels or spheres of relationship that are considered acceptable based on position and rank in the hierarchical structure. Cliques within the congregation also subtly define acceptable relationships within a given body. A class structure is clearly alive and well in the modern church! Tradition usually demands, as with most class structures, that we limit ourselves to what are called “peer level” relationships. This is what we have been taught is right and proper, even though the New Testament promotes equality.^a The result is that much of the Body does not have real fellowship with other parts of the Body. There are dividing walls set up by the system to separate the living stones from one another.

The two of us learned about this invisible dividing wall early on. When we were in our mid-20’s, the associate pastor of our church was a young man of about the same age. He and his wife had two children the same ages as our children. We liked each other and seemed to enjoy the brief conversations we had on Sundays. However, when Dave approached this man about the two of them going fishing or our families getting together for a meal so that we could get to know one another better, he hit a wall. The young pastor explained that he did not think it was a good idea for pastors “to get too close” to the people in their congregations. That was the end of it and we were left to wonder what might have been if these constraints of church tradition had not been so firmly in place.

There are also dividing walls established by denominationalism and sectarianism in the modern church. Church members are often encouraged not to fellowship with other Christians who have a different understanding of various doctrinal issues. For example, those who believe that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are no longer in operation are sometimes warned that those who embrace the gifts are “dangerous” or “deceived”. A great deal of separation happens within the Body of Christ under the pretext of “caution” – this group, we are told, is flaky, emotional and ungrounded in the Word. Another group, we are warned, is legalistic and unenlightened! Dudley Hall believes the sectarianism we see in today’s church is actually rooted in a lack of love.⁵ We don’t have the love of God abiding in us that gives us a love for one another, a love which transcends our differences. Jesus, however, said that this love would be the very thing which reveals to the world that we are His disciples.^b

⁵ Dudley Hall, *Out of the Comfort Zone – The Church in Transition* (MorningStar Publications, Pineville NC, 1991), p.118.

Then there are the denominational labels . . . The use of denominational distinctives often results in division. Why can we not embrace one another as fellow “Christians” instead of labeling ourselves or others as Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Anglicans, Presbyterians, and so forth? Sectarian thinking leads to pride, self-righteousness, mistrust, suspicion, and judgment – not to love, encouragement and support. Could denominational distinctives be part of the reason that we seem to have no power over disease in the Church today? After all, Paul did tell us that one cause of sickness among believers is our failure to rightly judge ourselves *and properly discern the Lord’s Body*.^c It would behoove us to examine the judgments we hold in our hearts towards those who worship differently than we do and who are not a part of our own stream or network within the Body of Christ. It is imperative that we learn to discern the Body as *One* and to recognize that the only name He meant us to carry was His! Jack Gray, the thoughtful octogenarian mentioned in the last chapter, helps us to see the Lord’s intent and perhaps to feel His pain when he writes on his website, *The Pilgrim Path*:

“As we stand in the light of this revelation of a God-initiated, God-glorifying community, taken out to bear none but His name, how tawdry and grubby our divided denominations seem in their efforts to extend their respective domains. How we need to have engraved on our hearts this simple, yet so perfect definition of the Church, “A people to bear His name.” How quick the great apostle Paul was to rebuke the Corinthian believers taking to themselves other names. “Is Christ divided?” was the agonised cry rung from his heart. (1 Corinthians 1:12-13.)”⁶

While serving the Lord in another country, we found that division from sectarian thinking and politics can occur in non-denominational settings as well. We knew of several church leaders who were cautioned by their “area apostle” not to allow “their” people to participate in a regional ministry training center we had established to serve the churches in the area. Interestingly enough, this same apostle had approached us previously about joining with him to establish a training center “under” his “covering”. He had no qualms about our qualifications, doctrine or our hearts to serve. However, when we declined to make it part of his political association, he refused to allow anybody in “his” network to attend. Ironically, one of the objectives of our training center was to equip people to more effectively serve Jesus through their local fellowships.

Today’s church system frequently dictates the relationship we have with non-Christians as well. A few years ago, our neighbor down the street was lamenting the fact that she and her husband were so busy with church, they had no time for other relationships. She had a real burden for our neighborhood and a desire to get to know people there in a deeper way. She had the sense that the Lord was nudging her to look outward and to share His love and life with the people around her. But “church” had been dictating her relationships for so long, she wasn’t sure how to break out of the mold. This is a challenge for most of us. The system tells us we must be at church whenever the doors are open or we are not “faithful”. The system warns that we will be tainted by the impurity of non-believers if we spend time with them. The system suggests to us that the more involved we are in church activities, the more spiritual we will become. There is a subtle pressure, from many directions, to allow church to completely *consume* our lives. Yet each of us must face this challenge and press through it if we are truly to be the salt and light in this world that the Lord has called us to be!

Secular Models, Mentalities and Methods

Modern church structure is another area where biblical principles fare poorly. Most of us are used to being part of a pastor or elder-driven group, run like a corporation, with platform-led Sunday services that embrace a hierarchical model of leadership. Yet, as Watchman Nee pointed out many

⁶ Jack Gray, www.thepilgrimpath.co.nz, “A People for His Name”.

years ago in *The Church and the Work II*, “To have pastors in a church is Scriptural, but the present-day pastoral system is quite unscriptural, it is an invention of man ...”⁷

- ▶ **While we may rightly consider the Church to be a living organism, in truth we still try to run it like an organization – often with the pastor functioning as a spiritual CEO and elders or leadership team as the Board of Directors.**

The two of us operated this way for many years. We believed it to be good and “right”. In all honesty, it was the *only* way to approach church as far as we knew, because we had never known anything different, never questioned it or asked God what He wanted! We were just bumbling along, to a great degree replicating what we had seen, known and been taught ... like most of the Church world today.

There is actually a strong dichotomy in most of today’s churches between professional clergy and laity. The members of the congregation are resigned to being spectators, for the most part, while the leadership conducts the services and does most of the work of the ministry. The leadership is usually looked upon as “ruling” the church and responsible for sustaining its life, certainly in practice if not doctrinally. This position of headship/lordship can be held by a single pastor, a group of presbyters or a board of elders. In one of the countries we have ministered in, churches led by a team of three elders were quite popular. People in these churches were quite convinced that their form of church government was more biblical and closer to God’s original plan. But these elders still ruled the church with a heavy hand, the government continued to be strongly hierarchical, and there remained a great deal of ungodly control. Though three men occupied the head position instead of one, and they called themselves elders instead of pastors, it really wasn’t any different from the traditional pastoral system. It serves as an illustration that, regardless of what governmental form we embrace, Jesus is frequently given only lip service as the Head and Lord of the church. It is the humans who are really “in charge” and “responsible” for what happens. As leaders who operated out of this faulty mindset for many years, we can testify that it is exhausting! We finally realized that we were carrying a burden we were never meant to carry. At the same time, we were hindering others from stepping into God’s plan and purpose for their lives. Oh, what a tangled web we weave!

As those “in charge”, leaders sometimes offer titles or positions to others farther down in the chain of command to reward them for their support. It is handled in much the same way that those in the corporate world promote others who have shown themselves to be “loyal company men”. We once worked closely in ministry with another Christian leader who promised us open doors for ministry among her personal contacts if we would keep our questions and concerns to ourselves, and go along with what she wanted to do. The loyalty-reward system was so ingrained in her thinking that she never gave it second thought. She equated loyalty with blind subservience and was prepared to offer an acceptable reward, if only we would play the game the way she expected! In many ways, this is no different than another business arrangement we can observe in the world. “As long as you are loyal to me, don’t make waves, and give me a percentage of your income, I’ll see to it that you continue to have work...” Which business? Prostitution!

Because we are part of a spiritual entity (the Body of Christ) with spiritual dynamics, but have adopted secular mindsets and methods to regulate our life together, the consequences of disagreement within a church are usually devastating. Congregants are frequently blackballed, and labeled as rebellious or “Jezebels” if they question decisions made by the leadership or are perceived as unsubmitted. The submission often required is not to the Lord, however, but to individuals within the church system. Similarly, pastors sometimes end up in a spiritual tug of war over control with others

⁷ Watchman Nee, *The Church and the Work II* (Christian Fellowship Publishers, New York, 1982), p. 88.

in the church who desire themselves to ascend the “throne” of leadership. This happens so frequently because both clergy and laity have been *set up* by a faulty system that lends itself to conflict over control, and because many of our ideas about authority and submission are skewed. Many precious believers have been crushed by the guilt put upon them and the hurt that follows when those that they trusted and looked to for spiritual guidance viciously turn on them. Many potentially life-changing ministries are sidelined by the very ones who should be equipping and encouraging them because of the way our modern church system tends to work! Likewise, many anointed shepherds are left bruised and broken, and are leaving the ministry in droves, because they are weary of fighting, wounded and disheartened. We will investigate biblical authority and submission later in this book, examining what is often taught in the church and how our misconceptions can inhibit the Body of Christ from functioning the way that God ordained.

Looking for What We Get Out of It

There are other areas where our present-day approach to the concept of Church seems to widely miss the biblical mark and the realization of God’s purpose. Modern Christians are, as a general rule, used to being entertained “at church” by good music, a good sermon and well-planned children’s ministry. We frequently demand a good performance but sanitize our self-centeredness by calling it a desire for excellence. Further, we have become dependent upon programs offered by the church to meet people’s needs. We don’t want to be put out ourselves. We want the church programs to meet the needs for us. In our consumer society we have become consumer Christians, demanding the church to supply what we want, with a readiness to “shop” elsewhere if it does not! Sadly, we are takers, not givers.

This desire to be comfortable and have the leadership entertain us is nothing new. When Moses led the people to Sinai to meet with God, they refused to hear God for themselves, but wanted Moses to hear for them.^d While Moses was on the mountain, the people got tired of waiting for Moses and requested of Aaron (who later became High Priest and the father of the priesthood) to “*make us gods, which shall go before us...*”^e Significantly, Aaron required of the people that they give up their golden earrings to make the calf. Let’s look at what was really happening here! The people didn’t want to hear from God for themselves; they wanted someone to hear for them. They were willing to give up their golden earrings (symbolic of anointed hearing), so that the priesthood would give them what they wanted. Unfortunately, the whole scenario led into idolatry! Could we be doing the same today – not wanting to put forth the effort to hear from God for ourselves and trading anointed hearing for the teachings of leaders that will tell us what we want to hear? Take note of the warning Paul wrote to Timothy:

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables." (2 Timothy 4:3-4, NKJV)

In today’s church world, our attitudes are often characterized by a focus on *me*, and what *I* am getting out of it. Rarely do we come together as the Body of Christ looking for opportunities to edify, encourage, or strengthen others. Largely this is due to the fact that we come to receive, not to give. This me-focused attitude is simply evidence of spiritual immaturity. Would it be accurate to suggest that such immaturity characterizes the western church of today? Is maturity among believers the exception rather than the rule? If so, why is that?

- **Is there something inherent in the religious infrastructure of the modern church which spawns and nurtures spiritual immaturity?**

We believe these are questions to which we should all give prayerful consideration. Jeremiah asked a question related to this self-seeking and self-focused attitude: "*The prophets prophesy falsely, And the priests rule by their own power; And My people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end?*"^f It is a question that each of us faces today. Even though God's people still love to have it so, what will we do in the end?

Adopting the World's Values

Another area where the modern expression of church has strayed from its biblical roots is in the area of core values. We often judge a particular group's success by the number and quality of programs offered. We also make judgments about their validity or success based on how nice or how large a building they have, and how many people attend services at the building. We really believe that "bigger is better" and that the bigger the ministry, the more successful it is. We tend to listen to those leaders we view as successful, paying scant heed to what others might have to share. The unfortunate truth is that when a message is given by the Lord and shared by the pastor of a small church in some obscure place, few outside of his or her own local church will pay much attention. Yet if the same message is shared by the pastor of a mega-church, many press forward to jump on the bandwagon, embracing it with excitement and without hesitation! What we often fail to take into account, however, is that big ministries are often big simply because the leader is a gifted administrator or an eloquent speaker, not a more spiritual leader. We will look further at the contrast between secular and biblical concepts of success in succeeding chapters of this book.

Dee found herself struggling with a secular value system as a young Christian from the southeastern United States. She came from a traditional sort of family and attended a traditional denominational church where folks were measured by what they looked like and what sort of impression they made. She remembers thinking as a teenager that the Pentecostals in her area did not possess the same caliber of Christianity as her own church. She arrived at this conclusion because their numbers were small, they seemed to be very poor, and their church building was an inexpensive, ugly brick box with more dirt than asphalt in the parking lot. They looked anything but successful to her way of thinking, so she ascribed to them and their faith little value. Yet, how had this understanding of value and success been defined? She had learned it from her family and the church world around her. Interestingly enough, many years later she was able to look back on her experiences as a young person and recognize that those Pentecostals had something she and the rest of her Christian friends did not have. In spite of the poverty, they had *joy!* They seemed to look forward to each day with great enthusiasm. They almost always seemed happy and very little seemed to get them down because they were trusting firmly in Jesus, their Savior. She had noticed, but not given any thought to these things at the time, because of the judgments she had made about them.

Another area where we have adopted secular values is in our attitudes towards church leaders. We often glamorize those church leaders we deem successful to the point of worshipping them or idolizing them like rock stars. We've made them celebrities in our midst. We have noticed that this is especially true of those who are recognized as apostles or prophets. Many of us are mired in idolatry and don't even realize it. We put leaders on a pedestal, treat them like they are God, and are devastated when something happens to awaken us to the reality that they have clay feet like rest of us. Many leaders, however, are insecure and begin to welcome and actually encourage this idolatry and worship. Yet the encouragement of such adulation is rarely challenged, we have noticed. The misplaced values of the world have distressingly become an accepted part of the Church.

Dee recalls when she first started working on staff with a well-known ministry many years ago. She relates, "I had been there a few weeks when I came in from lunch with another member of staff to

find a memo that the director of the ministry had called and left a message for me. I set the message to one side while I put my purse away and looked through my other messages. The staff member with me stopped me, her voice filled with panic.

‘What are you *doing*?’ She asked. I told her I was going through my messages.

‘You can’t do that!’ she exclaimed. ‘You have to call him back right this instant!’

‘Why?’ I asked in puzzlement.

‘Because it’s Dr. _____ !!! No one keeps *him* waiting!’”

Dee continues, “I had infinite respect for this man, but felt that my co-worker’s attitude belied an adoration and subservience to this leader that bordered closely on the idolatrous.” Sadly, such a glamorization of people all too frequently characterizes the Body of Christ today. Dave’s dad has extremely impressive credentials as a scientist in his field of chemistry. But he has always humbly put a proper perspective on it all by reminding the people around him that “everyone puts their pants on one leg at a time.” He has never allowed anyone to idolize him or place undue value on his education, abilities or accomplishments. Yet we allow it all the time in the church world. What is wrong with this picture?

Exclusivity, Isolation and “Ownership” of People

In modern times, we usually consider a group or fellowship of believers to be autonomous and separate from the other believers in the area. This is a radical departure from the principles of the New Testament! These days, each group takes a name to identify themselves as separate from other groups of believers in a given locale. For example, I might consider myself to be a part of Miramar Christian Church and *you* to be a part of Emmanuel Baptist Church! Dudley Hall has interestingly pointed out that people tend to think a name will give them an identity, even though identity *really* comes through relationship.⁸ In our carnality, however, we shy away from true relationships, using names as a substitute. Through our dependence on names for identity, we *pretend* we have relationship. In fact, many of us remain isolated at the heart level from others in the Body of Christ, whether they be members of other churches or our own.

In fact, isolation is often subtly encouraged in the modern Church. When pressure is put upon Christians to participate only in programs offered by “their church” or “their denomination”, isolation is promoted. Many churches strive to offer more and better programs so that “their people” will never have to go anywhere else to get what they need. An unfortunate spirit of competition also characterizes many churches. It is revealed when leaders think “their people” are being proselytized. Then the fireworks begin! Where did this strange concept of ownership of people come from? It is certainly not biblical.

Some time ago, a young missionary friend of ours was sharing his concerns about ministering in a particular area. Primarily, what he wanted to do was ferry in supplies to a tribe of indigenous people that was starving. The glitch, he explained, was that a certain denomination had once worked in that area. Although they had been gone for a long time and had not been back to check on the people, he was concerned that they would cause problems for him because he dared to enter “their” territory and minister to “their” people. How low have we sunk when we would let people starve to death rather

⁸ Dudley Hall, *Out of the Comfort Zone – The Church in Transition* (MorningStar Publications, Pineville NC, 1991), p. 47.

than allow someone else to minister to their needs? And yet, we take this attitude in our churches all the time. We never want “our” people to find their food at someone else’s hand!

Sadly, there is an air of exclusivity and a hint of underlying pride in much of the western church today. Many of us feel that we have a corner on the truth and that no one else does or understands things as well as we do. This is a particularly easy trap to slip into, as each of us is *intended* to understand things somewhat differently and we *do* have clearer revelation in some areas than in others. Our mistake lies in seeing ourselves as more spiritual, cutting edge, valid, or mature as a result. The two of us have been ensnared by such pride, and the Lord gently chastens us when it crops up. He points out things we do not particularly want to see, allowing us to see the ugliness remaining in our hearts. Jesus dealt with this same attitude in His disciples. John approached Him at one point saying that he and others of the twelve had seen a man casting out demons in Jesus’ name. But since he was not part of their group and did not follow them by doing it their way, they forbade him to continue to minister. Jesus then addressed this sectarianism and corrected them, saying, “*For he who is not against us is on our side.*”² According to Jesus, we are all in this boat called Christianity together! Despite our diversity, we are meant to work together, allowing the Lord to create a habitation or living temple for His presence in the earth.

We Think Going to Church is What It’s All About

As modern-day Christians, we generally believe that “going to church” is what is important, and we teach those who are newly saved that to be “good” Christians, their first priority must be regular church attendance. The Sunday morning service is the focus of the week and the mainstay of many a Christian’s walk with the Lord. For many, church services provide their primary time with God and their only time of spiritual feeding and worship during the week. We often depend on our local churches to spoon-feed us in this sense, and we’ve been subtly encouraged that this dependence is good! *We must re-iterate here that the two of us are certainly not anti-church.* But we believe that a number of misconceptions about church have led to the modern church becoming a substitute for our relationship with the Lord and for taking personal responsibility in our walk with Him. We observe that “church” has become the all-important thing which Christianity tends to revolve around, when it is really *not* what this Christian walk is about at all!

Recently, we received an email forwarded by a friend. It was a copy of something written by an eight year old boy from Chula Vista, California, part of a homework assignment in which he was asked to explain God. While most of it was rather cute, there was a part that caught our eye and saddened us. He wrote, “You should always go to church on Sunday because it makes God happy ... Don’t skip church or do something you think will be more fun like going to the beach. This is wrong.” Can you see how the institutional system is indoctrinating our children with the religion and legalism that constitute its very nature? We wish we could share with this little boy that some of our most precious experiences of “church” have been on the beach, in the mountains or in a park, discovering a deeper relationship with God’s people and experiencing His presence in a fresh way!

Most of us also feel that we must invite others to a service “at church” in order for them to get a taste of God or to discover who He is.

- ▶ **There seems to be a mindset of bringing people to the church service or building to find God, rather than our taking God out to the people in the world.**

Most of us indeed depend on the church to provide the way to touch the hearts of our family, friends and neighbors. We don’t know *how* to be vessels through whom God can work to touch their lives, so we depend on the church to do it for us! In doing so, we never fulfill our destiny to be salt

and light in the midst of a dark and tasteless world. One of the most tragic examples of this mindset we have seen was a letter penned by the European director of a well known international ministry organization a number of years ago. In it, he was lamenting the fact that his teenage son found church to be “boring and irrelevant”, so he never attended. As a solution to this dilemma, this international leader wrote something to the affect that, “we must find new ways to make church more exciting, otherwise, nobody will come and the lost will never know Jesus.” Did God really intend our church services to be the only place the lost will find Jesus? Most of us know the answer to this question! And yet we have still replaced, “Go into all the world and preach...” with “Go get the world and bring them to church...”

Because we usually equate spirituality with “church”, many people believe that their calling or ministry must be fulfilled at church or within the context of church programs. It is our observation that many people have grown disillusioned with church because they believe their ministry gifts are meant to be released only within the context of the local church. They continue to wait for the opportunity as each year goes by. Yet, there is practically-speaking, little way for this to ever happen. A study of the New Testament reveals that ministry was never intended by God to be limited to our times of gathering together as believers or to those programs sanctioned by our particular group.

- ▶ **Ministry was intended to take place wherever we, the Church, happened to be – at all times, anywhere and everywhere!**

A relatively brief look at Jesus’ life will reveal that most of the miraculous, power-filled, life transforming ministry that He did happened *outside* the synagogue. We will examine the concept of ministry further in another chapter.

We also tend to depend on the modern church to give us teaching, vision, faith, security and motivation. We have begun to *worship church* in the sense that we look to church to provide all the things we should be looking to the Lord Himself to provide in our lives. In a sense, we’ve made the wineskin that Jesus spoke of more important than the wine!

- ▶ **We have taken the wineskin, sewn on gems and pearls and various decorations, and begun to think that Christian life is all about the beautiful wineskin we have.**

In doing so, we have neglected the wine and the Vine Himself! Jesus and the Holy Spirit often take a back seat in our lives and churches while we busy ourselves with improving the wineskin of “church”.

Seeking Affirmation Through the Church

Most of us have gotten the message that if the *church* affirms us, then *God* affirms us and that until a church validates us, we are not really accepted or qualified by God. Said another way, we tend to believe that “to be in right standing with God, we must be in right standing with a recognized local church.” This leads a significant number of believers today to spend much of their lives seeking the approval and affirmation of those whom they respect in their local churches. While being in proper relationship with the Body of Christ is critical to our Christian growth, to derive our self-perception or sense of value from this relationship is a snare that shifts our focus from pleasing God to pleasing and worshiping man.

The underlying dynamics involved in this mindset are so pervasive that we have dedicated an entire chapter to this subject (which won’t even scratch the surface). But for now, here’s something to think about: How was Jesus perceived by the religious establishment (think “church”) of His day? Was He motivated by the belief that He must be in right standing with them, or was He able to face the

religious pressure and rejection because He received His affirmation, qualification, and authority from another source?

A Co-dependent Relationship Between Leadership and Congregations

Finally, in modern churches there is often an artificial nature to the relationship between leadership and members of the congregation, which gives rise to some unhealthy dynamics. These dynamics work to hinder the Church from fulfilling the plan and purpose that God had for her from before the beginning.

- ▶ **A detrimental symbiotic relationship has developed in many churches between the leadership and the congregation. We call this kind of unhealthy relationship “co-dependency”.**

In co-dependent churches, the congregation gives up the right to contribute or make decisions in return for a dependence on the pastor and the leadership to do everything for them. The laity feels absolved of responsibility to take initiative or lay down their lives in a significant way because they have given over that right to the pastor and other leadership. The pastor and other leaders, meanwhile, willingly shoulder the burden of responsibility and work in return for the sense of importance, need, value and identity that they derive from their position of authority within the church. Both groups operate as *enablers*, helping the other continue to operate in their unhealthy, as well as unbiblical, patterns. Christian Smith comments on this dynamic,

“The clergy profession is fundamentally self-defeating. Its stated purpose is to nurture spiritual maturity in the church – a valuable goal. In actuality, however, it accomplishes the opposite by nurturing a permanent dependence of the laity on the clergy. Clergy become to their congregations like parents whose children never grow up, like therapists whose clients never become healed, like teachers whose students never graduate ... **the result is that the laity remain in a state of passive dependence.**”⁹

The New Testament pattern, however, is that the saints take personal responsibility for their own walk with the Lord and for the work of the ministry, and that the leadership in the *ekklesia* functions primarily to equip the saints towards this end.^h The New Testament pattern shows us cooperation and an *interdependent* relationship among all believers, who are joined to the Head – Jesus Christ, rather than a co-dependent relationship between the two groups viewed as the “professionals” and the “amateurs”.

Biblically, there is no artificial division between leadership and laity that would reinforce the unhealthy patterns of co-dependency seen in today’s churches. BOTH Greek words *cleros* and *laos*, the ones to which our English words clergy and laity are related, are used in the New Testament to refer to *all* of the Church or *all* of God’s people. It is grievous that the biblical terminology was perverted by men to serve their own purposes, and that this perversion has gone unchallenged for so long. Historically, the professional ministry of the “clergy” (as we use the term today) was not a part of the church world until the 2nd or 3rd century. One church historian, for example, describes the earlier days of the Church as only “loosely-coordinated”, but then goes on to note that, “By the third

⁹ Christian Smith, *Voices in the Wilderness (magazine)*. “Church Without Clergy”; Nov/Dec 1988.

century the church was everywhere divided into dioceses, with bishops holding the reins of government in firm hands.”¹⁰

Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe believes that this modern division between clergy and laity has its roots in the doctrine of the Nicolaitans mentioned in Revelation 2:6,15. The word *Nicolaitan* is derived from the root *Nicolaus*, meaning “to conquer the people.” He maintains that they initiated a false division between members of the Body of Christ, which became a doctrine in Pergamos, even though it was taught nowhere in the New Testament.¹¹

Where Did We Get Off Track?

How has the Church arrived at such a confused state? There are historically a number of reasons for it, in addition to the doctrine of the Nicolaitans mentioned in the preceding paragraph. First, as the Church mushroomed in numbers during its first few centuries, human leaders gradually yielded to the carnal need to control what was happening. Further, they relied on human wisdom as to how to go about it. Though we tend to accept everything the “early church fathers” said and did as gospel, it is interesting to note that Ignatius (A.D. 67 – 107) lobbied within the existing Church to gain support for centralizing control and structuring the Church like the civil government.¹² He eventually succeeded, introducing secular thinking and institutionalism into the Church. This brought a class structure similar to those we see historically among societies with “lords and serfs” and “masters and slaves”. Certainly, the establishment of a ruling class we call clergy can thereafter be identified in the Church.

Another result of the move to centralize control using secular methods involved a change in how authority was viewed and used. Over several hundred years, church practice gradually shifted away from ascribing authority as a natural outflow of calling, gifting and anointing, to embracing an artificial kind of authority imposed by title and position. The concept of leadership also changed, from a servanthood model to a hierarchical model, as Christians began imitating the government of the secular world within Church life. Leadership was no longer viewed as serving others by lifting them up and encouraging them forward, but rather as being “over” others and telling them what they should do. We will look at the concepts of leadership more fully in subsequent chapters.

Another contribution historically to the state of the modern church happened at the time that the Roman Emperor Constantine issued his Edict of Toleration in 313 A.D. His edict put an end to the persecution of Christians that had so marked the previous centuries. Seventy years later, the Emperor Theodosius took things a step further and declared Christianity to be the state religion of the Roman Empire. All Roman subjects were forced to accept Christianity in order to maintain citizenship, hold office or conduct business.¹³ Because non-Christian status brought persecution, there was an onslaught of pagans who “joined” the Church to simply avoid persecution. They brought with them their pagan feasts, temple worship, goddess worship, priesthood, and so forth. Before long, these things became a normal part of “Christianity”. This is where many of our holidays came from, as well as the idea of going to a building set apart for meeting with God, a return to liturgical forms, the worship of Mary, an elite priesthood (called by different titles since the Reformation), etc. All of these things are merely sanitized versions of things that were originally part of pagan worship! One church history text summarizes the consequences of actions taken by the emperors Constantine and

¹⁰ Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *The Story of the Christian Church* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1970), p. 53.

¹¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. “An Exposition of the New Testament Comprising the Entire ‘BE’ Series” – Jkt., Re 2:1. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996, 1989 AND *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the New Testament*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1997, 1992.

¹² Susan C. Hyatt, *In the Spirit We’re Equal* (Hyatt Press, Dallas, 1998), p. 40-41.

¹³ Bill Hamon, *The Eternal Church* (Christian International, 1981), p. 89.

Theodosius in this way, “The ceasing of persecution was a blessing, but the establishment of Christianity as the state religion became a curse.”¹⁴

Many people have mistakenly assumed that our use of a temple for worship, the existence of a priesthood (both official and unofficial) within the Church, and the use of liturgies to approach God were the result of following His pattern for worship in the Old Testament. They think that because we see the tabernacle of Moses and Solomon’s temple there, as well as a priesthood and prescribed liturgy, that these things are at least sanctioned by God, if not ordained, for today. What they fail to take into account, however, is that these things in the Old Testament were meant to be only a foreshadowing or a glimpse in the natural of what Jesus would later provide for us through His death and resurrection. Jesus did away with the priesthood by becoming our High Priest and the *only* mediator between God and man.¹ His resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit dispensed with the tabernacle and temple by causing *us*, as we embrace His atoning work, to become the temple or dwelling place of God.¹ He nullified the need for prescribed rituals and liturgy to come into the presence of a holy God, because He rent in two and removed the veil that separates man from God.^k He created a new and living way by His blood into God’s presence.¹

Examining the New Testament reveals to us that the early Christians had the understanding that temples, priests and liturgies were fulfilled in Christ! They looked for no temple or building to worship in, they sought to put in place no priesthood, and they incorporated no liturgy into their meetings. *It was only as the pagan element within the Church grew and gained influence that these things were incorporated into church life and practice.*

By the 7th century, the Church had fully entered into what has been called “the Dark Ages”. It was so steeped in paganism and secular thinking by then, and the Holy Spirit generally so quenched, that the light of Christ was no longer shining brightly within it. There were, of course, exceptions in various quarters, what many have called the “hidden remnant”. But for the most part, the Church during the Dark Ages was polluted with secular thinking, weighed down with pomp and pride, oppressed by demons of control, voracious for power, and beset with corruption.

The Dark Ages lasted until the Reformation of the late 16th century. While God has restored our understanding of many biblical truths since the time of the Reformation, and cleaned up a great deal of doctrinal corruption, the church system itself has not changed all that much! As a variety of historians have noted, the Reformists lacked the impetus to incorporate the truths they were seeing into the actual practices of the Church. Things changed a bit, but there is still a very long way to go. The Protestant Reformation brought revelation in several areas of doctrine and theology. Perhaps a reformation of the 21st century will extend that revelation into the area of Church life and the dynamics of how we function together *as* the Church. It is our fervent prayer that this might be the case!

Food for Thought

1. How would *you* define “church” to someone from a previously unknown tribe deep within the jungles of Asia or South America, someone with no context in which to understand the concept?
2. What do you notice is missing from your experience of Church as you observe what is happening around you?

¹⁴ Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *The Story of the Christian Church* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1970), p. 62.

3. Do you see any way that you might be confusing connectedness in the Church with an unhealthy dependency on the system or leadership to meet your needs? How can your relationship with others in the Church be strong without being idolatrous?
4. How do you think the Lord might want to use you to more greatly contribute in edifying and strengthening the group of which you are a part?

^a (Galatians 3:26-28; Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9; James 2:1-4,9)

^b (John 13:35)

^c (1 Corinthians 11:28-31)

^d (Exodus 20:18-21)

^e (Exodus 32:1)

^f (Jeremiah 5:31)

^g (Mark 9:38-40)

^h (Ephesians 4: 11-12)

ⁱ (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 3:1; 4:14-16; 5:5; 6:20)

^j (1 Corinthians 3:16; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:21-22)

^k (Mark 15:38; 2 Cor 3:14-16)

^l (Hebrews 10:19-20)