

New Family!

Koinonia in the Ekklesia of Christ

By Marina Greenwood

What is "Church," Anyway?

After 35 years of looking for a "good church," it's about time I asked that question! In those 35 years since I began my quest for a church that I could have confidence in, I have had more than 20 different periods of starting over. Moves were made from one church to another due to relocations or bad experiences that forced me to leave one group and continue looking for a more biblical one.

What I was amazed to discover is that "church" is not even an accurate translation for the Greek word "ekklesia" (eck-clay-SEE-uh). And "fellowship," described by the Greek word "koinonia" (coin-oh-NEE-uh), is what God means for us to experience in being part of this ekklesia but it is alien to our individualistic, Western minds. "Koinonia in the Ekklesia of Christ" is God's plan, but it is about as foreign to our natural minds and to our American church patterns as the words are foreign to our language.

So we do need to go back to the Greek to try to understand these concepts. As you think of your own experiences with "church," I hope you'll be willing to rethink your assumptions, traditions, and beliefs. And I hope you will catch enough of a glimpse of God's higher and better ways—his precious promises of what he intends new life in a new family, the family of God, to look and feel like—that you'll be encouraged to seek it until you find it, too.

My personal goal is to quit using the word "church" so I can train myself to be conscious of the biblical meaning of ekklesia and koinonia. It's so hard to undo the connotations and traditions and experiences associated with "church," so I'd rather not use it.

Can you relate? Have you felt frustration in your own experience of "going to church," as I have? Have you also had hopes disappointed as you have sought a church family? Have you settled for less than what you hoped to find? Have you given up on finding a spiritual family? Or are you still seeking, still hoping to find others with whom you can experience what you see in the Bible? My hope, for my own life and for anyone who reads this booklet, is that we won't settle for less than God intended us to have. Jesus died for us in order to give us new birth, new life, new love, and a new family. What a shame it would be to look back on our lives and discover that we left his gifts unopened or unused!

The Mind of Christ

Before we dig into the Greek meanings of ekklesia and koinonia, however, we need to be sure we're open to the possibility that there could be a different way to think about "church." It's very easy to mindlessly follow the teachings and practices of whatever religious traditions we grew up with. It's uncomfortable to be asked to reexamine what we are used to, even if we may be dissatisfied with some aspects of our own church experiences.

We need to always be consciously committed to seeking more and more truth. We must decide up-front that we'll be willing to change our beliefs and our practices whenever we learn more. That commitment is rare to find in religious people, and even when we want to stay humble and teachable before God, it's hard to stay focused on spiritual issues.

Long stretches of my own life have passed in a spiritual fog, when I haven't even been aware of missing out on what God intended me to experience as a Christian. At times an experience or circumstance has brought me to my senses and I've realized that I need to pay attention to questions, dissatisfactions, or lack of peace. Other times I've been exposed to some further biblical teaching that has challenged me.

I'm thankful for everything that has worked together for my good (Romans 8:28) to keep me gradually learning, growing, and changing, even though most times the lessons have been at least uncomfortable and often outright painful. I'm growing to the point of feeling less dread of the hard lessons I expect to learn for the rest of my life. I can't honestly say yet that my default is to "consider it pure joy" when I "face trials of many kinds" as James 1:2 urges us to do because they develop perseverance and maturity! But I'm comforted by the encouragement in Hebrews 12:11 that "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it." I accept that it will never become natural for me or anyone else to understand God's wisdom without the help of his Spirit.

Jesus' first recorded public message, the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5-7, amazed his hearers "because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law" (7:28-29). He often said, "You have heard

that it was said...But I say..." and then he cut through the traditions of man and got to the heart of real spirituality, God's wise and perfect perspective. The people were awed at his insight and courage as he spoke of truth that went deeper than they had ever heard.

In that first sermon, Jesus puts responsibility on each of us for whether we seek, find, and choose to take the road that leads to life. That is the theme running through Matthew 7. He starts out by admonishing us to quit focusing on everyone else and to examine ourselves first. He says in 7:1-5 not to judge (condemn) others hypocritically and to deal with our own glaring sins ("planks") before we try to help others overcome their weaknesses ("specks").

He urges us in 7:7-12 to "ask...seek...and knock" with the promise that if we do, we will "receive...find...the door will be opened." He continues to urge us to seek in 7:13-14, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Why do only a few find it? It can only be because few are seeking it.

Even when we are seeking the road to life, Jesus warns in 7:15-20 that there will be false prophets who can lead us astray—those who will claim to be speaking for God but who insert their own opinions. Jesus says we are to examine the fruit of their lives and their message. We can't make the excuse to God that the teachers we followed are to blame for our own errors. He tells us to expect many false teachers who help Satan (most of the time unwittingly, we hope) in his scheme to keep as many as possible from knowing God and his truth (Matthew 24:11, Acts 20:29-30 Corinthians 11:13-15, 1 Timothy 1:3-7, 1 Timothy 6:3-5, 2 Timothy 4:3-4, 2 Peter 2, 1 John 4:1).

Because we have the Bible to study for ourselves, we are responsible for our own beliefs and practices. In 7:21-23, Jesus comes right out and says that many who will expect to hear a warm welcome into the kingdom of heaven will be told, "Away from me, you evildoers!" Jesus' point in all he has said in this chapter is that it is very easy to miss the truth, and it takes conscientious, diligent, humble, pure-hearted effort on our part to find it.

Finally, just when one could start to get discouraged and hopeless about how anyone could ever feel confident before God, Jesus closes out his message with a promise. In 7:24-27, he says that "everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice" will have a life built on a solid foundation, "the rock" of Jesus' words, God's truth revealed for us to live by.

Paul followed Jesus' example in 1 Corinthians 1-2, where he calls us to the same paradigm shift that Jesus did. First he appealed to the Corinthian Christians not to use shallow, worldly thinking that led to divisions and immaturity. Next he tried to persuade them to grasp the wisdom of God revealed in the crucifixion of Christ. He says it is foolishness to most people but to those who believe it, Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Corinthians 1:24-25). Often we can't understand God's will with our own logic or wisdom, but if we accept what God says and obey it, we can then see why it's true (John 7:17).

Then Paul says something amazing. To quote bits and snatches just won't do. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 must be read, re-read, meditated upon, and believed so that this shift in perspective can truly take place:

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"—but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. *This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.* The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" *But we have the mind of Christ.*

After Paul taught about the truly mind-boggling (perhaps mind-un-boggling would be more accurate) promise that God through his Spirit gives us "the mind of Christ," he admonished them—and us—to grow up and get beyond the basic doctrines. God intends for us to understand and apply deeply spiritual, wise principles to our lives. He wants us to experience "life to the full" that only he can give (John 10:10), the "life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 6:19).

In 2 Corinthians 5:16-6:2, Paul again emphasized our need to shift to the new paradigm:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

In Romans 8:5-17, Paul earnestly tries to persuade us that we need to consciously and constantly reset our default mindset, which is only possible through the help of the Spirit of God if he lives in us:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and coheirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Once we start to grasp that God calls us to a completely new life that flows from a completely new perspective and paradigm, we see that the New Testament Scriptures repeat the theme over and over. The gift of God—of transformation from the old worldly-wise mindset and pattern of life to God's higher, deeper, and better "New Covenant" way—is the foundational assumption of every letter written to the first Christians (for example, Romans 12:1-2, Ephesians 4:20-24, Colossians 3). (For a more comprehensive focus on the New Covenant promise of transformation from within, see the booklet "New Life! The New Covenant Paradigm.")

In John 8:32, 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." He said in John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." And 2 Peter 1:3-4 proclaims: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires."

The starting point for our freedom and the full life Jesus offers is to seek knowledge of Jesus' teaching, to be sure it is his teaching that we are holding to and not the traditions of man, either our own or those of any religious group. So let's go back to the original language of the New Testament writers and see what "spiritual truths in spiritual words" God revealed to us.

In the very early days of the ekklesia, an angel of God released the apostles from jail and told them, "Go...and tell the people the full message of this new life" (Acts 5:20). In our day and time that full message is not easily found by "going to church." Please seek it with me so we can find and experience it together!

Ekklesia ≠ Church!

"Ekklesia" is the Greek word that is translated "church" over 100 times. It means "an assembly of the called out." It was not a new word to Jesus' followers because it was used in secular life in Greek culture to refer to an assembly

of citizens called out to decide some issue. An example of this usage is found in Acts 19:23-41, where three times it is translated “assembly.”

But when Jesus said in Matthew 16:18, “...on this rock I will build my [ekklesia], and the gates of Hades will not overcome it,” his plan to build an assembly or gathering of those he calls to himself clearly had a different, spiritual dimension. Jesus’ indestructible “ekklesia” would be built on “the rock” of the truth that he is the Son of God (Matthew 16:16)—the Son who would go on to die and be resurrected to make it possible for us to experience life as God designed us to live it.

Why do I want to quit using the word “church” as a translation for ekklesia? Because “church” is not derived from the Greek word “ekklesia,” but from “kuriakos” or “kuriakon,” which means “belonging to the Lord.” It is used only two times in the New Testament: once in 1 Corinthians 11:20 referring to the “Lord’s supper” and once in Revelation 1:10 to describe the “Lord’s day” as the day of the week when John received the revelation he described in that book. It’s a fine word in and of itself. But it describes something completely different from ekklesia, and it is an adjective, not a noun.

In the case of the “Lord’s supper,” it reveals the perspective the earliest Christians had on the memorial that Jesus instituted at his last meal with his apostles. This rite was being demeaned by their attitude as they participated in it. Paul admonished them to remember that it is no ordinary meal but rather the *Lord’s* supper, to be shared in with reverence for Jesus and for his body of believers.

By the time Revelation was written, John’s use of “Lord’s day” confirms what we see in Acts 20:7, “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread.” Sunday, the day that Jesus was resurrected, became the regular day of assembling. Hence it became referred to as the “*Lord’s* day,” the day when God’s children weekly gathered in groups as the “assembly of the called out” to worship their Lord. They met to celebrate and commemorate his death, burial, and resurrection—to “break bread” or partake of what we call “communion” or the Lord’s supper—and to encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Why did “church” become associated with and used to translate ekklesia? That’s a good question that the translators of almost every English version will have to answer. My hunch is that it was because “church” (or it’s precursors) had become commonly used by the fourth century to refer to the meeting place, “[the house] of the Lord.” The association of it with the place of worship was implied and understood by the time it came into common usage. The etymology of the word “church” is, “Gk. kyriakon (adj.) ‘of the Lord’ was used of houses of Christian worship since c.300, especially in the East.” (See <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=church> on the internet.)

“Church” became synonymous with the institution of religion that was deeply entrenched when the first English translations were done. Leaders of the religious status quo found it easy to put their own meaning on the word that they chose to use. A more accurate translation would reveal a need for change in established doctrine and practice! (This is similar to the reason “baptism” was used to translate the Greek word “baptisma,” which means “immersion” but by the time of English translations had long since become perverted by the practice of sprinkling or pouring water on babies).

William Tyndale paid with his life for translating and printing an English New Testament—the first ever. He used “congregation,” never “church,” for ekklesia. He was committed to providing an accurate version for the understanding of and use by the common man rather than using English words that suited the purposes of the religious establishment (the Church of England, which differed from the Catholic Church mainly in its earthly ruler, the King of England—Henry VIII and his successors—versus the Pope).

Through the years as translations have become available to more and more people, there have been some efforts made to rethink “the way we’ve always done it.” The Protestant Reformation is well known. It started with Luther’s 95 Theses in 1517, objecting to certain Catholic Church traditions, and was fueled by Tyndale’s English translation of the New Testament in 1525, which threatened the Church of England. Luther only meant to change some errors within the Catholic Church, not to start Lutheranism. Other “Protestant” denominations also developed out of this mentality of reforming parts of the existing traditions or doctrines. The Restoration Movement of the 1800’s in America led to the growth of congregations calling themselves “churches of Christ,” with the goal of getting away from denominationalism by going all the way back to restoring New Testament principles rather than merely reforming existing traditions.

But in both of these major movements in the history of Christendom, eventually a new status quo settled in—with newly entrenched traditions! The effort to restore and guard New Testament doctrine, practices, and attitudes waned as succeeding generations got comfortable with new versions of “the way we do things.” It’s an understandable

weakness of human nature to seek comfort and security. That's why we are clearly warned in the Scriptures of the temptation to go by our own wisdom rather than God's revealed will.

Overall, the word "church" has not been questioned as it continues to be used in current translations and defined by whatever group is using it. The King James Version was translated with rules given to the scholars which restricted the use of English words that would undermine certain established doctrines and traditions. (See on the internet <http://www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/> to find more detail about the history of English Bibles. And for more information about the translation of ekklesia as "church" in particular, see the article on the internet at <http://theexaminer.org/volume8/number1/church.htm> titled "'Church:' From God or From Man?") Though there have been other English translations that have used "assembly" or "congregation" for ekklesia, none of the most well-known and widely used ones do so, perpetuating the institutional connotation of "church." That makes it hard to think in terms of people instead of a building or an organization!

Ekklesia = "Assembly of the Called Out"

When Jesus said he would build his ekklesia in Matthew 16:16-19, he was saying he would call everyone who believes in him out of the world into an assembly that would be "a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14). They would be described as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" in 1 Peter 2:9, and "God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved" in Colossians 3:12. We see in 2 Corinthians 6:16 what kind of "building" Jesus had in mind: "For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.'"

This would be the fulfillment of the New Covenant promise that Hebrews 8:10 quotes from Jeremiah 31:33: "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." That Gentiles (non-Jews) would be included in the promise was prophesied in Hosea and quoted in Romans 9:24-26: "...even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: 'I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one,' and, 'It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

2 Thessalonians 1:8-10 promises that those who become "his people" have a truly "marvelous" day to look forward to, in contrast to the day of regret and condemnation of those who reject his call: "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you."

The idea of God "calling" people out of the world and into Jesus' ekklesia has confused many people. Jesus said in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." It almost sounds as if God chooses to draw some but not others. But the next verse clarifies how God does the calling: "Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me." How do we do that? Listening to Jesus is how we listen to the Father: "For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say" (John 12:49-50).

John 12:32 clarifies this idea further: "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself," which, the next verse explains, showed the kind of death he was going to die. The death of Jesus on the cross, and his resurrection and victory over sin and death, was the only way that we could be enabled to come to God. And it proved that he was truly speaking for the Father. As John 8:28 says: "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me." Jesus died for all. It is sad that not all choose to answer the call of the cross.

Jesus made it very clear who he calls, in Luke 5:32, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Is there any person on earth who is not a sinner? Jesus' death pronounces judgment on all of us, as 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 points out: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." Bottom line, we know that God "is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). All are called. It is very sad that so few people listen and respond with repentance.

Sometimes people get confused about what is God's role and what is ours in how we as sinners become reconciled with God. We know that we can't save ourselves, as Ephesians 2:8-9 makes clear: "For it is by grace you have been

saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” God has created us all with the freedom to choose whether or not we will receive the gift of his grace. His offer to save us (his part) is received “through faith” (our part). When we believe that Jesus died for us, we do become compelled by Christ’s love to live for him. The gift of saving grace is offered to all. It’s so sad that most don’t have the faith through which it is received.

How does one hear God’s call and then answer it? In John 1:12-13, we are promised that when we “receive him...believe in his name,” we are given the “right to become children of God...born of God.” When a right is granted, it must be exercised in order for the benefit to be experienced. For instance, having the right to vote means we may vote; but if we don’t exercise the right, we (and whoever we’d have voted for) won’t benefit from having it! How do we exercise the “right to become” God’s child and actually experience being “born again” as Jesus described in John 3:3-5?

Jesus spelled out for his apostles what to teach people about the new birth—how to be forgiven and spiritually empowered—when he gave them their commission to begin building his ekklesia. The simple Gospel, which means “good news,” in Mark 16:15-16 is to be taught and responded to: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Matthew 28:19-20 says it another way: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

In other words, those who believe the good news that Jesus died in our place and offers us new life free from the control and penalty of sin will gladly be baptized, which means “immersed into Christ,” as we see Romans 6:3 and Galatians 3:26-27. (For a comprehensive discussion about the good news of new birth through baptism, see the booklet “New Birth! Known by God”). Once a person is “in Christ,” which is where one must be in order to experience the full life he offers, then the amazing promises God makes to his children start coming true! As Colossians 3:2-4 urges us to remember, “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”

Acts 2 is the wonderful account of the first time the call of God went out to the masses. God’s timing was right for the commission Jesus gave to his apostles to begin being fulfilled. When Jesus promised to build his ekklesia, he told Peter in Matthew 16:19, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” All during Jesus’ ministry he promised, “The kingdom of God is near,” as we see in Matthew 3:2, 4:17, 10:7; Mark 1:15; and Luke 10:9,11, 19:11, 21:31. As Jesus prepared to go back up to heaven, he instructed the apostles in Luke 24:45-49: “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’”

This they did, and on the day of Pentecost when Jerusalem was filled with Jews who had come from all over the known world, the “power from on high” did rest on the apostles, and Peter used the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” that Jesus promised to give him. He preached the very first good news message, explaining God’s wisdom and plan in sending his Son to die and be resurrected.

The conclusion in verse 36 convicted many of them of their sin: “Therefore, let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” They were “cut to the heart” (2:37) and begged Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” They realized that they had rejected God’s Son and had allowed him to be killed. His death was on their heads, his blood stained their hands; they were just as guilty as those who drove the nails—as is true of each of us now as well. Their desperation makes it seem that they feared it was too late, that the gate of the Kingdom of heaven was shut to them. If only all of us were so desperate!

It was then that Peter used the “keys of the kingdom” to unlock the gate. Early in his ministry, Jesus taught in Matthew 7:13-14, “Enter through the narrow gate....small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” Where—really who—is the gate? “I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved,” Jesus revealed in John 10:9 shortly before he was arrested and crucified.

Peter issued the very first public call of God and brought in the new covenant promise. In Acts 2:38-39, he answered the desperate plea of those who heard him with this good news: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” What great news!

The responsibility for accepting or rejecting the call that is given to all people rests on each individual (2:40): “With many other words he warned them and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’” How can we “save ourselves”? Of course we can’t forgive our own sins or make ourselves right with God. But we are the ones who determine whether the call of God will do us any good. In a very real sense, we either save ourselves or condemn ourselves by whether or not we believe in and receive Jesus and then exercise the right to become children of God by being born again as we are baptized (immersed) into Christ.

“Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (2:41). What an awesome first day of God calling and then welcoming those who answered into the kingdom of heaven! The kingdom was then not “near” but “here!” The gate was unlocked and anyone who chose to enter in could do so, including us now as “far off” ones he spoke of.

The truth that the world needed to hear in the first century and needs to hear now is how to get into Jesus Christ in the first place and then how to live “in Christ” as a part of his “body.” That analogy is how his ekklesia is aptly described in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and many other places. We will turn our focus to the life found only in Christ and how we function in his body for the rest of this booklet. But because it’s so important to be sure we have heard the true call of God and have answered that call in the way God tells us to, we need to look back at a parable Jesus told that dealt with this very idea:

In Matthew 22:1-14, Jesus told a parable among the many lessons he taught in what he knew would be his last week before he was arrested and crucified. He described a wedding feast where the original invitees rejected the invitation, so then anyone and everyone who would come were invited. Yet Jesus focused in on one guest: “But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

What is the seemingly harsh lesson here? We are invited, along with everyone else, to God’s wedding feast in honor of his Son, Jesus Christ, aren’t we! But that doesn’t mean we come as we are; we must put on the “wedding clothes.” What does that mean? Galatians 3:26-27 answers us: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” We must all be “clothed with Christ” by being “baptized into Christ.” Have you answered the call of God, his invitation to join the feast? It’s so important to be sure we have entered the “small gate,” gotten on the “narrow road,” been “born again,” and been “clothed with Christ” through baptism.

But that’s only the beginning. Then we need to grow up!

The book of 1 Corinthians was written to a particular ekklesia that needed help getting past infancy in their lives as children of God. We can learn much from Paul’s admonition and teaching to them.

Chapter 1 lays down as a foundation the “call” of God. In the first verse, Paul jumped right in to the concept by describing his own apostleship in those terms: “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...” We know his calling was miraculous and dramatic on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Is that what every person is to experience? No, as we see when he shifted to their own calling in the rest of the chapter.

In verse 2, Paul said: “To the [ekklesia] of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.” A few verses later (1:9), he ends a section of encouragement on the theme once more: “God, who has called you into fellowship [koinonia] with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.” Then Paul expounded about how worldly wisdom was the cause of their divisions into denominational groups (which means “of the name of,” and yes, this is just as wrong and caused by the same worldly wisdom today as it was then!). In admonishing them to unite, God’s “call” is basic: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:21b-24).

Again we see God’s part and our part when he said, “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1:21). God accomplished the way for us to be reconciled to him through Jesus’ death and resurrection, and then he issued the call to all mankind to receive his offer. But it does no good to anyone until it is answered with belief that prompts repentance and baptism.

God's call is rejected by most people because of their pride and self-sufficiency. The Corinthian Christians are a good example to us of the humility and openness needed for God's call to be heard and received as the good news it is (1 Corinthians 1:26-29): "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

The call of God did go out to the world after the amazing first day at Pentecost, and many answered the call just as Paul did by obeying God's instructions to "Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16, cf. 1 Corinthians 1:2). In that way, they became part of the ekklesia of Christ—the "assembly of the called out"—just as we are called to do now.

The theme of God's call to man and man "calling on his name" in reply runs throughout the New Testament letters to the ekklesia. We've seen that we are called out *from* the world into God's kingdom, the ekklesia, through faith in Christ. There are many other Scriptures that refer to God's call in describing what we are called *to*. We are called *from* sin and worldly wisdom that leads to death. We are called *to*:

Romans 1:5-7: "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles *to the obedience that comes from faith*. And you also are among those who are called *to belong to Jesus Christ*. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called *to be saints*."

Romans 9:24-25: "...even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: 'I will call them '*my people*' who are not my people; and I will call her '*my loved one*' who is not my loved one.'"

1 Corinthians 1:2,9: "To the [ekklesia] of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called *to be holy*, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours....God, who has called you *into fellowship [koinonia] with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord*, is faithful."

1 Corinthians 7:15: "God has called us *to live in peace*."

Galatians 5:13: "You, my brothers, were called *to be free*."

Ephesians 1:18: "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the *hope* to which he has called you, *the riches of his glorious inheritance* in the saints."

Ephesians 4:4: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called *to one hope* when you were called."

Philippians 3:14: "I press on toward *the goal to win the prize* for which God has called me *heavenward* in Christ Jesus."

Colossians 3:15: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called *to peace*."

1 Thessalonians 2:11-12: "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you *into his kingdom and glory*."

1 Thessalonians 4:7: "For God did not call us to be impure, but *to live a holy life*."

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14: "But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you *to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth*. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

1 Timothy 6:12: "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the *eternal life* to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses."

2 Timothy 1:8b-9a: "But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us *to a holy life*—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace."

Hebrews 9:15: "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive *the promised eternal inheritance*—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant."

1 Peter 1:15-16: "But just as he who called you is holy, so *be holy* in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy.'"

1 Peter 2:9-10: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you *out of darkness into his wonderful light*. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

1 Peter 2:20b-21: "But if you *suffer for doing good and you endure it*, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

1 Peter 3:9: “Do not *repay evil* with evil or insult with insult, but *with blessing*, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”

1 Peter 5:10: “And the God of all grace, who called you *to his eternal glory in Christ*, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.”

Revelation 17:14: “They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.”

God calls each of us to a new life in his ekklesia, where all of these amazing promises are fulfilled. Have you answered the call? Have you listened to Peter’s gate-unlocking message in Acts 2:38-39? “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Have you—as one of the “far off” ones who has faith in Jesus—repented and been immersed into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins? Have you therefore received the Holy Spirit to live in and transform you into being like Jesus Christ as you live for him in this world and as you wait for your home with him in heaven? If you have not been baptized for the forgiveness of your sins, why not? Please, answer God’s call! “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).

“I Will Build My Ekklesia”

Jesus selected a group of men who would be with him during his ministry on earth, whom he would train and whose eyewitness view of his life, death, and resurrection would prepare them to be his partners in building his ekklesia (Luke 6:12-16). He appointed them to be “apostles,” which means, “ones sent.” Their testimony and teaching laid the foundation for his ekklesia, as Ephesians 2:19-20 says: “God’s household [is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” Paul became an apostle by the direct call and revelation of the resurrected Christ (Acts 9), and joined the others in laying this foundation: “By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:10-11).

The book of Acts, short for “The Acts of the Apostles,” is unique in the way it reveals through historical events the headship of Christ in building his ekklesia. God was clearly the one in control. He used his specially chosen and uniquely empowered apostles as well as other leaders among the Christians who were given a miraculous measure of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of apostles’ hands (Acts 6:6, 8:14-20). He also used events as they unfolded and decisions that resulted from needs as they arose. The good news spread just as God intended and the foundation of the ekklesia was laid for all time.

The potential for confusion and disorder was great with a first-day response of over 3,000 baptized, plus “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). And many of that number were in Jerusalem from other countries to celebrate Pentecost and wanted to stay awhile to learn more about their new life in Jesus Christ before returning home. It was a needy bunch of folks!

There was no way to humanly organize such a crowd. Besides that, we get no hint that Jesus prepared his apostles in advance for imposing structure or organization on the ekklesia. After Jesus’ resurrection and as they waited as he told them to do, they were not the mighty men of God that they became when the “power from on high” came upon them at Pentecost. They had the knowledge of Jesus’ teachings and their experiences as his disciples for three years, and they even had the Holy Spirit with which Jesus inspired them when he appeared to them after his resurrection: “‘Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21-22). So they had the calling, the potential, and the faith, but not the plan.

Jesus left the apostles fairly clueless. They knew that they were chosen to be his witnesses and his messengers and that they would be given the knowledge they needed when they needed it: “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you” (John 16:12-14). But they really didn’t know what to expect. They had to set the example in walking by faith and following God’s lead.

At times Providential means to accomplish God’s purposes were evident, where circumstances and events resulted in spreading the message and shaping the way the ekklesia functioned. For example, the persecution that arose following the stoning of Stephen scattered the Christians, which resulted in spreading the message beyond

Jerusalem, the goal of the plan Jesus revealed to his apostles. He told them that after they received power from the Holy Spirit coming on them, they would “be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The result of the persecution was phase two, moving out from Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1).

At other times, God used clearly miraculous means to reveal his will and confirm the message of the apostles, as Hebrews 2:3-4 explains: “This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.” First was the miraculous preaching of the message of Jesus in the many different languages of the audience by the unschooled, Spirit-empowered apostles on Pentecost. Then there were many other miracles performed by the apostles and then also by those on whom they conferred miraculous powers. We read of healings and even the dead raised back to life, jail escape and supernatural boldness and courage.

The calling of Saul to become Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was very clearly a miraculous act. In Acts 9, Saul—a major figure in the persecution of Christians as the Pharisee who gave his approval to the stoning of Stephen and who had set out on a mission to arrest Christians—responded to the direct and personal call of Jesus. When God knew the time was right for phase three, he chose Paul as an apostle, “one sent,” to spread the good news “to the ends of the earth.” And as with the other apostles, Paul could say, “The things that mark an apostle—signs, wonders and miracles—were done among you with great perseverance” (2 Corinthians 12:12).

The wisdom of God’s choice of Paul to be an apostle proved out, as he explained in 1 Timothy 1:15-16: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.” He was motivated by his gratefulness for being given the opportunity to believe, repent, and be immersed into Christ, as he explains in 1 Corinthians 15:7-10: “...and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the [ekklesia] of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”

God’s wisdom is seen in the way Paul’s Christ-like life and attitude became a model for others to imitate. And that is the heart of the paradigm of how the ekklesia was designed to function, which Paul simply and concisely states to an immature ekklesia in 1 Corinthians 11:1: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”

The first clear picture we’re given of daily life in the ekklesia is in Acts 2:42-47: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”

Why did they “devote themselves” to these things? Did anyone tell them they ought to? Did anyone have to preach at them or rebuke them? No, this devotion was a natural spiritual result of their “glad and sincere hearts” and the awe they were filled with. The gospel truly was good news to them, and gratefulness and desire to learn about and live by God’s will motivated them.

When physical needs arose among those who had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost and stayed longer than they had planned in order to learn and grow spiritually, the needs were met spontaneously. Life was good, and Acts 2:47 closes out the description with the good news, “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” People were attracted to what they saw and responded to the teaching about Jesus that promised such fellowship and peace with God and with others.

How long did this idyllic state last? Not long. By Acts 4, the reality that faith in Jesus was going to be risky and bring suffering as well as joy started to set in. Peter and John were seized by the Jewish leaders and interrogated after spending a night in jail. This wasn’t a total surprise, since Jesus had already set the example of suffering for the truth and had warned them to expect the same (John 14-17). This first taste of persecution steeled the resolve of the ekklesia and kept them dependent on God. And still, “All the believers were one in heart and mind” (Acts 4:32). They didn’t know what the future would bring, but they were committed to God and to one another. Even after more serious persecution came, with the apostles setting a great example of “rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41), “the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (Acts 6:7).

Human temptations continued, however, and by Acts 5 we see the first instance of the discipline of God working both directly and through his apostles. Ananias and Sapphira lied about a good work they claimed to have done, which was exposed by the apostle Peter and punished directly by God as they were struck dead.

Nowadays it's shocking to see here the seriousness of God about sin creeping into the ekklesia. We need to remember that this period of time was the establishment of the ekklesia of Christ and the laying of foundations for all time. We also need to remember that everything God preserved for us as Scripture is there for the reason Paul reminds us in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The hypocrisy and deceit of Ananias and Sapphira was serious because, as Peter said, "You have not lied to men, but to God." The effect of God's judgment on them was that "Great fear seized the whole [ekklesia] and all who heard about these events" (Acts 5:11). If it shocks us to read about God's severe response to their sin, we need to pay attention to any ways we may rationalize about compromises of truth in the ekklesia today.

Sometimes I wish God would act as directly now as he did then. But we are expected to use the Scriptures that we now have. God has provided us with the record of the building of the ekklesia and his word given through the apostles and prophets, recorded by servants guided by the Holy Spirit in the first century. So we really have no excuse, do we?

We actually have an advantage over the early Christians in that we can read the "big picture" of God's work and his will for our individual lives and for the way he intends the ekklesia to function. We don't have apostles anymore to see needs and spot problems and correct them. But we do have the record of the needs and problems that arose and were addressed then, just like they will arise today. And we don't have miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit anymore now that their purpose has been fulfilled and the message of Christ has been delivered, confirmed and recorded for all time. But now, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness" (2 Peter 1:3).

Granted, in some ways it is more challenging to live now than it was in the first century, with no tangible evidence such as Jesus' presence, miracles we see for ourselves, or apostles to catch us when we start to stray from the truth. As Jesus said to Thomas in John 20:29, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." And as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 5:7, "We live by faith, not by sight."

Yet we do have something tangible and powerful—Scripture, as Hebrews 4:12-13 encourages us to remember: "The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

The powerful word of God does its work, if the hearer is open to it. Paul's instructions in 2 Timothy 2:24-26 apply to us as teachers of God's word and as hearers: "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will." As teachers of others, we don't have to stress out over their responses—their hearts and God's work through his word determines the result. We have the privilege of watching God work repentance in the lives of open people, but we don't make it happen, God does. And when we are the ones being taught, we can experience the power of truth cutting through confusion and sin and, as Jesus promised, "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

Jesus is still building his ekklesia on the foundation of truth, one life at a time! Ephesians 2:19-22 is good news, that we are "fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

Each person is responsible for whether or not he or she is being "joined together...built together" with others in the ekklesia of that generation, on the foundation of what was laid down for all time in the Scriptures. It's not only healthy but necessary to imitate the Bereans in Acts 17:11: "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true." We each need to reexamine the meaning of "church," "to see if what [our modern-day teachers and preachers] said was true." Most people entrust their very souls to other people—their families, their preachers, their church traditions. The sad but obvious reality is that most people do not prove to have this "noble character"—will you?

Spiritual Warfare

Life in this world will always be a battle, as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6:12, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” Our weapon is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17). Just as those who heard Peter’s message on Pentecost were “cut to the heart,” we need to open our hearts and minds to what God preserved for us in the written word and let it cut sin and human wisdom out of our lives.

The great challenge is to stay encouraged and confident, as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, “...though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” How do we do this? 2 Corinthians 4:2-3 says, “...we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing.”

Back in Acts 5, God exposed Ananias and Sapphira’s sin because he will not tolerate hypocrisy and deceit in his ekklesia. Remember, he said, “The gates of Hades will not overcome” it (Matthew 16:18). He has not struck anyone dead as an immediate judgment since then, but the lesson is there for us to learn. God gives us freedom of choice—but there is only one right choice. He lets us choose to be religious but wrong and among those who will hear, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers” (Matthew 7:23). He lets us choose to be among those who “will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Timothy 4:3-4). But God wants us to choose the truth of his word!

Paul knew that as soon as he was no longer present as an apostle, power-hungry men would try to seize control. He warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-31: “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!”

God even gives us what we want though it’s wrong, when we’re not seeking his will—but with consequences, as 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 says, “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.”

We need to be alarmed, much more so than I see on the part of those in the confused mess of denominational religion in America today. We will not “give account” until we die and face God, but we have to accept the responsibility each of us has for seeking, finding, and then obeying the truth that is there to find in the Bible. “Church” in America is a far cry from the ekklesia of the first century. We will each be held accountable for our own knowledge of and practice of truth, no matter what any “church” says.

God wants us to get it right! All through the Bible we are given instructions for how to discern what is right and true. Sometimes it’s easier to see what is right by looking for whether there is clear evidence of something being wrong. For instance, in James 3:13-18 we are given the contrast between heavenly and earthly wisdom: “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.” The absence of these qualities of heavenly wisdom has caused so much division and needs to be alarming to us.

As we examine modern Christianity and rethink our convictions about how the body of Christ functions, we need to be willing to admit when we see human, earthly, unspiritual—yes, “of the devil”—thinking. If we know the wisdom of God by learning his will and putting it into practice, we will be able to spot a counterfeit. Just as bank tellers are trained to spot counterfeits by handling real bills so much that anything “off” is easy to spot, we need to be so familiar with the principles God gives us about his ekklesia that we’ll be able to catch signs of straying. The

one thing we can be sure of is that “Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). We need to be alert, “in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes” (2 Corinthians 2:11). And as 1 Peter 5:8 says, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” We must be on guard, but truth will win!

Signposts on a Zigzag Path

My bad experiences with “church” fall into three categories: dead, shallow, and cult. It usually takes me awhile to recognize or admit when there truly is a serious problem. Then my curious temperament compels me to figure out from Scripture what the problem is and what the biblical solution is. I hope sharing some of my own hard-learned lessons may encourage others who may be tolerating bad situations to take action and not settle for less than God offers.

In dead or dying congregations I’ve been in, there was not the zeal or awe or spiritual depth that was so obvious in the early days of the ekklesia. Human traditions, rituals, liturgy, and pomp are what seem to be the focus in those congregations. Somehow faith gets lost in the rut of going through the motions. God becomes part of the schedule and is checked off the to-do list. “Going to church” is done religiously, but hearts, lives, and relationships are not impacted deeply. Lack of spiritual growth leads to lack of numerical growth, also. And many of their own young people quit seeking God because they are not attracted or motivated by what they see in their home congregations. My own frustration growing up in a congregation like this motivated me to seek a “great church,” which had both good and bad consequences.

Shallow congregations I’ve been part of did have many good-hearted and even individually spiritual-minded people, but there was no sense of direction or purpose, no *modus operandi* or organizing principle in the congregation. Week after week the members “go to church” and stay busy with programs and activities, and they may even get to know a few people fairly well. Many good works are accomplished; probably many physical needs are met. But with no clear biblical focus or mature leaders who keep the congregation from becoming caught up in busyness that isn’t spiritually productive, there isn’t the spiritual or numerical growth that God intended.

Groups like this are especially vulnerable to being seriously damaged or even divided or destroyed when problems arise. They are not in the habit of consciously and proactively seeking and applying biblical principles, so if someone brazenly asserts leadership and seeks to “lord it over” others or to push his own agenda, he gets away with it. In congregations like this, problems have not been faced and most people are too nice and too timid to stand up against those who are willing to assert themselves wrongly. And because the relationships are not really deep and strong, with little or no experience of applying Scripture to real life sins and weaknesses, those “wolves in sheep’s clothing” (Matthew 7:15) are successful. It’s sad to see a congregation go through this, as I have, because the members are so confused, so naïve, and end up so hurt. Unless lessons are learned and repentance takes place, the vicious circle will continue as a shallow peace settles in until new problems arise or lurking “savage wolves [that] will not spare the flock” (Acts 20:29) seize control. My own frustration with groups like this is that on the surface things seem fine, people are friendly, but the feel is more of a social club than the dynamic ekklesia of the New Testament. Ultimately it feels lonely because of the lack of heart-level involvement where one expects to find it.

The most insidious experience I have personally had was with a group that held out the promise that it was the “great church” I had been seeking. It was serious about accomplishing the very things that are clearly stated as God’s goals in the Bible: Personal spiritual growth, deep relationships, and converting the world to Jesus, exactly what I wanted to be a part of. It took seventeen years of gradually being drawn into more and more programmed, regimented, controlled, and finally abusive practices for me to realize that something was seriously wrong—not with the goals, but with the human traditions that had grown more and more elaborate in the leaders’ efforts to “make it happen.”

I finally faced the need to leave that group as a result of a particularly awful experience. What happened exposed to me the ways that leaders had set up a human hierarchy that was robbing those under them of their freedom in Christ and of the power of the New Covenant paradigm. One couldn’t continue in that group without abdicating to the “lording over” attitudes and practices of leaders, which they got away with for a long time by preying on the desire of sincere Christians to be humble, teachable, and to please God. By experiencing someone trying to pressure me into violating both my own conscience and my convictions of what was the wisest application of biblical principles to a specific situation, I finally found the courage to face what a people-pleaser rather than God-pleaser I had become.

Once I left and had the freedom and time to sort out what was biblically wrong with that group as well as what was God’s better way, it was actually fairly easy to spot many unbiblical practices that were based on human wisdom

rather than God's revealed word. I could see in hindsight the drift of the group toward becoming a cult over the years, as leaders exerted more and more authoritarian control. God's means were not used to accomplish his ends, which God will never bless. Many, many people were hurt rather than helped.

All of my experiences have provided signposts along the way. I've learned much that was true and biblical in every congregation I've been a part of. Sometimes this was because of what was good and taught right and sometimes it was either in spite of what was wrong or even because of experiencing the effects of biblical errors. Each experience has pointed me back to the road, and gradually I've learned that it's best to study the "map" of God's word first rather than after something goes wrong (though I still do plenty of that, too).

I'm no longer seeking a "great church." Now I understand that the point is to be "in Christ" and he adds me to his *ekklesia*. Jesus' *ekklesia* is great! I am not responsible to "make happen" anything. I'm not in charge of the results of doing what God tells me to do—he is, as is clear in passages that clarify what is our role and what is God's (Mark 4:26-29, 1 Corinthians 3:7-8). Wanting to see tangible results of our faith is a strong temptation, which Jesus admonished his disciples about in Luke 10:20: "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." I just need to love God enough to obey his teaching (John 14:23-24), and he promises in Romans 8:28, "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Even when we can't see how anything good will come of circumstances we go through, we can always rejoice in the most important thing—that we have a relationship with God. We can leave the results of our obedience up to him to bring about in his own way and time and measure, just as he did through the events in Acts.

Now I'm learning to focus on being the kind of worshiper that God is seeking. In John 4:23-24, Jesus tells us what he is looking for: "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." Keeping the balance of "spirit and truth" and "life and doctrine" (1 Timothy 4:16) is my goal for my own life and what I look for in any congregation of Christians.

I'm trying to be most concerned about keeping my own priorities right, as Matthew 6:33-34 says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." Acts 17:26-28 says, "...he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'" That's the perspective I want to have, then I trust that all else will fall into place.

Koinonia = Fellowship

"Koinonia" is the Greek word that is translated "fellowship." It is also translated as "contribution, sharing, participation," depending on the context. Koinonia is the experience of being connected closely with others. In the Greek it was not a religious term. It was used to describe business partnerships and even marriage. Just as with *ekklesia*, a word that the people of that time were familiar with took on deeper meaning with the added dimension of spiritual application. The good news of the message of Jesus Christ gave the word *koinonia* special meaning. Nothing is more awesome than becoming connected to God through his Spirit given in the new birth and then to other Christians through life in the body of Christ, the family of God, the *ekklesia* that God adds us to when we are "in Christ!"

Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology concisely says *koinonia* or fellowship is "relatedness, relationship, and communion" (see the article on the internet at <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Dictionaries/BakersEvangelicalDictionary/bed.cgi?number=T258>). Through the new birth, we become related to God as his children and to other children of God as siblings in the family of God.

The assumption and expectation of each person in the *ekklesia* of Christ is that because we are related to one another in God's spiritual family, we do desire deep relationships. 1 Peter 1:22-23 reminds us of this: "Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, with all your hearts. For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." 1 John 3:9-10 also talks about this assumption: "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother."

The reality of the connection is produced through the presence of the Holy Spirit of God in each Christian, who produces qualities—“fruit”—in us that are all involved in our the way we relate to others: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). The Spirit is “God’s seed” that John said is in us and that bears this fruit. There is a sense of communion, of community, which is produced by the Spirit, and we are cautioned not to undermine his work: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). This is based on the fact that “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6).

What more can be said about *koinonia*, “fellowship,” than what we’ve already seen in Acts 2:42-47? Because the first Christians’ devotion to the fellowship that they were given through Christ flowed from very grateful hearts, if we don’t have the same devotion to it, we need to look at what is missing from our own hearts. Perhaps we are so bound by “the way we’ve always done things” that we have never even realized what we’re missing. Once we do realize it, the only biblical way to change the quality of our fellowship is to deepen our gratitude to God so our own devotion will flow from the heart.

There are a couple of possible explanations for shallow experience of *koinonia*. One reason could be that one isn’t actually in fellowship with God yet, that the common mindset of “going to church” has confused the issue. Many people don’t even realize that before they can experience what being a Christian brings to one’s life, they must become a Christian. Many assume that if they believe in Jesus and go to church on Sundays, they are in fellowship with God. But because they have not ever actually been born again through immersion into Christ, they don’t and can’t experience or appreciate *koinonia*. Their experience of relationships remains worldly and shallow.

How dare I suggest that someone needs to examine his or her relationship with God? Isn’t it better to question it now than to discover, when it is too late to change anything, that one’s assumptions don’t match God’s word? There are many admonishments in the Bible to examine ourselves, such as 2 Corinthians 13:5: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” And Romans 8, the chapter that describes “Life Through the Spirit” as my Bible heads it, includes this caution in verse 9: “You, however, are controlled not by your sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.” Real spiritual fellowship is impossible without the Spirit of God as the source of the connections with God and with other children of God.

I can speak from my own experience of being very religious but not “in Christ” for several years before I learned how to be born again. I hope my story will encourage others to be honest with any nagging questions or doubts about whether they are really experiencing the new life they read about in the Bible. The gauge is not our feelings or our hopes or even our own belief that we are right with God. Even Paul acknowledged the potential for self-deceit that we all have. He said in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5, “I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me....He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.” Please be sure you really are a child of God through the new birth. If you haven’t experienced the heartfelt fellowship you read about in the New Testament, start with examining your conversion and comparing it to Scripture.

Another possible cause of lack of meaningful fellowship is that programs and traditions and schedules work against it. One of the best examples of this is the way our “church buildings” (where is that in the Bible?) are designed and used, forcing a spectator atmosphere rather than a participatory and relationship-building tone. In traditional “worship services,” it is difficult to feel connected to others when we are looking at the back of heads and all eyes are on the “performance” of whatever is going on up front. And once the service ends, often people are eager to leave or close friends are across the room and impossible to catch before they leave.

This frustrated me even as a child every time the worship service ended in the denomination I grew up in, as everyone lined up to get out the door, shaking the preacher’s hand on the way out but rarely talking to one another about anything spiritual. My experience since then has been similar in some places. Even when some people do stay after the service to talk, it’s hard to deepen the bonds when one only gets snippets of conversation occasionally. Often it is small talk and not conducive to building the kind of connections where the “one another” principles, which we’ll look at later, can flourish.

Buildings are “expedients,” which means that they are not something instructed in the Bible for us to have, but they are supposedly intended to facilitate fellowship by giving us a place to meet. But if they become hindrances rather than helps, evidenced by the lack of the depth of fellowship we see taught and exemplified in the Bible, then their existence needs to be re-examined or they need to be used differently. A building can become a hindrance by

the very fact that it can hold a large number of people, so large that it becomes difficult to form connections with anyone easily or deeply enough to really function as the body of Christ or the family of God. People get lost in the crowd, and visitors often feel neglected, ignored, or invisible.

Many congregations are realizing this difficulty of connecting in relationships that allow good fellowship, so they are adding small groups as a means to that end. In the first century, the Christians likely had natural interactions with others who lived near them, where they could “encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13), even without cars or telephones or email! We know that meeting in homes was common, and the only large space we have a record of in the Bible where Christians met was in the early days in the temple courts (Acts 2:46) and in Solomon’s Colonnade at the temple (Acts 5:12). This was in Jerusalem, so once the *ekklesia* spread to other areas, we start to see more examples of assemblies in homes. Is it possible that the need to meet in homes was part of the wisdom of God—that it was the most conducive atmosphere for the fellowship and sense of spiritual family to thrive?

If buildings could truly be helpful rather than a hindrance, it seems it would have to be more as an additional tool, a place to hold larger meetings that are less the norm than the exception. Many congregations have discovered that renting larger facilities for occasional larger gatherings of many small groups has worked better than building their own structure that ends up using money that could go elsewhere for better purposes. Many discover that a building also subtly imposes a limit on the growth the group expects or wants. Once it gets reasonably full, it becomes easy to feel comfortable and satisfied with the size of the congregation and faith sharing wanes.

Adding small groups is a start. But perhaps we need to go further and flip-flop our mindset, to think of the smaller, closely connected group experience as the real *koinonia* in the *ekklesia* of Christ. Larger assemblies would be special times where we get to meet additional brothers and sisters and appreciate the larger body of Christ, where the power of a large number of voices raised in song to praise God and encourage one another is a special treat. That can be “dessert” rather than expecting large corporate worship to be the “main course,” because it is ineffective at forming the bonds of fellowship God intended.

Let’s soak in the meanings of *koinonia* by reading and pondering the many verses that contain it in addition to Acts 2:42-47:

Romans 15:26: “For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a *contribution* for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.”

1 Corinthians 1:9: “God, who has called you into *fellowship* with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.”

1 Corinthians 10:16: “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a *participation* in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a *participation* in the body of Christ?”

2 Corinthians 6:14: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what *fellowship* can light have with darkness?”

2 Corinthians 8:3-4: “Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of *sharing* in this service to the saints.

2 Corinthians 9:13: “Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in *sharing* with them and with everyone else.”

2 Corinthians 13:14: “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the *fellowship* of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Galatians 2:9: “James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of *fellowship* when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews.”

Philippians 1:4-5: “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your *partnership* in the gospel from the first day until now.”

Philippians 2:1-2: “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any *fellowship* with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.”

Philippians 3:10-11: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the *fellowship* of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.”

Philemon 1:6: “I pray that you may be active in *sharing* your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.”

Hebrews 13:16: “And do not forget to do good and to *share* with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.”

1 John 1:3-7: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have *fellowship* with us. And our *fellowship* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have *fellowship* with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have *fellowship* with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”

Koinonia with God and each other is a taste of heaven on earth!

Koinonia in a New Family

Once we are born again and become children of God, we become part of a new family—the family of God! The koinonia—the fellowship—we have with other children of God is intended to be awesome, something we crave and seek and that shapes our daily lives. Jesus set the stage for this mindset in Matthew 12:47-50: “Someone told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’ He replied to him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’”

He had already challenged our human wisdom about family relationships in Matthew 10:34-38: “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.’ Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” But along with the challenge, he made a great promise. He said in Mark 10:29-30, “‘I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.’”

Jesus’ own perspective on his relationship with us is revealed in Hebrews 2:11: “Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.” Jesus is my brother, and he’s proud to be known as that—mind-boggling!

In Ephesians 3:14-15 we see that the idea of this spiritual family comes from God: “For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” This is wonderful news which will motivate us, as 1 John 3:1-3 says: “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure.”

As we step out in faith and actually do the things the Bible tells us to do with and for one another, we will understand and appreciate what a great gift koinonia in the family of God really is. Gradually bonds form, history develops, trust builds and fears wane (“perfect love drives out fear,” as 1 John 4:18 says). We start to feel real affection and warmth for brothers and sisters in our new family when we open ourselves up to one another.

Paul was such a great example of this affection and openness. He knew how important it is for us to be real and vulnerable with one another in order to experience the bonds God created us to need. In 2 Corinthians 6:11-13 he is so bold as say, “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians, and opened wide our hearts to you. We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us. As a fair exchange—I speak as to my children—open wide your hearts also.” Paul called them to be open because he knew they would be missing something wonderful if they remained self-protective and closed. We see Paul’s impact on others in Acts 20:37-38 as he says a final farewell to the Ephesian elders: “They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again.”

Another great example of Paul’s mindset is in his letter to Philemon, where he oozes love and family affection as he appeals to him to change his view of a former slave: “Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints....Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains....I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you....Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.” Is there anyone for whom you

feel that kind of heartfelt affection? What God meant as pure and holy affection (Greek “phileo”) has been tainted so that “love” has become almost synonymous with sex. We miss out on a whole dimension of life that God meant for us to experience if we don’t have phileo-filled relationships. (For in-depth discussion of this, read the booklet “New Love! Focus on Phileo.”)

Jesus was very honest with us about the reality that physical family relationships can, and often will, be strained or broken when someone chooses to follow him and their parents or siblings choose not to. But the spiritual family of God that we are brought into by our new birth offers a depth of relationship that isn’t possible in physical families. There’s no greater joy than to share spiritual fellowship with physical family members, to be “on the same wavelength” because we are following the same standard, serving the same Lord, sharing the same Father, and experiencing the same “full life” empowered by the Holy Spirit. I’m so thankful that I share both a physical and spiritual bond with my husband and children. But even if no one in one’s physical family shares a spiritual bond, Jesus says that God will bless us with others in his spiritual family that will be like parents and siblings.

This is something I appreciate from experience. I’ve had the joy of experiencing bonds with other Christians that I wish I could have with all members of my own family. But many in my extended family operate from such different perspectives about life that it is impossible to feel the closeness that I do with brothers and sisters in Christ. It is impossible to describe this spiritual bond within the ekklesia to one who has never experienced it, but the wonderful hope that we can have deep family connections with many people, no matter what our physical family experience has been, surely does appeal to each of us. Having experienced it, I want more of it, now and forever in heaven!

Our love for God is expressed in our day-to-day life by our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ, as John, “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 21:20), said in many ways in his first letter. 1 John 4:10-12 and 19-21 says well that our motivation is appreciation of God’s love for us: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us...We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.”

God’s love for us will result naturally in love for one another in the family of God, according to the New Covenant paradigm of God transforming us from within. As we examine ourselves and our understanding of koinonia in the ekklesia of Christ, we need to be honest about whether we have seen or experienced the deep bonds of spiritual family that God has promised.

There’s no human experience like it! To love and be loved affectionately, deeply, and unconditionally in a new family is a great gift!

Perfect Plan for Imperfect People

All of this sounds very idealistic. Yes, it is! Is it really possible to experience the kind of love and affection, the unity and oneness that God calls his family to? In talking to others about my frustrations in the quest to experience Jesus’ ekklesia functioning biblically, the frequent—to be honest, usual—reaction that I receive either outright or that I sense behind smirks or slightly rolled eyes, is that “there are no perfect churches.” So, if that has been your train of thought as you’ve read this so far, let me clarify:

I haven’t found sinless perfection yet, and I don’t expect to find it as long as I live here in this world. But I have not given up yet in my quest to experience what I see promised in the word of God. I’ve seen and experienced enough of God’s plan working to make me continue to “ask...seek...knock” so I will “receive...find...have the door opened for me.” God’s plan is perfect because he built into it the way for imperfect people to enjoy perfect fellowship with one another.

There are no perfect people, but God designed a perfect ekklesia because he is the head of it and he is perfect. Colossians 1:18 says it clearly: “And he is the head of the body, the [ekklesia].” Ephesians repeats it three times to make it unmistakable: “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the [ekklesia], which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (1:22-23), “...speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ” (4:15), and “...Christ is the head of the [ekklesia], his body, of which he is the Savior. Now...the [ekklesia] submits to Christ...Christ loved the [ekklesia] and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless...No one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the [ekklesia]—for we

are members of his body...This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the [ekklesia]” (5:23-32). This passage uses the example of Christ’s relationship with his “bride,” his ekklesia, to teach us his perfect marriage paradigm, but we miss the point when we aren’t experiencing ekklesia as he designed it.

Jesus not only is the perfect head of the ekklesia, he imputes to members of it his very own perfection. Hebrews 10:14 says, “By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” In other words, he grants us his perfection, his righteousness, and with him as our spotless and pure “clothing,” God looks at us and sees no sin, no weakness, just his Son’s perfection. I picture myself wearing Jesus’ spotless white robe, and God doesn’t see my sin and weakness inside of it. His power is at work in my life to enable me to grow into it as I am “being made holy.” Another way I imagine it is as if Jesus gave me use of his “credit card” with no spending limit, where the currency is righteousness. Philippians 3:9 says, “...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.”

As God “grows me,” I get to experience in reality what was first credited to me as a gift before I could even imagine being righteous. The New Covenant promise is that God will help me become more and more Christ-like. I start with righteousness received, undeserved grace, a gift from Jesus granted and received through sharing in his death, burial, and resurrection in baptism. Then, from the point in time of my new birth until my physical death, I become more and more like him, in the way I think and act and even the way I feel as I experience life as he created it to be lived—the “life that is truly life” (1 Timothy 6:19), “life to the full” (John 10:10)! 2 Corinthians 3:18 promises this: “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

Both the forgiveness and the power to become like him are gifts from God. So when Jesus says in Matthew 5:48, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,” he’s calling us to not settle for anything less, to not give up on the goal just because it’s not easy. I want to arrive in heaven with as much understanding from experience of God’s perfect will as is possible by using the power of the Holy Spirit to grow into the image of Jesus Christ while I’m here in this world. I want to feel in heaven that I’m home at last—that there’s familiarity because of the glimpses of the heavenly reality of being with God and with his family that I experienced while on earth.

Paul never compromised or settled for less than perfection. He felt the urgency to help others keep on growing, as he says in Colossians 1:28-29: “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.” Similarly, in Galatians 4:19 he says, “My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you...” Does this mean he was a “perfectionist,” a psycho-babble label that no one wants to be accused of? No, he just knew that the more like Christ we become in reality, the more we will experience the wonderful promises of peace, joy, and freedom that we all crave and that are only possible “in Christ.”

Paul is actually a great example of the balanced perspective we need to have. In Philippians 3:7-17 he shares with us his own heart’s desire in appreciation of “the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” He says, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.” His view of life on earth is, “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me....Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Paul didn’t settle for less than all God promises us, and his life is a great example of the joy, love, affection, peace, and contentment that God wants all of us to experience.

And then he says something that proves that he was not a neurotic, idealistic perfectionist: “All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.” Grasping this principle changed my life: God frees us to look forward to what we can and will become and to enjoy where we are at every moment along the way.

I used to focus on how far from perfection I was and get impatient and discouraged. Now I focus on how far God has brought me, making me a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17) and giving me power to think, feel, and act like Jesus by his Spirit living in me. I’m thankful for the growth I see as I look back on my life. And I get excited about what I know he’ll produce in me for the rest of my life, until I am ultimately made completely like Jesus when I go home to heaven to live with him forever. Then I’ll be free of the temptation and the hard circumstances that we all must face all day every day in this life, which God uses to shape us, to cause growth and maturity to prepare us for eternal life.

Hebrews 12 reminds us that just as Jesus had the attitude, “for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God,” we are to “endure hardship as discipline; God is

treating you as sons...God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

What’s even better, but more challenging, is to grow beyond “enduring hardship” to the point of being able to “consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds,” because of the perseverance, maturity, and completeness (which is really what “perfection” means) that will result (James 1:2-4). “Consider” means it doesn’t come naturally to us, but we choose to believe God’s perspective.

God assumes that we are weak and powerless to live up to his perfect will and he provides for that very fact. So we have no excuse for either pretending we’re not weak or for staying weak. Paul is exemplary again, in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10: “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” God gives us his strength!

The New Covenant paradigm is that God will transform us from within, which Romans 12:2 summarizes well: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” We know that we’re all going through the same process Colossians 3:9-10 describes, “...you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” We’re all at different points in that transformation process, so we can be patient with and accepting of one another and trust that “God will make clear to you”—as we read above—whatever is needed, whenever it is needed, when we are seeking to be like him.

Paul was such a great example of the balance of loving and bold involvement in helping others grow and yet patience to let God produce the “fruit.” Paul never forgot that God is the source of the truth and the power essential for growth, and that his own role was to put God’s word to use in the ways he said in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” He demonstrated what he tells us our perspective should be in our involvement with one another, in Colossians 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.” Yes, we are to be involved with one another deeply enough to see and meet needs, but we don’t use our own human wisdom but rather the Scriptures, to let God’s word cut, convict, correct, or encourage.

God provides answers to every question, every problem that he knew could and would arise as people who are being transformed experience life together as his body. The fact that most of what we have as New Testament Scriptures addresses problems in the ekklesia can be viewed either with pessimism or optimism. The pessimist says, “People are imperfect and will never live up to the ideal the Bible talks about. The very fact that the Bible is a collection of writings to correct problems proves this.” The optimist says, “It is good of God to correct us and teach us how to become both individually and together more and more what he created us to be!”

But it is euphemistic to use the labels pessimist and optimist. The real heart of the matter is always faith. Isn’t it really faithlessness not to believe that what God says is possible will ever really come true in our lives and in our experience of ekklesia and koinonia? Isn’t it faithlessness to rationalize away the zeal, the love, the boldness, and the courage of the first century Christians with the excuse that their culture was different and it was easier to be that way then? Isn’t it faithlessness and even cowardice that justifies not sharing our faith in Christ and his truth with others by rationalizing that most people we know are already religious and wouldn’t be open to learning more or to taking their faith more seriously?

How can I make these accusations? Because I struggle with the same temptation to be pessimistic...faithless. I get discouraged every time I experience a breakdown in my relationship with a “church” that stems from God’s clear directions not being followed or not even being sought, by leaders and members alike. And when I hope a friend will be eager to learn more of God’s will but he or she proves not to be either open or seeking after all, I want to quit taking risks and being vulnerable to rejection. It’s hard to “live by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). But God knows that and plans for it.

So, then, what is God’s perfect plan for imperfect people? It is simply that we would love him and love one another—simple to say, hard to do! But as 1 Corinthians 13 reminds us, love really is the most important thing. “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

There are many practical instructions about how to go about loving one another. We've already read some of them. In these few more examples of practical instructions for how to love one another, we see that God has taken into account our human imperfection and has provided the way for us to experience a taste of heaven through koinonia in his body, his family, the ekklesia of Christ:

Romans 12:10,13: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves....Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."

Romans 15:1-2,7: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

Romans 15:14: "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another."

Galatians 5:13: "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."

Ephesians 4:2: "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."

Ephesians 4:25-27: "Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body. In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry."

Ephesians 5:21: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."

Colossians 3:13: "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Thessalonians 5:11: "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing."

1 Peter 3:8: "Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble."

1 Peter 5:5: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"

The wonderful privilege of being in the family of God includes the promise that we can experience giving and receiving God's love. As members of the body of Christ, we all as real people make God's love tangible to one another. We say and do what Jesus himself would say and do if he were physically among us. It's as if we each were his voice to speak just the right encouragement or teaching or question or even admonishment, his arms to give hugs full of deep affection and comfort, or his feet to go to help those who are in need.

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). We'll never live up to that perfectly! But none of us expect to be given much from others in this world, so to whatever degree this principle is being put into practice in our relationships with one another, we experience God's love by proxy, and it feels good!

Though there is no congregation full of perfect people, Jesus' plan for his ekklesia is perfect, offering to his brothers and sisters—his family—the experience of being accepted, loved, encouraged, helped, and so much more as we travel through this hard life together, preparing for our life together forever. God's way is to trust that we will be so grateful for this, and that we will long so much for more and more of the joy we experience in obeying his ways, that we will grow to be more and more Christ-like. We expect problems, conflicts, weakness and sin to have to be faced and dealt with, and God tells us how to deal with them. His plan is that through life in his body, his family, every need will be met. And his perfect plan works, when it is followed!

Leadership in the Ekklesia

How is the ekklesia organized? I've been amazed that clear instructions in the Bible have been neglected or discarded by many groups I've been a part of. Without biblical leadership, the body can't function or grow the way God intended.

Eventually as the ekklesia was established and grew, leadership roles of elders/overseers and deacons/servants were described and qualifications given for how the ekklesia is to select them. 1 Timothy 3:1 encourages, "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task." Why is this noble? The organization of the ekklesia is the reverse of the way of the world, bottom-up rather than top-down. Jesus set the example, of course, and made it clear to his apostles in Matthew 28:25-28 how leadership in his ekklesia would work: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." There's nothing glamorous about the "positions" of leadership in the ekklesia. They really are roles and not positions.

In 1 Corinthians 4:9-12, Paul describes life as an apostle, the most responsible level of human leadership in the ekklesia (and no longer needed since the foundation God used them to lay down is complete): “For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.” Jesus had warned his apostles to expect this in John 15:18-20: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: ‘No servant is greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.”

Roles of designated leadership in the ekklesia fall on the shoulders of godly and mature men. That is not popular in our culture, because Satan, the “father of lies” (John 8:44), has twisted our thinking about God’s design of different roles for men and women. In the Garden of Eden he said, “Did God say...? You will not surely die!” In our time, he says, “Did God say only men are to be overseers (elders) or special servants (deacons) or congregational preachers and teachers? How unfair! Women shouldn’t be relegated to second-class status! They are just as capable of leading as men are, so they ought to seek the same positions as the men!”

I know I can’t change any minds, in this short space, of those who believe they’ve found a way to justify women serving in these roles. All I ask is that you be aware of the possibility that you may have started with wrong assumptions and forced Scriptures into your preconceived model. And I ask you to keep studying it with an open mind, that you consider that “different roles” does not mean one is superior and one inferior. Personally, as a woman, I’m thankful for the potential God designed through different roles, for me to be free of the responsibility for the welfare of souls of others that the roles of overseers, deacons, teachers, and even husbands bear. God’s wise plan is that if men live up to that responsibility, then members of the family of God and each physical family can feel the safety, security, and consideration that God’s design is intended to provide.

Hebrews 13 reveals that leaders are really recognized rather than appointed, and are followed because they have earned respect and voluntary submission to their wisdom. Verse 7 says, “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” As we’ve said about Paul, leaders set the example of faith and obedience and of wisely applying truth to real life. In verse 17 we are urged to have an attitude toward leaders of being persuadable and willing to follow that makes their work of watching over us easier. The New International Version translation says, “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.” The word “authority” is not in the original manuscripts, which is misleading; they lead by persuasion and example, not authority of position. The sense is that we make it hard on leaders when we are stubborn or unwilling to yield to their judgment even though they have earned respect and demonstrated their faith by the outcome of their lives as we saw in verse 7.

The qualities of mature men who would be suitable to serve as elders/overseers are described in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. And 1 Timothy 3:8-13 describes qualities of “deacons,” which is a transliteration of the Greek word rather than translating it to indicate designated servants who are given specific responsibilities, such as when the men in Acts 6 were asked to administer food distribution to needy widows. Clearly, both roles meet special leadership needs in the ekklesia, with overseers focusing on spiritual health and growth and deacons serving the administrative needs. In descriptions for both roles, the men are not only to be married, but they are to have wives who are also worthy of respect. The level of maturity and Christ-like servant heart of the man is to be discerned by how well those wives and their children have been led in the home.

Scriptures also give guidelines that teaching/preaching (which really is the same thing in different formats and settings) in meetings of the whole body is to be done by men, with women being silent in terms of public teaching of a congregation. 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 need careful study so they won’t be twisted. The best concise but thorough study that I’ve found about this is on the internet at: http://www.gospelway.com/teaching/women_preachers.htm.

God designed men to lead in marriage and in the ekklesia, and he designed women to function best when confident but considerate men lead them, as Jesus exemplifies toward the ekklesia as we saw in Ephesians 5. Yet our sinful nature tempts us to get this backward.

Men are tempted to be domineering, authoritarian and to demand respect rather than earn it. They don't naturally understand that women will gladly follow strong but humble and thoughtful leadership; they think they have to have all the answers in order to be the leader. That causes a vicious circle because women understandably rebel against submitting to that kind of leadership.

Women are tempted to resist submitting to and trusting the leadership of men out of fear from seeing wrong patterns in the world. They often take on responsibilities that God asks the men to carry, out of fear of what will happen if the men will not do it—and most men let them do so, either out of insecurity and fear of conflict over correcting or exerting leadership over a woman, or because they haven't really accepted their own role and responsibility.

Our culture's male-bashing and aggressive feminism needs to be challenged by showing it the wisdom of God's design in male-female differences in general (for an interesting description of this, see <http://gospelthemes.com/genius.htm>) and role distinctions in the home and ekklesia in particular. It has to be proven in practice in the ekklesia and then taught to those who are added to the body out of the world.

So it takes trust in God's will on the part of both men and women. Men need to learn to confidently lead by persuasion, example, and considerate respect for and appreciation of the nature and needs of women. Women need to learn to trust men who love God and are trying to be like Jesus, to let them learn how to lead. 1 Peter 3:1-7 gives clear instruction about this godly, spiritual mindset. Women are encouraged to "not give way to fear." Though it is a vulnerable position to be dependent on another person to lead, Christians can always put trust and confidence in God to bless when we do what is right. God is ultimately the leader of all of us and cares for us as our Heavenly Father, even if we are affected when people mess up in their fumbling steps of growth. Men and women can have an attitude of patience and acceptance of one another during the transformation process as God's role paradigm is learned, experienced, and eventually appreciated as the wisest and best way, intended for our joy.

As all Christians—yes, men and women—live exemplary, Christ-like lives, it's natural for humble Christians to follow their example and seek help and teaching from them. Everyone certainly has the freedom to learn from godly men and women individually. Priscilla was involved along with her husband Aquila in meeting with Apollos when they "explained the way of God more adequately" in Acts 18:24-26. And several women were singled out in Paul's letters as exemplary and helpful to his ministry. As you can imagine, I hope both men and women will be willing to consider what I write about.

Paul instructs Titus in Titus 2:3-5, "Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God." Women have an important sphere of influence with other women. As women have added roles in the world of work outside the home, it's been tempting to downplay the importance of their unique opportunity and responsibility in the marriage and home. But that would be changing the truth to accommodate our culture rather than setting a godly example for our culture to be able to see why God's way is true and wise.

There are male and female leaders in the sense of those who set good examples of mature faith. But God in his wisdom has said that congregational leadership roles of overseers and official servants are restricted to qualified men—married, mature, exemplary men. Since the whole mindset in the body of Christ is humble service and not self-seeking power and position, any disgruntled or negative attitudes on the part of someone who thinks he or she ought to be allowed to hold a leadership role in the body but is restricted by her sex or his marriage status would obviously prove a lack of spirituality. In the ekklesia, no one seeks to lead but to serve. Leading comes from the fact of others following, not from being appointed to a position. Overseers and special servants don't start leading when they are put in those roles, but rather they are selected by the body to fill those roles because of their service from the heart and their demonstrated humility, wisdom, and maturity before they are selected for congregational leadership responsibility. It is good and right for a man to aspire to be an overseer, but because it is "a noble task" and not because it's a prestigious position. The body does need strong and mature leadership—those who are able to spot needs, teach and equip others, correct errors and guard the truth.

In 1 Peter 5:1-6, Peter reminds elders, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." Then young men are urged to be submissive to those who are older and all are told to "clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'" Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that

he may lift you up in due time.” God raises up leaders who are humble servants, and the body recognizes them and follows their wise leadership.

What about paid preachers/ministers? Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:14, “...the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.” Certainly the apostles were supported in their work; Jesus prepared them for that when he sent them out when he was training them (Matthew 10), and Paul explained to the Corinthians that he was entitled to be supported financially, though he chose not to be most of the time. Timothy, Titus, and others were evangelists and not apostles and must have accepted financial support that they were entitled to expect—gratefully so, surely! Probably in many congregations it was the elders who filled this role, some even full-time and supported by the congregation, since 1 Timothy 5:17-18 says, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’”

In Matthew 23:1-12, Jesus warned against the use of titles of honor. This principle applies to terms such as “Reverend,” “Priest,” or “Father” now in common use. His paradigm is, “The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (23:11-12). I’ve never understood why these titles that aren’t even in the New Testament are used, yet the terms elder and deacon that are biblical are ignored or misapplied by most denominations.

Another common mistake is to use the word “Pastor” as the title for the role of preacher/minister. Pastor is a translation of the Greek word for the shepherding role of an elder. Other terms are bishop, which equals overseer, and presbyter, a transliteration of the Greek word for elder. Different words describe different aspects of the role, but though there are elders who focus on preaching and teaching, not all preachers are elders, and there is always a plurality of elders so there cannot be only one Pastor or a young or unmarried man as Pastor. These unbiblical titles are traditions of man! As the ekklesia was being planted in many new places, the apostles and those they personally trained, like Timothy and Titus, filled the role of evangelist. They preached and taught the gospel to convert people to faith in Jesus Christ, and as congregations matured, they were helped by those evangelists to get elders and deacons in place to carry on the ministry and lead the life of the body (Titus 1:5).

We know that in the first century there weren’t seminaries or special schools to train preachers—the culture of the time was more of a mentoring/apprenticeship approach, the kind of relationship Jesus had with his disciples. Surely God’s Providence worked that together for his good purposes, and I can’t help but wonder if we’ve tampered with a good thing in incorporating these traditions of higher learning from our culture. Paul told Timothy, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Now that we have the written word, there’s freedom to read and study what was limited to oral instruction in Paul’s day. But there was more to the teacher/student relationship than just instruction; much was caught as well as taught, as we see in Paul’s emphasis on following his example. This is lost in a system of academic Bible study as the means of training preachers. My husband was blessed with the opportunity to be trained in ministry through the biblical approach of one-on-one equipping. He was therefore able to equip others effectively also through relationships. Perhaps we need to reexamine our traditions about paid staff, how they are trained and how they are used in the life of the body. The need for relational, individual teaching and training is just as keen now as it was in the first century!

Paradigms of Body Life

Several Scriptures give a framework or organizing principle—a paradigm—for how God intends our daily life to be lived out in the big picture of the ekklesia. We’ve already looked at principles that undergird this paradigm: We need to submit to Christ as the head of his body. The new family God adds us to gives us a model for how we think of the ekklesia and our place in it, where we are intended to experience deep love that is unconditional and affectionate and safe. And the New Covenant paradigm of transformation by the power of God’s Spirit is the foundational mindset we must understand for our own lives and it shapes our involvement in others’ lives.

How, then, does the body actually function from day to day? How do the leaders lead, and how does the body grow? There are three organizing principles that God in his wisdom designed for our “progress and joy in the faith” (Philippians 1:25): interdependence, equipping, and involvement. These paradigms shape our experiences of body life.

The description of the ekklesia as the body of Christ gives us a way to picture the principle of interdependence and interconnectedness. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 says it well: “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts;

and though all its parts are many, they form one body....As it is, there are many parts, but one body....God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other....Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” He describes how no one can say, “Because I am not a hand/eye/[any other part], I do not belong to the body.” Neither can anyone say, “I don’t need you!” to any other part of the body. The point is that God puts his body together with many and varied “parts”—each person brings something unique to the mix. We’re each needed and needy.

How do we find our place in the body? In this age of psychology and science, elaborate systems and tools and programs for “finding your gift” have developed. How did the early Christians ever figure it out? Once again, we tend to complicate what God does not. We simply need to each put biblical principles into practice and live out our lives according to our circumstances, temperaments, and interests. God does lead and guide and work Providentially, but since we “live by faith and not by sight,” we usually can’t tell what he’s doing until we look back in hindsight and see how he’s worked things together for our good.

We don’t need to stress out over figuring out our gifts and talents, we just need to practice the K.I.S.S. principle—keep it simple, saint! Individual strengths and talents become clearer by doing what God tells all of us to do than by waiting and analyzing first. There is no indication in the Bible that God expects us to seek a singular path for our lives with our specific talents and interests and temperaments. In other words, God doesn’t reveal in advance any specific plans for our lives, though we often wish he would! We can look back and see the unique and personal ways he has worked in our lives and our circumstances and take comfort in knowing that he is intimately involved. But the underlying assumption seems to be that if unique individuals apply his universal truth, there will be plenty of variety from which the whole body will benefit. The strengths of each will surface as God’s will is done. One’s strengths will help another overcome weaknesses, and vice versa, through the encouragement and application of God’s truth as we enjoy fellowship together. The whole will be greater than the sum of the parts.

Romans 12:3-8 encourages us to use our individual gifts, but it seems assumed that we’ll know what they are without a lot of angst. The challenge is to use our gifts, not to figure out what they are: “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”

We know, and others see in us, what seems to come naturally for us. For instance, my writing interest and compulsion grew out of my pondering temperament. Bad experiences in the group that became a cult compelled me to try to sort out proactively both what was wrong and what God’s true and better way is. After much journaling, I wrote an essay of my conclusions that was included in a published book about that cult. Positive feedback from readers about how it helped them sort through their own experiences with the group was very encouraging to me. I had been criticized for “thinking too much” by leaders in the group. When finally free of their controlling and judgmental manipulations, I realized that it was not wrong, but right, to accept my temperament and use it in service to God. I could see my strengths and their potential weaknesses and guard against them with the help of others’ strengths.

Each of us has natural strengths. God made us that way, so we can’t get conceited! Each strength has a flip-side weakness, which also keeps us humble. We can be open and real with one another because all others have weaknesses, too. We can be thankful for and learn from one another’s strengths, and we can be patient with one another’s weaknesses. That’s where the idea of equipping or preparing for works of ministry comes in.

Ephesians 4 spells out this paradigm of equipping. If we grasp and then consciously operate from the perspective of how the body works and what our roles are within it, God’s plan will amaze us in how simply but powerfully it works. Ephesians 4:7,11-16 paints the big picture:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it....It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare (“equip” in Revised Standard Version) God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and

there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Colossians 2:19 continues the theme of the body structure: "...the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow." The ekklesia is organic, held together by the connections of freely chosen and cultivated relationships where koinonia is experienced. It cannot be organized by an imposed external structure. The whole moves toward Christ-like maturity when each part does its work. Each person using his or her talents and temperament works for the good of the whole.

Voluntarily learning from—being equipped by—those in leadership roles will mean that everyone will be living out what we were created for, as Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." We do need practical equipping for applying God's truth to real life, real relationships, real problems, real conflicts, real stresses and temptations. Those who have been living out their faith longer than I have can share their wisdom with me and help me grow faster than I can on my own. And as I learn and grow, I can turn around and pass on to others what I've been given opportunity to learn. That's how the whole body moves toward maturity. It's not programmed or forced, it just happens over time when the connections are cultivated and nurtured and when we're real and honest.

Ultimately, God equips us, as Hebrews 13:20-21 says: "May the God of peace...equip you with everything good for doing his will..." His word is the primary tool for this, as 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." We use it in our own lives. But God also placed us in a family so others would also use it to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15) to help us grow.

How is this equipping and learning accomplished? Involvement is the most concise way to describe what we see as the pattern of the Bible. Hebrews 3:12-13 describes this: "See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." Daily interaction with other Christians is the ideal, because it is the need. "See to it" means that thought and consideration needs to be given to how to encourage one another. There's no magic formula, no program that can "make it happen." God through his Spirit will give wisdom and insight and discernment to anyone who asks (James 1:5), who seeks to love brothers and sisters in ways that meet needs.

We all are very naïve about our weaknesses, overestimating our own ability to spot temptation and resist sin. We arrogantly think we don't need to seek the support of others in our struggle against sin. We're warned clearly in many places about "sin's deceitfulness," most memorably by Jesus in the parable of the soils where thorns in the soil gradually choke out the word of God. That's why we're specifically admonished in Colossians 3:16, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom..." We need to consciously avoid advising one another based on our own human wisdom and instead let the "living and active" word of God do its work as directly as possible. We all need help to remember God's truth in the midst of life's struggles.

We know much more than we practice, and God knows we need to be reminded and encouraged to obey it by real people who love us. Within the body of Christ, there is to be the assumption that we all do want to grow to be more and more like Christ, which frees us all to get deep and talk to each other about what's really going on. Satan can't get a foothold when everyone is "walking in the light" (1 John 1:5-10) and being honest and real and open to receiving help. That mindset needs to be taught and understood from the start, following Paul's example of "boasting in weakness" (2 Corinthians 11-12) and relying on God's strength and power, our only—but real—hope.

Hebrews 10:24-25 also gives very practical instructions along these lines: "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." Though just meeting together in an of itself will produce connections over time, what sets the ekklesia apart from the world is the conscious focus on meeting others' needs, the thoughtful consideration that seeks to give whatever is needed to those God puts in our individual lives. Whether it's encouraging, or "teaching, rebuking, correcting, or training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16), it's all part of how we "spur one another on."

The early Christians assembled weekly to "break bread" in the "Lord's supper" memorial meal, sing, pray, hear the word of God taught and preached, and enjoy the fellowship and encourage one another. But they also were involved in one another's lives daily. Are we? They knew what one another's needs were because they could see one

another's ups and downs. Do we? Though it's hard to start being open and vulnerable with one another, it does get easier as we gradually realize from our regular involvement with one another that within the body of Christ, the family of God, we can feel safe, accepted, loved, and encouraged. And that is how God causes his body to grow up.

That the World May Believe

God intends for his body to grow in number as well as in maturity. Jesus said he came “to seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10)—and every person is lost without him! He wants his call to be heard by everyone. Yet as we read the New Testament, we see no emphasis on proactive efforts to try to convert others except on the part of the apostles and evangelists. We don't see any pressure put to bear on the Christians to “evangelize” (which simply means to tell the good news). The only passage that alludes to that is an encouragement from Paul to one man in Philemon 1:6, “I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.” Paul's emphasis is on the benefit to Philemon. Yet the numbers of disciples grew as people were attracted to the ekklesia and open to the good news. There were “inquirers”—those who were learning about God's will—in their assemblies (1 Corinthians 14:16,23,24 footnotes). What drew them to want to visit and learn?

The secret to the success of the early Christians in making such a huge impact on their world goes back to four principles that Jesus himself described in the process of training and preparing his apostles before his death. Jesus spoke in terms of what will happen if his disciples, his followers, have the right perspective. For instance, he says, “If you love me, you will obey what I command” (John 14:15). He doesn't say, “If you love me, you must obey what I command,” because he knows that obedience will be the natural result of true love for him. The whole New Covenant paradigm is based on a “want to” rather than an “ought to” mindset, and the reason it is possible is because of God himself producing that mindset, that heart's desire, in his children through his Spirit.

So as you read the following four statements by Jesus, notice what he says will happen when his disciples are living by his teachings, when they are obeying his commands because they love him:

John 8:31-32: “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 13:34-35: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this *all men will know that you are my disciples*, if you love one another.”

John 15:4-8,16: “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, *he will bear much fruit*; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you *bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples....*I chose you and appointed you to *go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.*”

John 17:20-23: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us *so that the world may believe that you have sent me*. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity *to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*”

In all of these passages where Jesus describes what will be true of those who follow him, there is a result that *will* follow in God's spiritual order of the universe. We will have great news we want to share with others; we will want to invite them to join us. And many will be drawn to what they see in Jesus' disciples, his ekklesia, and will want to be a part of it. If we would put this to the test, what was true in the first century could be true now. We can be the ekklesia of Christ whose koinonia attracts many seeking and open people!

To Him Be Glory in the Ekklesia!

The pattern of the early days of the ekklesia was very simple. God's truth was spoken, both in preaching and teaching to groups and in one-on-one relationships. It “cut to the heart” those who were seeking and open. They responded through faith by repentance, immersion into Christ, and then active involvement in the life of the body of Christ. They spent time with other Christians and they put into practice the “one another” admonishments we read. Love for each other was with words and actions.

Have you been waiting for me to tell you more specifically what you ought to do? There certainly are very many practical instructions in the Bible, enough to keep us busy for the rest of our lives. We've looked at some of them.

But the main point I hope each of us will take away from pondering all we've seen here in God's word is this: "Church" is not a place we go to or what we do, it is what we *are*. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks." He always focused not on external religion, but internal, heart matters. The Jews missed the point about what the kingdom of God would look like, and much of his teaching was aimed at correcting their wrong assumption that it would be an earthly kingdom, such as in Luke 17:20-21: "Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, 'The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.'" So much of our modern "church" culture has made the same mistake, focusing on externals—buildings, organizations, programs, layers of staff and hierarchy that do the ministry work themselves rather than "equipping the saints for the work of ministry." It misses the point!

Next time you read through Acts and the letters in the New Testament, please notice this "from the heart" perspective. Notice how needs were addressed and conflicts were handled. And notice how everyone very much kept the perspective that God himself was the one building the ekklesia and that it is a great privilege not only to be part of it but also to be messengers and witnesses to the rest of the world. There were no layers of tradition. There was no institutional feeling. Body life was organic, not an organization. Koinonia was dynamic and vibrant, and more and more people were drawn into the koinonia of the ekklesia.

The Christian life isn't complicated! It is a lifelong process of transformation that God produces through the Spirit, from a worldly and selfish perspective to a spiritual and selfless one. It is not accomplished by programs, plans, rules, and traditions, as Colossians 2 emphasizes, concluding that rules "based on human commands and teachings...indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (2:22-23). Rather, God works in us as we spend time with him and with one another just as the first Christians did, devoting ourselves "to the apostles' teaching (learning the Scriptures) and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." What if we simply "continued to meet together...broke bread in [our] homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God..."? Would the Lord add to our number daily (or weekly or monthly or even occasionally) those who were being saved because what we have would attract others? Isn't it intriguing to imagine?

The question we need to ask is whether we are seeking religion or seeking koinonia in the ekklesia of Christ? Is anything in our current practice of what we know as "church" getting in the way of what God intended us to experience? How many people are we truly connected to? How many people know us well enough to help us grow spiritually or to spot and overcome sin? How many people can we name who are such examples to us of Christ-like attitudes and actions, who are actually doing what Jesus did and would be doing if he were still here, that we seek their help and actually follow their example? Are we truly being equipped for the work of the ministry? Have we settled for less than what we read that the early Christians had—less than their courage, their focus, their boldness, their love, their servant-hearted actions, their affection for one another, their joy?

Jesus told us what being his disciples would look like. He said that his disciples, his followers, would be this way—not that they "ought to," but they *would*—and that the world would be impacted by what they see in us. Other seekers and those open to God and his truth would be drawn by what they see, just as we see happened in Acts as the ekklesia was being built in that first generation of Christians. What could and would God do if we caught the same vision, if we followed the same paradigm and had the same mindset as those first Christians did? That is what keeps intriguing me and compelling me not to settle for less than I see promised and experienced in the New Testament.

Jesus puts his body together. He is at work in my life and the lives of others who are seeking him and who want to worship him "in spirit and in truth." God makes sure his children will find one another, as he has already proven to me many times.

My prayer for each and all of us is that we will know and appreciate from experience what Paul prayed for in Ephesians 3:7-21:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the [ekklesia], the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the [ekklesia] and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 says best my own heart's desire, for myself and for all of us: "...we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ."

May God fulfill our "good purpose" to be the body of Jesus Christ, the family of God. And may he fulfill "every act prompted by your faith" as we seek rich koinonia in the ekklesia through the bonds of love and affection produced by the Spirit of God working in our lives!

May we each be counted "worthy of his calling." Isaiah 53:11 (see the alternate translation in the footnote) says, "He will see the result of the suffering of his soul and be satisfied." Can Jesus say that all he went through to come to earth, to resist temptation and live perfectly, and to die for us was worth it? Have we have received the gifts his suffering made possible—new birth, new life, new love, and new family? May the worthiness of his calling really motivate us to live for him so we can say from experience, along with Paul, "To him be glory in the ekklesia!"



Dedication

This booklet is dedicated to my brothers and sisters in Christ whom God has placed in my life right now. I wrote this to sort through and distill the essence of "church" out of the past 46 years of seeking God and seeking what at last I understand to be "koinonia in the ekklesia of Christ." Now I pray, watch, wait, and put into practice what has jelled for me as God's better way that I have experience tastes of, his paradigm for life in my new family. God has proven to me that he is building his ekklesia and putting me in it along with others he has led me to in both dramatic and ordinary ways.

I believe Matthew 18:20, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." I'm content to enjoy fellowship with whoever God provides to experience it with, starting with the brothers and sisters in Christ who have been put in my path. I am prepared to "live by faith, not by sight" and trust that God has been, is, and will continue working to build his ekklesia in his own way and time. I'm excited about the opportunity to be part of his work and part of his body. I'm "asking and imagining" big things and watching for God to surpass my wildest dreams!

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