

OpenTheo

The Way Out of Babylon



Some Assembly Required - Steve Gregg

In "The Way Out of Babylon", speaker Steve Gregg discusses the concept of the church and its institutionalization over time. He argues that while not every institutional church is flawed, some have become legalistic and excommunicate those who do not align with their distinctives. Gregg emphasizes the importance of focusing on biblical reasons for forming a church community rather than avoiding excesses and offensive behaviors. He also touches on the issue of church membership and the role of para-church organizations. Ultimately, Gregg suggests that the true essence of the church is in serving and loving others as Jesus did, rather than fixating on rituals and religious customs.

Transcript

Tonight, as we continue talking about the subject of church, what is church, what does it mean to be in church, what does it mean to be in fellowship, we are going to take the other part of that which I discussed last time. Right here in the midst of the series, there are two parts I wanted to cover. One was going into Babylon and the other is coming out again.

Last time we talked about how the church went into Babylon, how a movement that was a very simple, very family kind of a movement that Jesus established, just calling people together to honor their father and to live among each other as brothers. How this became ecclesiastical, how this became institutionalized, how this became religious, and moved into that which found its full flowering of corruption in what we call the medieval times with the Roman Catholic Church, but it didn't take the rise of the Pope to bring about all of these problems. It takes, in my study of church history, my impression is it takes about one or two generations only for a move of God to be embalmed.

I use the term embalmed because it suggests the thing is dead, but they won't let it rot. They won't let it go. They want to keep it around.

And I will say this, one of the things, and I'm not going to teach this as part of my teaching, but I will share with you something that I've toyed with for a long time, is that

it seems to me the church might have been better served if whenever a genuine move of God began to be organized, and I think maybe the best thing would be not to organize it too much, but whenever one of these things began to be organized, if they had planned the obsolescence of the organization right at the beginning and said, okay, we're organizing, but 30 years from now this thing is dissolving and our kids will have to be led of God to organize for their generation and not just perpetuate the machine that we built. Because I think, now, I think a little differently than that now. I used to say those kind of things in unguarded moments among trusted friends, but now I think the organizing part can be dispensed with altogether.

And then you don't have to plan for the obsolescence of the organization. Jesus didn't plan for the obsolescence of anything that he established, because he never, as near as we can tell from anything he taught, he never planned for much organization. He never planned for it to become a machine that just perpetuates itself.

He created a living thing. The writers of Scripture couldn't come up with a better metaphor than to call it a body, made up of living parts that are all organically related to each other through spiritual unity and which serve one another. And in doing so, they function as one living organism, one living expression of Jesus Christ in the world.

Now, that is what got started. And of course, we studied last time how many things happen, not all at once, to turn the thing into an institutional monster, a monster really. I mean, I'm not saying that every institutional church is a monster.

That would be unfair. There are some institutional churches where the spirit seems to move, where people are saved, where people grow in their faith, where the pastors are humble men and do their job, what God has ordained them to do. There are churches like that.

You might say, show me one and then you got me stumped. But the fact is, I have known such. I have known such and it would be far from anything I'm saying to suggest that all institutional churches are corrupt and decrepit and not worth having at all.

Most of us were saved through the efforts of institutional churches, or at least Christians that were very deeply involved in institutional churches. But we can say, without fear of being overly harsh, that in the medieval times, the institution called the church was nothing less than a monster. It killed everyone that disagreed with it, if they could, after torturing them in the most heinous ways they could imagine.

I mean, this thing that Jesus started, it was a family made up of love for one another. By this, all men shall know that you are my disciples. If you have love one for another, it became a persecuting monstrosity.

And that is something that can happen again. In fact, it did happen again. In the

Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli and John Knox and people like that, they broke away from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century.

And they tried to get back to something more biblical. And they did get back to something a little more biblical. And what they did was recover some important things.

They recovered the need to use the scripture as a guide for orthodoxy, for life and practice. The Roman Catholic Church by the time of the 1600s had already adopted it as an official doctrine, that not only scripture but church tradition were of ultimate authority. And it is the view of the Roman Catholics today, I mean, it's their official position that scripture and church tradition make up equal authorities indicating the life of the church.

Well, the reformers thought, well, we don't think that's right. We think the scripture has more authority than human tradition. And therefore, they broke away from that.

Of course, they broke away from much of the legalism, much of the nonsensical rituals of Roman Catholicism. And they did produce something better. However, ironically, within about 25 years of Martin Luther's 95th feast being nailed to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, and the official beginning of the Reformation, within 25 years, there arose another movement within the reformed camp.

And that was called the Anabaptists. Anabaptists, people like Mennonites and Amish and Hutterites are among the types that still remain of that movement. But the Anabaptist movement grew up and said, well, you know, we think we ought to go back further.

I mean, you Lutherans and Calvinists and Swiss and Dutch Reformed and so forth, you guys are all still baptizing infants. There's nothing in the Bible about baptizing infants. And so they began to say, we don't baptize our babies, we'll just baptize Christians.

Well, that was so controversial in their day that even the Reformers who had been persecuted by the Roman Catholic Church began to persecute the Anabaptists. Now, they were considered rank heretics in their day. But if you read the Anabaptist theology, there won't be an awful lot that you'll disagree with.

You generally believe that these are the people who were really trying to be faithful to Jesus Christ and do what the Bible said to do. They were essentially saying, well, if we're going to use the scripture as our guide, let's not bring in any of these traditions from the past that have come in that are not in the Bible. And so they, the Anabaptists were the first to suggest that states should not be officially Christian, but there's a division between church and state.

That was a radical idea in their day. Of course, they didn't, as I said, didn't believe in baptizing infants. They believed in following the Sermon on the Mount.

And because of that, they had problems with any form of violent resistance. Now, in some cases, they may have been more simplistic in their interpretation of some things than Jesus intended. That's a matter of interpretation of some of the things Jesus said.

But they, they at least were, they put their money where their mouth was because they were willing to die and show no resistance to those that were persecuting them and just show love, the love of Christ to those who persecuted them, even though those who persecuted them were not so much the Roman Catholics as they were the Lutherans and the Calvinists and the Reformed people. Zwingli, who was Luther's counterpart in Switzerland and the spark of the Reformation in that country, himself authorized the killing of over 4,000 Anabaptists for no better reason but that they had chosen, they'd had the audacity and the temerity to get baptized again after they were converted. But see, that all had political ramifications.

If they were saying that infant baptism wasn't legit, then the loyalty to the state church, which all babies in Europe were born supposing to possess this loyalty, was undermined by the fact that that state church had no right to baptize people who had not yet become Christians. At least that was how the Anabaptists taught. So they were killed.

They were burned at the stake. They were drowned. They were beheaded depending on who was persecuting them.

The Roman Catholics did it one way, the Reformers did another way, and then the Roman Emperors did another way yet. But this movement, of course, remains a relatively small movement to this day. And I'm not advocating it as the true church in our day necessarily.

But I'm saying that it was a movement that was, in my understanding, in terms of being faithful to scripture and casting out traditions of the Roman Catholics, the Anabaptists were much further along than the Reformers before them were. And yet they became institutionalized too, and they became legalistic, and they began to excommunicate people who didn't agree with their distinctives too. And this thing, it just seems like there's no end to it.

No matter who comes along to try to restore something more like what Jesus had, it doesn't take long for them to become institutionalized. And once people don't fit into the norms of the institution, they're persecuted in some ways too. Of course, the Anabaptists didn't persecute with violence because they were by nature non-violent.

I mean, they were seriously non-violent. There was a well-known story told among the Mennonites of how one of the Anabaptists was fleeing from persecution, and he fled across a frozen lake. And he made it safely to the other side, but the officer who was chasing him fell through the ice.

And the Anabaptists had the officer to escape, but he ran back and rescued the officer, and the officer took him back, arrested him, and had him killed. But I mean, this was very typical of the mindset of the Anabaptists. They felt like that's what Jesus would do.

And so, I mean, there have been people in church history who've tried very hard, even risking their lives and losing their lives, in order to try to restore something more biblical. But even the Anabaptists, in many cases, those groups that are institutionalized from that original movement, have become very, in most cases, well, let's just say some of you may have come out of those movements. I know some in this room have.

And many that have come out of that movement have said, it's very stodgy, very legalistic, very bad. And so how do you keep that from happening? We need to find a way to get out of Babylon altogether. And that's not going to be the easiest thing in the world to do.

In my searching of the scripture, I've come up with some recommendations of how to avoid Babylon in terms of religious institutionalization. That's what I'm referring to as the Babylonian problem here. I'm not real confident that a church that already exists as an institutional church will be very successful in implementing these recommendations.

One reason I bring them up here with some hope that they may be implemented is because we are, at this point, many of us, not all here, but many of us are part of a fellowship that has not yet become very organized. And there's pressure coming from outside the movement and some from within, saying we ought to get a little more like a real church. We ought to get a little more organized in those ways that churches are organized.

And I really think that there's a strong sentiment within the group that that's not really the way we want to go. And some people have biblical reasons for it. Some just have bad experiences with institutional churches in the past and are kind of scared of the idea.

But I think that a group that starts as a home church or that starts as a just kind of a gathering of Christians, you know, having potlucks together or something like that, and they don't have an institutional church already, I think there's very good reason to hope that if these principles are considered biblically, that that church may stay alive for some. There may be hope for the patient, and it may not die. So this is what I'm going to suggest.

There's several things that are very commonly thought of about church because of the way it has become institutionalized. Remember, we were born thousands of years almost after the institutionalization of the church, so much so that we just take as normative. Many things that Jesus and his disciples were thought were strange.

And so I want to talk about some of that. First of all, I'd like to suggest that just starting a

small group in a home or something like that is not necessarily a guarantee of avoiding the problems. I've seen many groups that have started out in homes, and before long they were just doing the very same things on a smaller scale that were being done in the churches that they left.

They were just trying to avoid the excesses, the more offensive things, but they were essentially their own little miniatures of the same phenomenon that they had left behind. And I think some of the things we need to reconsider are that we will fall into all the same traps unless we are very vehemently committed to scripture and willing to say, well, if that's not in the Bible, then I'm not going to let anyone pressure me into doing that. Because the Bible is the Word of God, and if there's pressure coming to do something that's not in the Bible, where is that pressure coming from? If it's not the Bible, what is it? It's traditions of men, and it's been the commitment to traditions of men that has caused the church in many cases to go into really deep trouble.

In retrospect, we can see it. At the time they were going into that trouble, they usually couldn't see it, I think. Now, we need to have, first of all, a renewing of our thinking about church altogether, about what church is.

Paul said in Romans chapter 12 and verse 2 that we should be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And the renewing of our minds means that our thinking changes, and the alternative to that is being conformed to the world. I dare say that the modern church is an organization that, for the most part, is conformed to the world.

Not enough to make the world really embrace it, but enough to cause the world to despise it. You see, the world knows that the church is supposed to be something different. At least they used to.

I'm not sure if the church, the world, has any idea what the church is supposed to be now. But a generation or so ago, a compromised church was despised by the world. Now all churches are despised by the world because they just figure Christianity is something that belongs to a former ancient age and can't figure out why anyone still is hanging on to it.

But there are things where the church certainly has taken on the world's ways. The very institutionalization of the spiritual movement is a copy of the world, and of worldly thinking. The idea being, well, we need to have some kind of leadership structure here, so that as generations go by and this movement continues, and if Jesus doesn't come back real soon, then we'll be able to have some smooth transition from one group of leaders to the next, and then the next generation to the next.

There needs to be some kind of method here of selecting leaders and establishing them, and they have to hold some kind of an office so that they can actually keep things in

line. So they really have the clout and the authority to keep the church on the rails, on the track that we want it on. In other words, we can't allow too very much freedom of thought in the ranks, because there might be too many people who see things differently than we do right now, and therefore we need to establish people who are well indoctrinated in our way of seeing it, so that we can perpetuate this way of seeing things generation by generation, and not allow very much variation in the way things are seen, because then we might lose our, whatever we consider to be the important distinctives of what we are.

And, you know, have you ever noticed how much the church service resembles a theater? I mean, the very use of bulletins, for example. Do you suppose Jesus or the apostles print up bulletins for their services? I mean, what's a bulletin for? Well, you can't know the players without a program, right? I mean, you got to know who that guy is up there preaching, who that is singing that special up there, who it is playing the organ, who donated the flowers in the front. I mean, how are you going to know that kind of stuff if you don't have a bulletin? It's like going to a play, you know? Okay, well, let's see what's, let's see, we're at the, oh, this is the operatory now.

Okay, this must be scene three. And, you know, what, now I'm not, I'm not saying that having a bulletin is a sinful thing. I'm not saying a church has a bulletin is bad to have a bulletin.

It's a symptom of something. We need a bulletin because we think of the church as sort of like a form of entertainment. And, you know, you go to a play, you get the program, you find out who the actors are and what each scene is supposed to be.

And a bulletin is sort of that way. And of course it is like an entertainment thing. Look at you guys, you're all facing one direction, you're all looking at me.

Now, there are times, even in the early church where, you know, Paul would address, you know, a full house. I'm sure that most of them were looking in his direction. But, I mean, the idea of there being lectures or sermons or teachings or whatever is not absent entirely from scripture.

But the impression I have from reading scripture, especially a place like First Corinthians and a number of other places where we get a glimpse of what happened or was expected to happen in church services, it sounds to me like they weren't just lecture hall experiences with a few entertainers getting up doing some music, but that they were situations where the saints gathered together to mutually minister to each other. That it wasn't just one guy in a pulpit, you know, ministering to the whole crowd and that was it. Now, there were times like that.

I mean, I imagine the church had more than one kind of meeting in the early days. And there's probably room for a variety of kinds of meetings that serve different purposes.

But the main thing I would want to point out is that church in the Bible isn't something you go to.

Yes, you can go to gatherings. We'll have something to say about gatherings of the church, but church isn't primarily something you go to. The church is the community of called out ones whose corporate life together comprises an alternative pilgrim society that exists alongside the dominant culture.

In other words, church is a family that live by different standards for different reasons and do different things than the world around them. And it's not so much when they get together in meetings that the significant part of church life is happening. It's when they see each other at any time or even when they don't see each other and they learn of the needs that each other have.

I mean, it just has to do with the relationships and the commitment people have to each other. And when gatherings happen, there's a sense in which that exhibits the same ideals, at least as near as I can tell from reading the scriptural examples. Church gatherings in the Bible are not necessarily formal liturgical protocols where Christians go and meet with a God that they don't have much to do with in between those meetings.

Now, let's face it. Many people who attend even evangelical churches today come to church to meet God. But in the early church, God went with the people everywhere they went and they acted like it.

What they did in their business, what they did in their relationships, what they did with their money, what they did for entertainment, all reflected the fact that they were aware that God was with them. And whatever they did, they did for the glory of God at all times. Gathering together was another thing they did for the glory of God, that they weren't coming to meet a God who lived there in the building and between meetings they didn't have much contact with.

A religious service is a very strange thing in terms of, I think, New Testament norms. Now, it's not strange in terms of Old Testament. The Old Testament had its holy days, its holy places like the temple.

It had its holy people like the priests and so forth. But in the New Testament, there was a radical change in all of that because the New Testament did away with holy days and holy, a holy cast of priests and holy places. Now, I don't want to just say that.

I want to show you in Scripture that this is so. We could do that in a lot of places in Scripture. Look at John chapter four.

We'll start there. Jesus is talking to the woman of the well. And in verses 21 through 24, Jesus said to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem worship the Father.

You worship you do not know what. We know what we worship, mean the Jews know, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father is seeking such to worship him.

God is spirit and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth. Now, this teaching was in response to a question that this woman had. She said, Our fathers have taught us to worship here in this mountain garrison here in Samaria.

But you Jews, she knew Jesus was a Jew. She said, You Jews say that Jerusalem is a place that may not to worship. Who's right? Now, he said, it really doesn't matter, does it? And he said, times come where it won't matter at all.

When he said the hour is coming when people will not worship in Jerusalem or in this mountain, he's referring to the fact that within 40 years of that time, the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple at Mount Gerizim were destroyed both by the Romans in the Jewish war. And no one worshipped there again after that. The temples were gone.

There were no holy buildings anymore. And she said, the hour is coming when they're not going to worship God in Jerusalem or in this building. But then he said in verse 25, 23, but the hour is coming and now is, you know, you don't have to wait till 70 A.D. for this to materialize.

It's already happened that those who are true worshipers of God worship him in where? In the church building? In the temple in Jerusalem? No, in spirit and in truth. He said the problem with the Samaritans is not that they worship in the wrong mountain or in the wrong building. It's that they don't know what it is they're worshiping.

He said, you Samaritan Jew worship, you know not what. That's the problem. The problem is not that you have a different meeting place than the Jews have.

I mean, the Jews, most of the Jews might think that's your problem. But he says, as far as God is concerned, your problem is not where you're worshiping. Your problem is that you don't know the one you're worshiping.

You're not worshiping spiritually. You're just fulfilling a religious ritual in a place that you regard as a holy site. But he says, time is coming when there won't be any more holy sites, not even in Jerusalem, which is the holiest place to the Jew for centuries.

He said that's even going to be kaput. That's going to be passé. And when that is so, the only holy place that God cares about is your heart, your spirit, that you know him and you worship him in spirit and in truth.

Now, by the way, the expression to worship God in spirit and in truth has been interpreted a lot of different ways. And I can only give you the suggestion of what I have

come to believe it means. There are other possibilities, but I believe that Jesus, when he spoke of the need to worship God in spirit and in truth, was deliberately making a contrast to the way that the average Jew and probably the average Samaritan thought about worship.

A, it was ritualistic, had more to do with the religious rituals you did, whether you washed your hands properly, brought the right animal, the right kind of animal to the right spot, killed it in just the right way, whether you avoided certain unclean foods and whether you avoided touching dead bodies and things like that. Those were just rituals. Had nothing to do with your own relationship with God, essentially.

Didn't have anything to do with your own character or your morality. It was just whether you learned to dot the i's properly and cross the t's properly to do the religious thing right. And Jesus said, not ritual, but in spirit.

It's got to be spiritual, not ritual. And in truth, that expression can mean more than one thing, but it often in scripture means in reality. In truth means really, genuinely, truthfully.

And this would be in contrast to the very common phenomenon of hypocrisy among the religious people in Jerusalem at the time, the Pharisees in particular, very hypocritical. They worshiped God apparently, but not genuinely. They had an outward show of love for God, but they didn't have any real love for God.

And he says, listen, God is sick and tired. He's fed up with this ritualistic, externalistic hypocrisy such as so common among religious people in our society. He said, God's looking for people.

God is looking for something. What he's looking for, he's seeking those who can worship in interior, in their spirit and genuinely in truth, as opposed to hypocritically. And once those factors are present, all other considerations are not the essentials.

Now you can have places that you meet that you have religious meetings at, and there can be ritual. There can be ritual. Even Christians have ritual.

Baptism is a ritual. The Lord's Supper is a ritual. And there's nothing wrong with having rituals so long as we don't define our Christianity as those rituals.

As long as we don't define our relationship with God as our performance of these rituals, as if God is a God who's into ritual. Now you could get that impression about God from reading the Old Testament, because I mean, it mattered really big time that no one touches that, because that's not clean. And no one, even no one but the priest could touch the tabernacle, because they'd have to be put to death for that.

And there's all this ritualism in the Old Testament. And some might say, well, God

obviously is a God who loves ritual. No, it says in Psalm 40, and it says in Psalm 51, that God never had any delight in all that ritual, in offerings and sacrifices, all that stuff that the chief rituals do.

He never had any pleasure in those things. He had all those things to be a shadow of something he really did care about. The ritual was a teaching device.

And what it was to teach was something spiritual. So that, you know, the animal sacrifices that were offered represented spiritual sacrifices, or in another dimension, it represented Christ, his sacrifice. It's hard to say which, I mean, both seem to be pictured there.

But I mean, the Passover was a picture of Christ. So many things in the ritual were simply pictures of spiritual things. God did use a great deal of ritual in the Old Testament while waiting for those spiritual things to materialize.

As it says in Colossians 2, verses 16 and 17, which, if you're not familiar with that verse, it would be a good one to know. Colossians 2, 16 and 17 says, therefore, let no one judge you in food or in drink. And by that, he means the restrictions about what you eat and drink that the Jews practiced.

That was part of their ritual of cleanness. Or regarding a festival, which was a religious holiday, or a new moon, which was another religious holiday, or Sabbaths, which was their weekly gathering at the synagogue. So don't let anyone judge you about whether you do those things or not.

He said those things are a shadow of things to come. But the substance or the body is of Christ. In other words, the rituals of Judaism that had to do with touch not, taste not, handle not, don't eat that, don't touch that, keep this day special, don't, you know, these other days not so special.

All of those things were rituals that pointed forward to something. They were a shadow. And that what they were a shadow of was a reality bigger and more important than themselves, namely Christ.

And once Christ has come, he is all that matters. Remember, later on in Colossians, Paul says, and you are complete in him. And watch that little spider.

In Christ, we're complete. We don't need all the ritual. Now, there are rituals that can be meaningful.

I wish I had brought with me a quotation that A. W. Tozer made about religious rituals, because he said religious ritual may be a meaningful expression of someone's genuine spiritual fervor. But more often, the rituals replace spiritual fervor and are viewed as a substitute for spiritual fervor. And I'm not quoting, I'm paraphrasing him.

But I think anyone who's been observing the spiritual scene knows that that is an observation that is true. In Acts chapter seven, Stephen's sermon, it's interesting what got Stephen into trouble. We know that Stephen was the first Christian martyr and he got stoned for being a Christian, but it wasn't just for being a Christian.

There were a lot of other people who were Christians who didn't get stoned that day, weren't even arrested, weren't even sought for. I mean, the apostles were all there in Jerusalem. No one grabbed them and took them out and stoned them.

Stephen got stoned not just because he was a Christian, but because he offended the Jews on a very important point. It says in Acts chapter six, verse 11, it says, then they secretly induced men to say, we have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him, seized him and brought him to the council.

They also set up false witnesses who said, this man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, meaning the temple and the law for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs, which Moses delivered to us. Well, that was true enough. Jesus did all that.

The temple was soon afterwards destroyed and the customs of Moses were changed. And then Stephen gave his little speech. And if you've read it anytime recently, you recall that he basically does what looks like a summary of Old Testament history, beginning with Abraham and all the way up to their own time.

But these historical summaries, such as you find in Stephen's sermon, or in some of the longer Psalms, give these kinds of summaries. Or even Paul in his sermons in Acts 13 and other places gives what seems like almost a unnecessary summary of all the Old Testament history of the Jews. There's always a point that's being made.

And in Stephen's case, one of the principal points he's making is that this holy place that they spoke of, that they said he had blasphemed against by predicting its destruction, was not a holy place at all. It was just a place. And that God is not confined to any particular places.

Notice, he says in verse two of chapter seven, he said, men and brethren and fathers, listen, the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia. Well, God was over there. Abraham had an encounter with God, not in Jerusalem, but in Mesopotamia.

Was that a holy place? It was. As soon as God met with him, it was holy to him. But it wasn't a holy spot on the map.

In verse six, he says, but God spoke in this way that his descendants would sojourn in a foreign land. That is, God would be with his people, though they were not in Israel. Israel

was the promised land, but God was with his people even when they were sojourning in Egypt, in other words.

And then in verse nine, says, and the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt, but God was with him. Where? In Egypt. God was there too? Again and again, Stephen brings out the fact that God was not confined to any particular place.

Comes out in verse 11. Now the family was great. Trouble came all over the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance.

And it goes on to tell how God cared for them. In verse 29, it says, then at this saying, Moses fled and became a sojourner in the land of Midian, where he had two sons. And there, when 40 years had passed, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush in the wilderness of Mount Sinai.

So here's an Arabian mountain and God's there too. So God's with Abraham in Mesopotamia. He's with Joseph in Egypt.

He meets Moses over Mount Sinai. And in verse 36, it says, he brought them out after he'd shown wonders and signs in the land of Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness 40 years. So God was present and manifestly present through signs, wonders in Egypt, in the Red Sea, in the wilderness, in other words, all places that God's people are.

God is there. No particular geographical spot is favored. And then he says in verse 44, our fathers had the tabernacle of witness in the wilderness.

And then he says in verse 48, however, the most high does not dwell in temples made with hands. As the prophet says, the quotation here comes from Isaiah 66, 1 and 2, heaven is my throne and earth is my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Has not my hand made all these things? Now, one of the points that Stephen is emphasizing here in his teaching is that God is not confined to religious places.

God himself says, and this is in the Old Testament, when the Jews were still required to bring their sacrifices to the priests of the temple, God in the Old Testament said, this house is not my house. He says, what house are you going to build for me? I dwell in all the heavens. You can be in Egypt or Mesopotamia or Mount Sinai or in the Red Sea or in the wilderness.

You can be any of those places or in Jerusalem or in Mount Gerizim in Samaria, and you can worship God there. And that's just as good. God has never been confined to any particular holy place.

And in Romans 14, we find confirmed again, what Paul had said in Colossians, which we

saw a moment ago, that holy days, there are no such thing as necessary holy days. In Romans 14, Paul is talking about the distinction between the sentiments, religious sentiments of different Christians in the church in Rome, and Paul allows them to have liberty in this matter. And he says in verse five, one person esteems one day above another.

Another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. Now, Paul said, it's not a problem if someone wants to keep one day above another, if someone wants to meet on a Sunday or a Saturday or some other day, we can call that their Sunday go to meeting, you know, Sabbath or whatever.

But really, if you treat every day alike, that's okay, too. Because as far as God's concerned, every day is alike. I have often been asked by Sabbath keeping people who believe that we ought to keep the Sabbath on Saturday, how it is, or to show them in the Bible where it is that the Sabbath was lowered to the level of all other days, because they believe that the Saturday is God's holy Sabbath and all other days are ordinary days.

And my response is that there's no place in the Bible that ever suggests for a moment that the Sabbath has been lowered to the level of other days. What has happened in the New Testament is that all the other days were elevated to the level of Sabbath, that if the Sabbath was God's day, now all days are God's day. If the Sabbath was a day to remember God and to rest from your own religious works or your own works righteousness, which I think is what Hebrews 4 and 9 suggests is what it symbolizes, then we're supposed to do that every day.

When Jesus' disciples rubbed grain in their hands on the Sabbath, which was against the law, they were criticized by the Pharisees, and Jesus said, well, listen, the Son of Man is the Lord even of the Sabbath day. And that statement, even of the Sabbath day, means He's the Lord of Sunday, He's the Lord of Monday and Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, Friday, and even of Saturday, even of the Sabbath. And what that means, if Jesus is Lord, what does that mean? What's incumbent on me if Jesus is Lord? Today is a Tuesday, so is Jesus the Lord of Tuesday? He is.

So what's that mean to me? It means I have to be loyal to Him and please Him and live for His glory on Tuesday. And when Wednesday comes, I have to do it on Wednesday. And when Saturday comes, the Sabbath day, I have to do it then too.

He's the Lord even of that day. But the issue is no longer whether this is a special day. The issue is, is Jesus my Lord today? Am I obeying Christ in what I'm doing any day? Paul said there were some in the Church of Rome who didn't keep any holy days at all.

They just esteemed every day alike. Every day is the Lord's day, as far as they were concerned. And Paul said, that works.

Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. If they want to do it that way, that works. No objection there.

He didn't say they have to keep a holy day. And he didn't say it was bad for those who wanted to. He gave liberty.

And that's one very important part of getting out of Babylon, is discovering the liberty where the Spirit of the Lord is. There is liberty, Scripture says, and allowing people to differ on things like that. In Galatians, however, Paul was more concerned because the Galatian Christians were not only keeping special days, but they were beginning to define their relation with God in terms of these Jewish rituals.

And so Paul vehemently expressed disapproval of that in Galatians 4, verses 9 through 11. Galatians 4 and 9, Paul says, but now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements to which you desire again to be in bondage? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I'm afraid for you, lest I've labored for you in vain.

Now, these people were keeping holy days. He says, I'm afraid I've labored in vain for you. I'm afraid that leading you to the Lord was something that ended up empty and fruitless, vain.

Now, he is not arguing that everybody who keeps special days is necessarily in the same kind of trouble the Galatians were in, or else he would have been more vehement when he wrote to the Romans when he said someone keeps one day above another. Well, he could have gotten more upset than he did about that, but it wasn't that big a deal. Actually, in Romans, the issue was, I think, that the Jewish believers were keeping the Sabbath.

The Gentile believers were not. And there was hostility between the two. And he had to tell them, listen, you don't judge them and you don't despise them.

Just let everyone do what they feel in their own conscience to do. And it's no problem. But here in the Galatians, it wasn't a matter of disunity in the church.

It was a matter of embracing ritualistic interpretations of what it means to be spiritual. And they were now incorporating a whole system of holy days and, you know, a festival calendar and so forth. And he says, this has really gone backward.

Actually, in another place, he says to them, just in verse three and four of chapter five, he says, I testify to every man who becomes circumcised that he's a debtor to keep the whole law. You've become estranged from Christ. You who attempt to be justified by the law, you've fallen from grace.

So this is a serious condition they're in. And that one of the symptoms that Paul was

concerned about was that they were now placing a real high emphasis on certain days, being holy days and months and years and so forth. And that just wasn't part of Paul's thinking about spirituality.

And he wished it wasn't part of theirs. One of the things that I believe has really damaged our perception of what it means to go to church is that church is treated like a formal occasion. Now, I'm not saying that formality is a sin in itself.

It's the question of the mentality that feels the need to be formal. That's the concern. It's like the keeping holy days.

There's nothing sinful in itself about keeping holy days. It's the question of why do you feel the need to? Now, if you don't feel the need to, but you just enjoy it and it's at a fine, it's time to get together with family and friends and have a good time, then fine. I don't see any problem with that.

But if the reason you feel the need to is that you just feel like you're spiritually deficient, if you neglect this holy day or this special thing, then there's a problem. Likewise, with the formality associated with the typical church service. Now, we live at a time where informality has become much more acceptable in church services.

In this valley, I imagine there's probably not too much formality. And I haven't been to many of the churches here, but I imagine there's not too much pressing for men to wear ties and women to wear expensive dresses and things like that. But I come from an area in Portland, Oregon, where there are still churches that teach that it's incumbent on us to dress up when we come to church.

Many churches still taught that anymore. They all taught that 30 years ago. But the Jesus movement kind of just changed a lot of the sensitivities about those things.

And now, I mean, when I was growing up in church, you couldn't go to church in blue jeans. You certainly couldn't go in sandals. And generally speaking, you'd be frowned on if you went without a tie if you're a man or a woman went without a dressy dress.

That has changed to a large degree. But there are still people who think of the church meeting is still a formal meeting with God. And there's a church, for example, in Portland, a very large one, that prints right in the bulletin.

They say, we think that when people come to worship God, they should dress in their best clothes. And they say, we expect men to wear coats and ties and women to wear nice dresses. Well, that sounds weird to you, but here's how they justify it.

They say, well, if you are going to have lunch with the governor at a fancy restaurant or something, you'd get dressed up for that meeting, wouldn't you? And God is greater than the governor. Our honoring God is far more important than to honor any man. And they

say, therefore, since you would dress up to see the governor and have lunch with him, is it not dishonoring to God that you don't dress up to come see him? Doesn't it communicate to him that you honor the governor more than you honor him? Well, see, all of this sounds very reasonable to people who have no spirituality.

You see, the difference in the analogy between God and the governor is that the governor cares what you wear. The governor actually would be offended if you didn't dress appropriately for the occasion. God, however, according to scripture, looks not as men look.

Men look on the outward appearance and God looks on the heart. In James chapter three, is it? Or chapter two? Let me turn you there. James chapter two, beginning with the first verse, says, my brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory with partiality.

For if there should come into your assembly, a rich man with gold rings in fine clothing, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes. And you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, you sit here in a good place and say to the poor man, you stand there, sit here at my footstool. Have you not shown partiality among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Now, James indicates that that mentality that many Christians have about dressing up to go to church is being a judge with evil thoughts.

You're showing partiality to people on the basis of their clothes. And you know that the average person who dresses up for church, I can't say you know this, and we can't really know everyone's hearts, but we know this. There's a good percentage of people who dress up to go to church, not because they think God cares how they dress for church, but because they care about how the other people view their clothing.

It's showing partiality to those who have the nicest clothes, who can wear the most stylish clothes, the most expensive clothes or whatever. The Apostle Paul was certainly said enough that it should keep us from that error. But I guess if people aren't reading the Bible, they're not going to be kept from error.

In 1 Timothy chapter 2, Paul made this comment about how women should dress, 1 Timothy 2, 9 and 10. It says, in like manner also that the women adorn themselves in modest apparel. And modest doesn't just mean that it covers up a lot of skin.

Obviously, if clothing doesn't cover up much skin, it's not very modest. But there are other ways that clothing can be immodest. You can have all the skin covered up and be immodest in that your clothes are either a pattern or a cut or a color or something that has one purpose, and that's to draw attention to yourself, to draw eyes to yourself.

Not necessarily sexual attention, although there's a lot of that kind of clothes too, but

modesty is not just a matter of avoiding stumbling people sexually. Modesty is being self-abasing and self-effacing and not trying to be the center of attention, not trying to draw a bunch of attention to yourself. And there are people who don't show any skin, but their clothing is so bizarre or so, you know, stylish or so expensive that they just know and they hope they'll get a lot of attention for it.

And that's not modest. It says that women should dress in modest apparel with propriety and moderation, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing. But, here's what they should be clothed with, which is proper for women professing Godliness.

They should be clothed with good works. When women dress, they should be more concerned about being clothed with good works than the particular style of clothes they put on. And the same would be true of men.

Now, to suggest that they ought to live by that rule except when they go to church, and then they ought to violate this spiritual principle to go to church and put on their costly clothing, to my mind is just wrongheaded, wrongheaded in the extreme. In Luke chapter 20, what I'm talking about here is the mentality that church is a formal thing. One of the ways that our culture exhibits that is in the expectation that you wear your good clothes to church.

Now, we don't go to a church, most of us that have that expectation, but the mentality is still around. In Luke 20, in verse 46, one of the things Jesus said against the scribes and Pharisees, interestingly, he says, beware of the scribes who desire to walk in long robes and love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues and the best places of the feast. These guys like to dress in their liturgical, clerical garments.

Now, if I went to a church or if I was a minister, especially if I was a minister in a church where the guys wore clerical collars and robes or special uniforms to get up in the pulpit, I don't know what I'd do if I read a verse like this. I mean, can you imagine that Jesus and his disciples got dressed up in their special clothes to get together for dinner or something? I mean, maybe they did, but I don't think they had much. I think they were kind of poor.

I don't find anything in the teaching of Jesus that indicates that ministers or congregants in the gathering of Christians should be dressed any differently than they would in any other kind of situation. If you put on special clothes for the meeting, I wonder if that suggests that you think you're going to meet with God in that meeting in a way that you don't meet with him at other times when you're wearing your ordinary clothes. I mean, the question is not, is it wrong to wear nice clothes to church or is it wrong to wear lousy clothes to church? The question is, why? What is in your mind? What is your mentality about church? Are you going there to impress God or to impress people? If it's a dressed up occasion, then it's to impress people because God's not impressed with you dressing up.

He's not impressed with the cut of your clothing. Now, another thing that is related to the church gatherings that I think is very controversial still is that the church gatherings are thought of as a formal time for the sacraments to be taken. Now, the Roman Catholics, as near as I can tell, are the ones who get into the sacraments big time.

There are seven sacraments in the Roman Catholic Church. A sacrament, by definition, is a means of grace. Now, as near as I can tell in the Bible, faith is the means of grace.

The only one that the Bible ever mentions that I can tell. I mean, by grace you can say through faith. It says in Ephesians 2.8, it says over in Romans 5.2, it says, through Christ we have access into this grace by faith.

This access to grace is faith. Faith is the means of grace. But the Roman Catholic Church introduced seven things that they call the sacraments, which are other means of grace.

Now, insofar as these, these are basically rituals of different kinds, insofar as these rituals may actually elevate my faith, they may indeed confer more grace to me. I may receive more grace because I have more faith at the time I do this particular thing. But I guess what I'm saying is Jesus didn't indicate that we need these rituals in order to increase our faith.

I think maybe the need for these rituals speaks of maybe a weakness of faith in general. And insofar as we have weak faith, we might as well admit it and use whatever we can to strengthen it. And if rituals do that, then so be it.

We better have the rituals. But we need to remember that Christianity isn't defined by these rituals. The grace of God doesn't come to us because we're baptized.

It doesn't come to us because, you know, well, because we take communion even. Now, I believe in those things. The Bible teaches about baptism and taking communion.

Those are rituals. But the idea of taking communion is probably the sacrament par excellence. It is the quintessential sacrament because it's the only one that's repeated in Protestant churches.

Protestants believe in two sacraments, some of them, Luther and Calvin and so forth. But when they reformed, they believed there were not seven, but two sacraments. There was baptism and the Eucharist or the communion.

And only the second is ever repeated. You're baptized really only once. If that confers grace, then it does.

But the rest of your life, you're not baptized anymore. So the only other sacrament that they saw that had any ongoing means of bringing grace into your life was the Eucharist. I believe that Luther did not differ very substantially from the Roman Catholics in his view

on this.

The Roman Catholics believed that the bread and the wine became the actual body and blood of Jesus. In the ritual with the blessing of the priest and so forth, the wine actually became the blood of Jesus and the bread became the actual body of Jesus. And this is called transubstantiationist viewpoint.

Luther thought he was being really risky when he changed his view to what they call consubstantiation. Consubstantiation means with the substance. And Luther taught, no, the wine doesn't become the blood of Jesus.

The bread doesn't become the body of Jesus. But the body of the real body of Jesus is above and below and to the side of and through the bread. And the real blood of Jesus is above and below and beside and through the wine.

To me, that's not too different than transubstantiation. It's just a variety. The Anglicans speak of the real presence of the body and blood of Jesus in the element of communion.

Now, some Protestants have gotten further away from this idea and say, well, these are not sacraments. These are what they call ordinances. A difference between a sacrament and ordinance is an ordinance is something you're required to do.

It's like a law. But a sacrament suggests that grace comes to you through it. Now, I would imagine in a room this size with this many Christians, there are probably a variety of opinions about what the significance of the communion is and to what degree it is essential.

But let's put it this way. Christians throughout history have had a wide variety of opinions. The Roman Catholics, of course, believe in taking it once a week.

In the fellowship where I attend, we take it once a week. I enjoy it. It's one of my favorite church meetings of the week when we do that.

The church I was raised in, they only did it once a month. Presbyterians do it four times a year, once every three months. And there are some who do it less often than that.

But the question is, how often is the sacrament or the ordinance or the practice of communion supposed to be taken? And what is the meaning of it when it is? Well, the one thing we know from what the Scripture says about it is it is a remembrance of Christ. If there's more to it than that, it is obscure in Scripture. There may be more to it than that.

There may be more to it than that. And there's very good reason for us to continue to take it because Jesus seemed to institute it as a practice for his church. But the question then is, do we need a formal meeting for this most sacred event to take place? Well, in

Acts chapter 2, we read that they broke bread from house to house and enjoyed meals together.

And apparently the communion that they took in the early church was part of a love feast. You see, the church service, the principal church service, apparently in the book of Jude. Jude refers to these false teachers who crept into your love feasts and they caroused there with you.

In 1 Corinthians, it's clear that they took a whole meal, like a potluck kind of meal or some kind of a buffet style meal or something, along with their communion because Paul complained that some of the people were going away hungry because some were taking more of the food than they should. And others were going away drunk because they were drinking more of the wine than they should. Now, although this was an abuse, it tells us some of the presuppositions about their meeting.

There was food there. There was a meal there. They took communion there, but taking communion was part of a whole feast that they were having together.

It was not a little ritual merely. Now, I'm not opposed to the ritual, as long as it's not harmful. Some rituals are harmless and some are harmful, but the early Christians took their communion at a place where people could actually get too much food and some could get too much wine.

They weren't supposed to, but there was that much available, apparently. And so Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, don't you have houses to eat at? Why don't you eat your meals at home if you can't restrain your appetite when you come to the Lord's table? The point here is, it doesn't sound to me like even the communion was, you know, was such a religious kind of thing. It was a remembrance of Christ and there may have been more to it than that that's not explicitly stated, but it was something that was done in the context of a meal that Christians were having together like a family, what they called their love feast.

So it wasn't really a formal religious kind of thing, it seems to me, at least from what I can get from the scripture. Now, if somebody wants to have more formality in their worship, I don't see any problem with it unless they begin to interpret their Christian spirituality in terms of it. I've never found any attraction to liturgical kinds of services, but some people like them.

Some people feel closer to God or whatever because of those. That's the feeling that I'm concerned about. I mean, if it's meaningful, that's fine.

But if a person begins to feel like I'm closer to God when I'm at a meeting where the priest is speaking in Latin or something, than at other times, my concern there is not with the meeting and the ritual itself, but with the attitude toward God that's exhibited

there. God is with me all the time. When I gather with more of his brethren, he's with us in a sense, a more dynamic way of sorts, where two or three are gathering my name, there am I, but he's with me at other times too.

But what does he want me to do? Does he want me to have a formal religious protocol or does he want me to enjoy the fellowship of the brethren and we mutually edify each other and minister to each other according to the gifts God's given us? As near as I can tell from scripture, I keep saying that because obviously there are other opinions some people have, I don't see a great deal of formality called for in religious gatherings or Christian gatherings because I don't think they were that religious. I don't think the early Christians were really that religious. I don't think Jesus was very religious.

The people who killed him killed him because they were religious and he wasn't religious enough for their liking. It wasn't the Romans that objected to Jesus. They had to be bribed and threatened to put Jesus to death.

They didn't care to put Jesus to death. It was the religious people, the religious Jews, who bribed and threatened Pilate to get him to put Jesus to death and their objections were all because Jesus was simply not religious enough for them. And I don't know that the early Christians were that religious.

We've just had a lot of religiosity creep into Christianity as a result of some of the trends that came up in the later centuries. Now, if we're going to try to avoid this Babylonian institutionalism of the church, there are certain things that need to be eliminated that are in many cases what we think of essential to church. One is, I believe one of the first things is we have to eliminate the politics.

I have been in many, many churches, I mean, I've been regular in many churches. I've been a leader in two different churches, maybe more. I don't know.

I was actually an elder in two different churches. I don't want to be there again. I don't think it was right.

I don't think that the eldership as it was understood in those churches, although it was not as bad as some, I don't think it was right-headed. There was too much politics. I'll tell you the one thing I hate most about institutional involvement in an institution is that there is no church politics.

And what politics means is the way that people are ruled over. Now, the leader of a church can be very humble and servant-minded, or he can be a real, you know, authoritarian kind of a creep. But in any case, there's politics in the institutional church, and it's one of the things that makes it institutional.

In a family, if there is any kind of it's not institutionalized so much as it's just understood. If you have a large family, I often think of this case. A friend of mine comes from a large

Italian family.

The father has been dead since the older sons were little kids. And so there's, I forget how many kids in this family. I actually haven't met all the kids, but I know two of the brothers and one of the sisters.

But I think there's probably about half a dozen or seven children in this particular family. And because many of them lived most of their lives without the father in the home, you know, decisions had to be made. I mean, officially the mother could make them, but she didn't want to make them.

The decisions were made by family councils where one brother in particular, who was not even the oldest, but he was the most responsible, tended to, you know, play the role of the papa in the family, just when decisions were being made. Now, he didn't have that role officially. There was no political structure that said, okay, he's going to be the guy who makes the decisions.

It was a family. There were family dynamics, not political dynamics. And this guy just happened to be recognized by most of the other members of the family as easily.

He's one of the older brothers. He seems he's got his life is together. His family's in order.

He's a, he's a good husband and a father. And he's just recognized as having the leadership qualities. And so when the family would get together, you know, his opinion was not the only one that was heard, but it was one that was often deferred to.

He had leadership role, but there were no politics. It was more like a consensus of agreement among the brothers and sisters in the family. This, you know, he's got the right thing.

He's saying it right. And leadership, I think in the early church was non-political in ways that we can hardly understand because we have almost never had the idea of a church is anything other than an institution and institutions need rulers. Institutions need, you know, CEOs or boards of directors or something like that in order to keep the organization, you know, on mission and doing what it's supposed to do.

However, in the Bible, the head of the church is Jesus Christ. There aren't other heads. There's only one.

The head of the church is Jesus. And all the members are members of Christ. And so he's the only real shepherd.

He's the only real leader. Now, there are lesser men in the church who do provide something of a shepherding role. But in my understanding, their role is not a political

role.

And one reason I say that is because Jesus basically forbade it. In Matthew chapter 20, verses 25 through 28. Matthew 20, verses 25 through 28, Jesus called them to himself, his disciples and said, you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lorded over them and those who are great exercise authority over them.

Yet it shall not be so among you. But whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave, just as the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.

Now, there are those who are chief, he said. And there are those who are great, but they do not exercise authority over the others. Now, exercising authority over someone is not abusive authority.

It's just exercising authority. It's what the Gentiles do. In Gentile organizations and pagan organizations, you know, everyone in the organization doesn't isn't guided by the spirit of God.

So they need some guy there or group of guys to keep everybody in line. Now, the only time a church needs that is when the church defines its distinctive so narrowly that there might be some true Christians who don't agree with it. And therefore, the church would get to be a little bit too diversified if they don't have some leaders there hammering the same distinctives of their denomination or something and saying, OK, listen, you know, tow the line or find another place to go.

And that's what the church became. And I pointed out to you in an earlier talk that Ignatius in the year 110 was addressing the problem of disunity in the churches. And his solution was everyone obey the bishop.

That's the first time we know of in church history where that solution to disunity was suggested when Paul addressed churches that had disunity. He just said, love each other. He didn't say, obey that guy over there.

Now, I do have something to say about the scriptures that some people think of. Doesn't the Bible talk about people with the gift of ruling? Doesn't the Bible talk about obey those who, you know, are your leaders and so forth? There are some verses I like to look at before we're done here, but they do not change what I'm saying. That those who were leaders, and there were leaders, they were not leaders in a political sense.

Jesus said, it shall not be so among you. Among the pagans, there are people who exercise authority over others. That's not how it's going to be in this movement.

You have one Lord. You have one father. Don't call any man father.

Don't call any man Lord. You have one Lord. And Paul says that, of course, too, in Ephesians chapter one, or chapter four, when he says, endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace, because why? Well, there's one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and father of all, one this, one that.

Notice Christians, in order to have unity, need to be reminded that we have one that we are to please, and that's Jesus Christ. We have one father that we're all supposed to obey. Paul didn't say, endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace by obeying the leaders of your church.

He said, endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit by remembering that we have one Lord. We have one father. We have one faith.

We have one baptism, and so forth. And that is where our loyalty is. It's not just some political structure of a man-made organization.

And by the way, every church is a man-made organization, every local church. And that's not always a bad thing, insofar as the fellowship that I attend is organized. It is a little bit organized.

There's nothing wrong with that. Whenever you get a bunch of people together trying to do something together, there has to be some sense of organization, but not necessarily institutionalization. But organization is not the problem.

It's when organization is looked to to keep the thing together, rather than God, that it's a problem. And I believe we need to be very concerned not to allow this particular aspect of politics to creep into the assembly. There are people who are elders in the church.

We'll say more about that next time. But what were the elders told to do? Well, in 1 Peter 5, when Peter wrote to the elders there of the churches, in verses 3 and 4, he said to them, well, verse 2, we could say, shepherd the flock of God, which is among you, serving as overseers. Being an overseer was a service performed.

It was not a privileged office. It was a service that some people performed for the rest of the church. It was a servant's role, not by constraint, but willingly, not for dishonest gain, but eagerly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Now, not being lords means you're not the boss. You're an example. That's the kind of leadership the church needs.

It needs examples of older men and women who are good examples of what we're supposed to be, as opposed to what the world is trying to pressure us to be. We need to see good examples of real Christians. And that's the leadership that the church needs, is people who are living it, walking it.

And we say, I see the steps of Jesus in that man's walk. I will follow that way. He can even tell me how it's done.

That would be teaching. He can teach me. He can do it.

But he does not exercise authority over me, because there's one authority over me named Jesus Christ, and he's jealous over me. He's jealous over his authority, and he does not share his glory with another. In 2 Corinthians chapter 1, I've shown you this in a previous week, but this is relevant to what I'm saying right now about no politics.

If there's anyone who held an office that we could say was an office of authority in the early church, it would be Paul, especially in the Gentile churches. And he wrote to one of those churches, one that he had planted himself. And he said, as he was trying to bring correction to them in 2 Corinthians 1.24, he says, not that we have dominion over your faith, but we're fellow workers for your joy.

For by faith, you stand. Your relationship with God is between you and God alone. You stand as a Christian by your faith.

We're not here to have dominion over you. We're not here to lord over you. We're not here to exercise authority over you.

We're here to help your joy. What we contribute, we hope, will be helpful to you, helping you to walk with God better. But he's the one you answer to, not us.

We're not the ones who dominate. We're not the ones who own you. Jesus owns you.

And if you don't go the way we suggest that you do, that's between you and him. Maybe you're right and we're wrong. And if we're right and you're wrong, then that's still between you and him.

It's not our place to tell you how you have to walk with God. Now, there's only one exception, and that is when a person is living in blatant, unrepentant sin, in which case church discipline is a thing. But that doesn't change what I'm saying about the politics.

I intend to say something about church discipline down here a little bit. Don't want to run out of time too quickly here, though. Well, the politics of church, as we generally know it, not only has as one of its major features leaders who exercise authority, like a board of directors or like a CEO or a boss of some kind, but also has the notion that the assembly, the man-made organization called the local church, somehow owns those who come to it, those who are part of it.

This is seen in the whole mentality of church membership. There are many people who are pressured by the church that they attend to become members. And I just don't see anything in the Bible favoring the idea of becoming a member of a local church.

First of all, I don't see anything in the Bible that resembles what we call a local church. There are assemblies, there are gatherings within cities and so forth, but none of them have the dynamics of what we call a local church. What do we call a local church? We call a local church a gathering that either is independent of all other groups that just started up and they do their own thing with independence, or if they're not independent of all other groups, they're connected organizationally to other groups like themselves somewhere else.

But they're not connected to the other local churches in their town. The Baptist church, when it loses a pastor, does not call up the evangelical free church and say, you know, we need a pastor over here. They call up their headquarters or their Baptist denomination.

It's all political networking here. And the Assembly of God church loses a pastor. They don't generally call the four-square pastor.

Their theology is probably essentially the same. But they don't call up the four-square church and say, we need a pastor over here, even if it's in the same town. They don't see themselves as one church in the city, like the Bible talks about the church in this town and the church in that town, the church in this town.

They see themselves as part of political networks that are translocal. And while they may have symbolic gatherings together with the other ministers for lunch once a month, called ministerial association meetings, in most cases, they don't really see themselves as connected to each other in the way that all Christians in a given town were connected in the biblical times. And that being so, what we call local churches today doesn't have any parallel in the New Testament.

We don't have any place in the New Testament where a congregation in Rome looked to some network of congregations elsewhere more than it looked to another congregation in Rome for its fellowship and for its mutual support and so forth. We find that all the Christians were one body. And Paul began to see the beginnings of denominationalism occurring in Corinth, did he not? In 1 Corinthians 1. I mean, talk about church membership.

This is where it began. The idea of being a member of a local church. The mentality is first seen in Scripture right here in 1 Corinthians 1, beginning at verse 10.

Paul said, I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind, in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, I am of Paul or I am of Apollos or I am of Cephas, that's Peter, or I'm of Christ.

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? The answer to that is, of course, no. Now, what's he saying here? The church was beginning to show alarming signs of splitting up over different leadership, even though those leaders weren't local. Paul, Peter, Apollos, none of them lived in Corinth.

But they all had their own style. They all had their own emphasis. They all had their own fans.

And because of that, the guys who liked Paul's style better were saying, you know, I think I'm Paul's kind of Christian. And there's others said, no, Peter, he's the guy. He's the kind of guy I stand behind.

Others say, well, that Apollos, you know, he can debate like crazy. He can beat all these Greeks in discussions and debate. I like his style.

I'm going to be a member of his movement. And Paul said, there's no three movements here. You've had three ministers here, and some of you like one more than another.

But that's not that's that's only one church. Christ is not divided. And Paul would not hear of there being a congregation of Paulicians and a congregation of patrons and a coalition of a congregation of Apollyons and so forth.

What he was saying is these guys are all just gifts of God to the whole church. But as soon as you begin saying, I am of, let me ask you this. If some church says, become a member of our church, what's the difference between saying be of us, be of our group? What is meant by church membership by those who use the term means this.

You are part of our congregation in a way that you are not part of the other congregations in town. You belong to us in a way that you don't belong to these others. And you have a loyalty owed to us that is not owed to these others.

And all of that is divisive in a way that Paul would find abhorrent. Now, a lot of the things that are assumed to go along with this whole local church membership thing, by the way, you won't find reference to church membership in the Bible. The only way the word members used concerning the church is like a limb, you know, we're members of the body of Christ, like arms and legs and eyes and nose are members of a body.

He's not talking about members like members of a union or members of an association or members of a club. He's talking about members of a body, limbs, organs. That's the kind of members we are.

And that's of the whole body. There's nothing in the Bible to suggest that there's any legitimacy. In fact, Paul seemed to be very much against the idea of being a member of a smaller association of Christians in a way that excludes you from the other Christians in the same town and makes you less a part of them.

You see, all believers are one flock. Jesus said in John chapter 10, verse 16 to his disciples, I have other sheep that you don't know about. He meant the Gentiles.

He said, I got to go to them also. I'll bring them too. And then there'll be one flock and one shepherd.

That's how he wanted it. One flock and one shepherd. And so all the Christians who are his sheep are part of that one flock, not several different flocks.

But the idea with church membership is this. The church is an organization that has financial needs. It has an agenda of the leadership and there needs to be some kind of committed people who are going to pay their tithes to that organization and their body's going to be there.

We can count on them to be there for the projects. If we need study school teachers, we know who to tap. If we need someone to come do some repairs in church, we know that these people are members here.

We can ask them to come. I think that a church ought to be able to say, well, if we have desperate needs here in this body, we could just put out a call to the body of Christ locally and let anyone come and help us who wants to. If you don't have church membership, these are some objections people raise to church membership.

They say, well, if you don't have church membership, how does the pastor know who he can count on to be involved in his projects and stuff? I mean, how does the pastor know who's on his team? Well, that's, that's a very naive question. Yeah. First of all, the pastor doesn't need a team.

He's on Christ's team. Remember when Paul was still talking about his business of I am a Paul, I'm a Paulist. A couple of chapters later, he says, who is Paul? Who is a Paulist? They're not leaders, you know, of their own movements.

He says, they're just laborers together with God. You're, you're God's field. I, I planted a Paulist water.

I laid the foundation of Paulist and others come and build on that foundation. We're just, we're not foremen on the, on, on different crews. We're just working on the same crew, on the same job.

You know, I don't have an agenda and a Paulist has an agenda and you have to choose which one you're going to be with. We're all looking for God's agenda here. But you see, many people say, well, if you don't have church membership, the pastor won't know who he can count on, who's on his team.

And I say, well, listen, most churches have twice as many names on their membership

rolls as they actually have people attending their church. This is really true. Most churches you'll find their attendance rolls are about twice as numerous as the people who actually come to the church.

So how did having members help the pastor know who's on his team? Half the people who are his members aren't on his team. And in churches that don't have membership, and I've been in several like that over the years, the leaders never had any, I never, never had any problem knowing who they could count on. You don't need some kind of written name on a list to say, I can count on that person because the person might sign the list and you can't count on him.

And a person who doesn't sign the list might be the most faithful person you'll ever meet. And you can count on him, you know, you can trust him with your life. Membership is artificial when it's written down.

Now, it's good for clubs and associations and unions and stuff, but it's not part of what it means to be in a church or in the church, in the body of Christ. Now, one of the corollaries of this idea of church membership is that there is a teaching often circulated that you are obligated to pay one tenth of your income to your local church. And a lot of churches, a lot of organizations that aren't actually churches, but are what they call para-church organizations like my radio program, or like a Bible school, or like a crisis pregnancy center, or a prison ministry, or a campus crusade for Christ, or a mission organization.

These are not actually organized as churches, but they're called para-church organizations. Para, from the Greek word para, that means alongside. These organizations work alongside the church, supposedly.

As far as I'm concerned, they're just part of the church. They're not alongside the church. That's defining churches as something like, you know, an organization called a church, and these are not it, so there's something alongside it.

But a lot of people, you'll hear this a lot on Christian radio and stuff, that say, after you've paid your tithes to your local church, if you have anything left over, send it to support our ministry. And it's very important to many people that you know that you owe your tithes, your ten percent, to the local church. Well, that's not taught in Scripture anywhere.

First of all, the idea of paying ten percent is not taught by Jesus or the apostles in the New Testament at all. There's nothing wrong with giving ten percent, as long as you don't think that's all you owe God. The Bible indicates that Jesus said, if you don't forsake all that you have, you can't be my disciple.

In the Old Testament, they only had to forsake ten percent. The rest was theirs to play

with. But in the New Testament, it's all God's, and, you know, he may ask you to give ten, twenty, thirty, fifty percent to this or that religious activity, or less.

But the fact is, it's all God's. The idea of giving God his ten percent, his pound of flesh, as it were, as some kind of religious duty, is not New Testament. The reason is because in the Old Testament, it was the amount that was needed to support approximately a tenth of the population, which were the Levites, who were in full-time ministry.

I've never been in a church where a tenth of the people were in full-time ministry and needed to be supported by the other nine-tenths. If I were, then I would see some reason to maybe give a tenth to the support of those people, because that's what it is. You find the only reference to tithing positively stated in the New Testament is when Jesus told the scribes and the Pharisees, in Matthew 23, 23, woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, because you do pay your tithes of mint and anise and cumin, but you neglect the weightier matters of the law, which is mercy and faithfulness and justice.

And he said, this you ought to have done and not left the other undone. That is, the Pharisees, in paying their tithes, were doing something they were supposed to do. Why? They were under the law.

That was their obligation. But he never taught his disciples to do that. Now, I don't object to people tithing and just, you know, tithing is fine.

But the idea that you tithe to your local church and you can't give your tithe elsewhere, and your tithe goes to the local church, your offerings are above that. Most people have heard that teaching. Where does that come from? There's not a line of Scripture to support it at all.

First of all, there's no such thing as a local church, such as we think of that term in the Bible. Secondly, there's no admonition to tithe in the New Testament. So obviously, if you don't have a local church, nor a command to tithe, you certainly don't have a command to tithe to the local church.

But more than that, it is argued that, well, in Malachi, God said, bring all the tithes into the storehouse, so there'll be meat in my house. And they say, well, the storehouse is where you go to get your food. So since you go and get fed at your church, then you should give your tithes there.

But the storehouse was not where the worshiper went to get fed. The storehouse is where the Levites kept their food they were eating. They were the ministers.

And that was at the temple. They didn't give their tithes to the synagogue, which is the local assembly of the Jews. There's only one temple, and that's where they took their tithes.

In the New Testament, a local church is not the counterpart of the temple. The temple has its counterpart in the body of Christ, which is made up of living stones. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

And there is no organization among men that usurps that dignity so as to demand your giving. Now, I do believe this, that if you are fed at a church or whatever, then it's a good thing to make sure that the feeding can continue by giving support. I do believe in supporting the saints.

I do believe in supporting the ministry. But I don't believe that any ministry biblically has the right to say, you owe me 10 percent. And it has to come to this organization right here.

You know, the Bible doesn't say that, but it's very commonly taught. Let me just make a few other points. I only have a couple minutes.

I believe legalism has to be eliminated. And legalism means that we make up rules that we impose on other people. Now, where the Bible speaks plainly, and where all Christians can see it with their own eyes, and there's no possibility of mistaking it.

I mean, thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal.

There's plenty of very plain teachings in Scripture that no Christian could ever get wrong. I think we need to uphold those standards. And we need to uphold the standard that we all follow Christ with all our hearts.

But there are people who follow Christ who interpret some things differently. And rather than saying, well, go start your own denomination, we want to have a group that believes X, this little narrow thing. The early church had to allow for flexibility because Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3, where the spirit of the Lord is, there's liberty.

I'll tell you this, where there's a political organized institution, there isn't usually much liberty because it threatens the establishment. If an organization is, if it's distinct, well, let me give you an example. You may or may not believe in a pre-tribulation rapture.

I personally don't, but that's okay if you do. It doesn't bother me what anyone thinks about the rapture, to tell you the truth. I just never had any emotional attachment to one view or the other on that.

But I had some teachings on it that an assembly of God minister, I shouldn't maybe mention the denomination, but it's out. And a friend of mine who gave the tapes to the assembly of God minister said to him later, what'd you think of those tapes about the rapture? Well, the assemblies of God ministers have to sign on every year to a certain list of things they agree with, which includes the pre-trib rapture. And this minister said to my friend, he said, well, all the arguments in the tapes sounded biblical and I can't

find any problem with them, except if I believe that I'd have to give up my job here because my denomination wouldn't let me believe that.

Well, I mean, the issue of whether a pre-trib rapture is the best doctrine on that subject or whether some alternative is the best doctrine is to my mind beside the point. The fact is there ought to be liberty. If this minister can't follow his own conscience to read the word of God and say, I think, you know, I think this teaches this, he'd lose his job with the organization.

If he differs, there's no liberty there. The only creed that the church should have is, I believe the Bible. Now, some people say, well, you can't just have the Bible as a creed.

I mean, think of how many strange ideas people come up reading the Bible. Well, then why didn't God make the Bible more specific? If is the Bible not a good enough creed, where did God go wrong? Maybe he wanted there to be freedom for people to, you know, to work out some things, maybe even the differences of opinion are there to test our ability to love one another. I don't know.

But the fact of the matter is that by introducing man-made creeds, we don't purify anything. The Bible is as pure as it gets. Every word of God is pure.

Add thou not unto his words, lest he rebuke thee, and thou be found a liar, says in Proverbs chapter 30, verses five and six. The Bible is creed enough, and people's own conscience in interpreting the Bible, where they're not, you know, where they're obviously not going off in total rebellion against God or something, you know, trying to justify, you know, immorality or something, which some people have tried to do. But any honest attempt to understand the Bible for oneself is, I believe, has got, we've got to leave room for that, or else you've got denominations happening.

Liberty of conscience is something Paul allowed, as I pointed out. Some wanted to keep one day special, some didn't. He says, let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind.

He gave liberty on those issues. We need to make sure we don't have legalism. We need to make sure that we don't have a political organization, or else we have something different than what Jesus established.

It is political in one sense. We have a king, and that's political. It's the kingdom of God, and Jesus is the king.

There are leaders of sorts, but they are of a different sort than the political type, and that's what we'll talk about next time. What are elders? What are the leaders of the church supposed to be? How can you have elders and it not be a political thing? How can you have men who are actually recognized as leaders, and yet you don't have offices and officers? Well, believe it or not, I believe the Bible teaches an answer to that. We'll have to wait until next time to get into that.