

OpenTheo

In Search of the Church



Some Assembly Required - Steve Gregg

In his discourse, Steve Gregg explores the concept of the Church as a universal movement encompassing all true believers in Jesus Christ, rather than just a local building with specific denominational labels. He highlights the importance of the Church as a community of loving brethren, with each member using their unique gifting to serve the whole body. Gregg acknowledges the disillusionment caused by denominationalism and encourages believers to look beyond traditions and divisive attitudes to find a pure-hearted worship of God, which he believes may exist within homes rather than traditional church settings.

Transcript

I would like to ask you to turn to two passages in the book of Hebrews with me, please. The first is in Hebrews chapter 10, and the second will be in Hebrews chapter 12. In Hebrews chapter 10 and verse 25, I suppose verses 24 and 25, we should read, it says, And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as you see the day approaching.

Now let's look over at chapter 12, please. Verses 18 through 24. For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched, and it burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest.

He's referring, of course, to the Mount Sinai at the time that God met with Israel there to give the law. And the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard it begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore, for they could not endure what was commanded. And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow.

And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, I'm exceedingly afraid and trembling. But you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, who are registered in heaven, to God the judge of all, to the spirits of just men

made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of Jesus Christ. It's Moses sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel.

Now, both passages that we read speak of assembling. In chapter 10, we read that we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. In chapter 12, we read that we have come to the general assembly and church of the firstborn.

Now, although both of these passages speak of assembling, at least in our English text, because the Greek words are different in the two passages, but in our English text, they both speak of assembling, yet they don't speak of the same idea. When the writer says we have come to Mount Zion, to the city of God, to the heavenly Jerusalem, when he says that we have come to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven, he is speaking of something global. He is speaking of something cosmic.

He is speaking of something much larger than any locality. He is talking about the heavenly Jerusalem, which is in Paul's writing. We don't know whether Paul wrote Hebrews or not, but when Paul spoke of the heavenly Jerusalem, he referred to the church in those terms, and so does John in the book of Revelation.

But the point is that he is speaking of something bigger than our fellowship, that is, our local fellowship. He is talking about a general assembling of the whole church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. Now, in the passage in Hebrews chapter 10, he speaks of a particular gathering.

He says, don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together. Now, this latter statement is often interpreted in terms of our traditional concepts of local church. The traditional concept of a local church in our day is that a local church, well, generally has a building.

It's not always insisted upon, but typically we'll have a building. Typically, we'll have a pastor. Typically, we'll have members.

Typically, we'll have tax-exempt status. And typically, we'll meet every Sunday and we'll have a certain liturgy, whether a rather free liturgy or a more ritualistic liturgy. There will be some kind of expected regular proceedings that take place during a weekly meeting.

These are the things that we usually think of as a local assembly. And in any given town, we have become accustomed to the idea of there being many such local assemblies. There's a Baptist.

If you go to a large enough town, there may be several Baptist assemblies. There's maybe some assemblies of God, some Four Squares, some Presbyterians, some Methodists, some Nazarene, some Congregational, some others, many others. There are several thousand Protestant denominations.

And in a very large metropolis, there might be representative assemblies of all of them. And so we have become accustomed to the idea that assembling together in the normative fashion is to attach yourself to one of these assemblies. And these assemblies have now come in the vernacular of modern ecclesiology, I suppose, to be called local churches.

Now, I'd like to suggest that the parlance by which we refer to these as local churches is not exactly drawn from Scripture. I'm not saying that everything about these local assemblies is objectionable. I'm simply saying that there's a great deal of tradition, a great deal of assumption, unchallenged assumptions about what it means to be assembling together and what it means to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

I'd like to talk about a phenomenon that I see happening among many true Christians today. I suppose it's really a phenomenon of almost all true Christians. I'm going to call it in search of the church.

Now, that's just the first part of what I'm going to talk about, but my entire series on this I'm calling *Some Assembly Required*. But I'd like to begin by talking about people in search of the church. Not in search of a church.

A church is not hard to find in America. You go to Turkey, you'll have a harder time finding a place to go on Sunday morning. But you come to any town in America, there's plenty of churches.

But I'm talking about saints who are in search of the church, whatever that may be. You see, the Bible indicates that when you are born again of the Spirit of God, there are changes that take place inside of you. You are a new creation.

You have a new heart and a new spirit. God's laws are written on your hearts. One of the universal phenomena that attaches to all truly converted people is a love for the brethren.

John said in 1 John 3.14, we know that we have passed from death unto life because we love the brethren. Now, this love for the brethren draws us into fellowship with the brethren. That is, we seek brothers and sisters of fellowship.

We long to be with them. It is something that is an affectionate yearning that is birthed inside of the believer to be with others of like mind. Others who know the same experience of regeneration.

Others who share the same disillusionment with the world and have adopted similar values and who love the Lord who is the chief desire and love of their own heart. To find others like that. And so, if those persons who have been born again happen to be fortunate enough to have been born again in an assembly where they find that kind of agreement, that kind of fellowship, happier they.

They usually stay there. But there are many, and I think an increasing number in our day, who do not feel that they have found that. Or at least, maybe if they have, they feel very acutely how difficult it is to find that.

Because we live in a day where churchianity is taking all of its cues from the world. The world has its own ideas about how to draw a crowd and how to finance a movement. And churches now, of course, have seminars.

There are huge multi-church national seminars on church growth where pastors and other concerned parties get together and try to decide what will help the church grow. What will draw more people into our congregation. And what they usually opt for are things that are very man-centered rather than Christ-centered.

Things that are very entertaining. And so we find a trend in many churches, especially the larger, more visible churches. When you attend them, you find much there that does not resemble what your own heart tells you is the church of Jesus Christ.

I do not say that you will not find people there who are Christians. You do. I don't think I've ever visited a church of the dozens or scores of churches I have visited.

I don't think I've ever visited a church where I didn't find any Christians. Christians are there. But finding an assembly that feels like a spiritual home is becoming more and more difficult.

I used to be in pastoral ministry. I was not a senior pastor of a church. I was an elder in a church where the elders were the pastors.

And I remember in those days I used to see from time to time some head of the household yanking his family out of the church and meeting in his home instead of in our church or instead of in any church. I remember thinking at the time that this was a bad sign. That this was the first step into backslidenness.

In fact, it might even be a step that that man has taken because he's already backslidden in his heart or because there are secrets he does not want others to discover. He does not want to walk in the light. He wants to find some obscurity.

He wants to withdraw from exposure. And I had these suspicions about people like that until I became one of them. It is now my conviction, and things have changed very much in the 20 years since I was in pastoral ministry, but nowadays when I meet people who have withdrawn from the organized assemblies, although I realize it is possible those people are backslidden or backsliding, as often as not, my conclusion is that it is likely they have withdrawn from the assemblies because the assemblies are backsliding and because those who are withdrawing are conscientious objectors who do not wish for their families to backslide with the congregation.

Now this is, of course, a problem. This is a dilemma for the believer because the believer longs to have fellowship with others like mine, but those places where one would most naturally expect to find such fellowship often is a great disappointment. And then, of course, the question is, well, what is plan B? Where do you find believers other than in the church? Now let me say, first of all, that when we talk about the church, we are using a term that the Bible uses in a variety of ways.

Sometimes it speaks of the whole body of Christ, which is a global phenomenon. Every Christian on the planet who has ever lived, both those who are still on the planet and those who have now gone and gone on to heaven are part of this one great family, this one great movement begun by Jesus called the Church of Jesus Christ, the body of Christ. Now that's one way in which the word church is used in Scripture.

In fact, one of the epistles that talks most about the church is the book of Ephesians, and you'll find that the word church in Ephesians, at least in my judgment, is never used any other way than that. In the book of Ephesians, I don't believe Paul ever talks about the church as anything other than the global universal church made up of all Christians. However, in other places in the Scripture, you'll find the word church used of the Christians who live in a given locality, usually a city, Corinth, the church in Corinth, the church in Philippi, the church in Thessalonica.

And there we find what we could perhaps call the local church concept, although really the Bible doesn't use the term local church. That's a more modern term, but while the Bible doesn't use the term local church, it does speak of that sampling of the body of Christ that dwells within the perimeters of a certain locality, of a city usually, because cities were separated by some distance from each other, and travel was slow in biblical times, and therefore the Christians in one city were kind of a discrete unit as opposed to the Christians in another city. Now, they knew that they were brethren, they knew that they were related to the Christians in another city, but when it came down to day-by-day interaction, unless they were travelers who traveled the world, most Christians simply fellowship with those others in their city.

And so when Paul writes to Philippi, he addresses the church in Philippi. He writes to Colossae, and he addresses the church in Colossae. The church then would be that sampling of the whole body of Christ that happens to reside on that small footprint designated by the boundaries of a city or of a community.

Now, the word church is used at least one other way in the Scripture, and that is when it speaks of the church gathering in a particular building. Now, in New Testament times, they didn't have church buildings, but they met, the Jerusalem church met sometimes in public rooms in the temple. In Ephesus, Paul rented the school of Tyrannus, or maybe it was available for free, I don't know, but they met there, but more often than not, the church met in homes.

And so we read of the church in Nympha's house, or the church in Priscilla and Aquila's house, or the church in Philemon's house. Now, Nymphus and Philemon both lived in the same city. They were both part of the church of Colossae, but they had churches in their homes.

There was a church in Philemon's house, and there was a church in the house of Nymphus, and both were in Colossae, the same church. So you have the church of Colossae, all the Christians in that town, and then you have churches within the city that met in various locations. We would probably refer to those simply as assemblies or congregations, which is a legitimate way to translate the word church, because the word church in the Greek is used in all those instances.

The Greek word is ekklesia. It comes from two Greek words, ek, which means out of, and kleisis, which is from the word kaleo, which means to call, the called out ones. The ekklesia literally means a calling out, and it was used originally in Scripture in the Old Testament, in the Septuagint, which is the Greek Old Testament.

The word ekklesia was used of the children of Israel. They were God's ekklesia, God's church, because they had been called out of Egypt to assemble unto the Lord. And Stephen, in Acts chapter 7, when he speaks of Moses leading the children of Israel in the wilderness, he speaks of them as the church in the wilderness, the ekklesia in the wilderness.

So does the Old Testament. Although in many of the places where the Greek Old Testament used the word ekklesia, the translation in our Bible would be congregation or assembly. And so, you know, the whole body of Christ is called out of the world to be holy and separate unto God.

But in every town, there are those who are called out of their ordinary activities, occasionally, to assemble and to congregate unto the Lord. And these are called churches. Now, as I understand the Scripture, every local church, that is the church in Kamii, the church in Grangeville, the church in Kuski, these churches of cities are all parts of each other because they're all part of the global church.

They're all part of the global body of Christ. They just happen to be defined more in terms of local living arrangements. But, you see, the churches in the Gentile world where Paul ministered were concerned about the church in Jerusalem, which is a church where most of them would never visit, would never probably meet anyone from that church.

But when they heard that there was poverty in the church of Jerusalem, the churches in the Gentile world, in the Gentile cities, would take up a collection and send the money back to the church in Judea because they considered them their brothers. They were part of the same worldwide church, although they had definition within their cities. Likewise, those congregations that met within one city, several congregations, the church in the

house of Philemon, the church in the house of Memphis.

In Rome, there appeared to be at least perhaps five house churches, one in the house of Priscilla and Aquila, and in Romans 16, there appeared to be evidence of at least four other house churches in the one city of Rome. This is understandable since a large city like Rome might have so many Christians that they couldn't all meet in one building unless it was a very large building. And so they met in smaller groups in homes.

However, these smaller groups, just as the church in Rome was really part of the church of Colossae, which was really part of the church in Jerusalem, so also the church in Philemon's house was part of the church in Memphis' house. And the church in the house of Priscilla and Aquila was part of the other gatherings in the same city. We know this because when Paul wrote to Rome, he didn't write separate letters to each of these house gatherings.

He wrote one letter to the saints in Rome he expected they shared. He expected they'd pass the letter around. He expected these people had some kind of commonality among themselves.

They weren't in competition with each other. They weren't rival congregations. They were simply various congregations of the same one church in that town.

Now, I believe that that's how Jesus intended for it to be, and things are quite different now. When you go to, well, I moved here from a city, a small city in Oregon, where there were probably 50 or 70 churches in the phone book of various denominations, of course. Now, as I look at things as near as I can biblically, I think there was a church in McMinnville, Oregon, where I lived, that when God looked down, he saw that he had a sampling of his people living in that city.

And one could reasonably speak of the church of McMinnville, because all the Christians in that city, just like all the Christians in Colossae or in Rome, were part of one church. But there were many gathering places, many assembly places in McMinnville. Now, if this had been the first century, those assemblies would have all been part of each other and would have known it, and would have been sharing together in the life of Christ in that town.

But, and I'm not trying to criticize McMinnville, it's the town I most recently lived in for the past 10 years, and I think it's very much like most towns, that the individual congregations there did not really share in each other's life very much at all. For example, there might be one congregation that lost a pastor who fell through sin. In fact, there's one congregation that lost a series of pastors that way.

What I find striking is that this congregation did not appeal to the other congregations in town and say, listen brothers, we've lost a leader. We need a leader over here. Does

anyone here have someone who can come and preach and teach us? No, they called the headquarters of their denomination in some other state and said, you know, you got anyone that can candidate out here to be our next pastor? Because there was not a sense of oneness among the brethren in the town.

Every church had its own connections all over the country, but not to the brothers in the same town. This is what we call denominationalism. This is something that Paul began to see emerging in Corinth when he said, I hear from those of the house of Chloe that there are divisions among you, that some are saying I'm of Paul, and some are saying I'm of Apollos, and some are saying I'm of Cephas, and some are saying I'm of Christ.

Now, Paul didn't let that go very far. That attitude, we don't have any reason to believe that they started separate congregations. Paul heard about it early enough and nipped it in the bud and said, you know, you've got to wipe that out of your mind.

There's no, you know, Apollos and Paul and Cephas, you weren't baptized in their name. They didn't die for you. There's only one body of Christ, and we're all of Christ.

We're not some of us of Paul and some of Apollos and some of Cephas. Well, Paul died, and the church took its own course. And it took a different course than that which he urged.

So that we live in a time where we take it for granted that in any given town, the Christians of that town, some of them are of Calvin, some of them are of Luther, some of them are of Darby, some of them are of John Wimber, some of them are of Chuck Smith, some of them are of Kenneth Hagin, some of them are of whoever, Wesley. Now, that we have come to live with without, we've given up the fight against that. Paul argued vociferously against that.

He would not tolerate that. We tolerate it because unlike the frog in the kettle that was put into cold water and then became hot gradually, we were born in the hot water. We were born in an apostate situation, one that Paul had no tolerance for, and we have reasonably that Jesus had no tolerance for since Paul spoke for Christ.

And that has made some of us concerned. Now, I want to say this, that the answer to denominationalism is not simply to withdraw and start another group and say we will not be a denomination and then start branch churches all over the country based on our group. There are groups that have done that.

I was years ago in Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa. It was an individual church. Only one Calvary Chapel existed under one pastor.

Then there were daughter churches that were spun off of it until there were about 600 Calvary Chapels around the world. Calvary Chapel said we are not a denomination, but they are. Before Calvary Chapel came along, there was the Church of Christ and the

Church of God and the Brethren and other groups that said we do not believe in denominationalism, therefore we will start our own group over here.

We will withdraw from the existing denominations and we will just be the church, the real church. And really what they ended up with in many cases is not very much different. Maybe they define themselves differently, but what they actually have in real life is a group that fellowships among themselves without any real interaction or interdependence with the other Christians of other groups in the town.

How often have you heard of a Presbyterian church that had a serious financial crisis and the Baptists came and said we have a surplus this month. Here is several thousand dollars for your crisis. Not very often I dare say.

And yet they are in the same town. They are in the same body supposedly. But you see, what has happened in the church is that we have defined the church differently than the Bible has.

And that makes it difficult for some who are longing for fellowship. And all they are looking for is people like themselves who love Jesus. They are not trying to find the people who necessarily have the same view of predestination that they have or the same view of head coverings as they have or the same view of when the rapture is going to occur as they have.

These are not the issues with them. The issue is Jesus. And they just want to fellowship with anyone who calls on the Lord out of a pure heart like Paul said.

And yet, while it is not necessarily hard to find those Christians to fellowship with, it is very difficult to find those Christians all in one place. You can go to almost any denominational church and find some of those Christians there. But usually they are also intermixed with a great dilution with persons who are perhaps also Christians, but there are other issues, big issues, bigger than Jesus to them.

You can always tell when an issue is bigger than Jesus when the group says, well, yes, those people over there, they love Jesus too, but they do not baptize by immersion like we do. And therefore, of course, we do not fellowship with them. Now, we live in a very enlightened age, I am sure.

And one of the phenomena that has been coming up in the evangelical circles is what they call ministerial associations. I have been a part of these in more than one town. And a ministerial association is sort of a group of pastors, usually most of the pastors in a town of different denominations, who acknowledge, at least in word, that they are all part of one big body, the body of Christ.

At least people are getting this message so that they acknowledge it verbally. And so they get together maybe once a month. And they try to find something they have in

common to talk about.

Since there is very little they have in common to talk about, they usually try to talk about how they are going to pay for the vagrants that come through looking for help, or how they are going to sponsor the Chuck Swindoll video series that is going to be shown in one of the churches, or something like that. And I guess this is better than nothing. It used to be that pastors of different denominations wouldn't even practically look at each other.

But now they are getting together and they are at least looking at each other. But when it gets down to the polity of actual church, when people are doing church, it still gets down to these hermetically sealed groups that although according to Scripture they are members one of another outside of the group, when it comes down to the real business of seeking gifted help, seeking financial help, or whatever is needed, they don't look to the other brethren in town. They look within themselves or to others more like themselves outside the area.

So that you have a translocal network replacing what in the Bible was really a local fellowship. Well, okay, what do we do about this? God has provided the true church to the body of Christ because God has put in us a desire for fellowship with people of like mind. In the early days, people of like mind, I mean in the first century of Christians, people of like mind were those who had forsaken Judaism, essentially, initially, and had become followers of Christ and believed He was the Lord and the Messiah, and that was basically their statement of faith, Jesus is Lord.

And all who believed that Jesus is Lord were together in one place, in one court. They hadn't worked out all their theology yet. They didn't have any view, as near as we can tell, of the hypothetical union between the divine and the human natures of Christ.

We don't know that they had any view of whether Christ had two wills or one, as became a great object of discussion in the fourth century. I'm not even sure whether they fully understood, I have my doubts that most of them fully understood even the Trinity. But they did know one thing.

They knew there was a God who had been the covenant-keeping God of Israel for many centuries, and who had now sent His Son to be the Lord and to be the Savior of the world, and they had attached themselves by faith to that Lord and to that Savior, and had left everything to follow Him. And that made them one. That one thing they had.

Now, other things had to be hammered out later on, and that got difficult sometimes. But initially, God simply provided a fellowship, a communion of the saints, which was made up of everyone who believed in Jesus. Eventually, when the Gospels carried to Gentile lands, of course, people came not out of Judaism, but out of paganism, various forms of pagan religion.

But they also embraced the same confession, that Jesus is Lord. To the Corinthians, Paul said, Know this, that no man can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. Meaning that everyone who had the Holy Spirit would have this confession, and only those who had the Holy Spirit would have that confession.

That that was the confession that set off those who had the Spirit of God from those who did not have the Spirit of God. That was the big issue. Is Jesus your Lord? Are you following Jesus? That was the issue.

There were other issues. Now, I'm not saying there were never any other issues. The issue of circumcision became a problem.

But that was settled by going, you know, the whole church gathered together and the apostles, who were the leaders that Jesus appointed, settled that matter. After the apostles died, it got much more tricky how to settle matters authoritatively. We're going to talk about that eventually, but not right now.

Let me just say that in creating the church, the true church, the body of Christ, God has provided for us all things necessary for life and godliness. And by life, when that term is used by Paul, that all things for life and godliness, I'm sorry, Peter, in 2 Peter, I don't know whether life there means eternal life or natural life. But whichever way you take that, I believe all things necessary for life, natural and eternal, and godliness, are given to us in the church.

The Bible says in the Psalms that God puts the solitary into families. Now, I don't think he was talking about natural families at that point. Although he could have been.

Some people have applied it that way. But I think what David is saying is that God takes those who are isolated and solitary and who are alone in the world and atomized by the differences they have from other people and so forth and by their own self-centeredness, and they become believers. And God puts them into a family.

And the church is the family that God has provided for believers. That is the first thing that the church is. I say the first thing that it is because when Jesus came, before he ever talked about the church, he talked about the Father.

Before he ever defined or even mentioned the church, he talked about your Father, your Father, your Father. And he was drawing the Father's strained children back into relation with the Father. You know, of all the metaphors in Scripture used of the church, and there are many, that which is most often alluded to is that of a family.

Every time you read of the Father, every time you read of brethren or brothers or children of God, you're reading the church compared to a family. Now, a family provides security and acceptance to those who are members in good standing, and that is what God intended for us. He knows we need security and we need acceptance.

And so the church, as the family of God, has been provided for us to provide those things. But the church is also, in the Scripture, referred to as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the temple of God. A temple is not like a family, although the church is both.

A temple is the scene of worship. Now, an earthly temple is actually just an ordinary building where people who worship go to assemble. But in the New Testament, the church is a temple made out of people.

In 1 Peter chapter 2 and verse 5, Peter said that we are all as living stones built up into a spiritual house. We are a holy priesthood and a holy house. It says in the closing verses of Ephesians 2, he says that we are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom all the body, fitly joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.

Now, the building grows not like a building that you see under construction grows by the work of outside, you know, workers. This body grows because the things from which it is made are living things that grow. These are living stones.

You are a living stone. I'm a living stone. And these stones, in order to become a temple, have to be assembled.

You don't just see a big haphazard pile of rocks and say, this is my house. This is my temple. You take stones and you assemble them.

And when they've been assembled, then they are a building. And so the church corporately around the world is the temple of the Holy Spirit. And that tells us that the church is not only the place that provides security and acceptance as a family, but it also is the sphere of our worship of God.

It is a worshipping community. It is that through which God seeks to be worshiped and his name to be proclaimed. Now, in addition to the church being the temple of the Holy Spirit, it is also likened to a body, the body of Christ.

And Paul is the one who works with this metaphor, especially in 1 Corinthians chapter 12, more than anywhere else. And there he says that it's like a body where, you know, the body has eyes and has ears and has hands and has feet. And the hand cannot say to the eye, I have no need of you.

Or the eye can't say that to the hand and the head can't say to the feet, I have no need of you. These members are different from one another. They are variously gifted.

My hand has different gifts than my eye. My head has different gifts than my feet and so forth. My ear and my nose have different gifts.

They do a different function. Because they are differently designed and gifted by God.

And so also the church is a multifaceted, multi-gifted body, which speaks of the avenue of service to God.

Through our involvement in the body of Christ, we have a defined function. We have a defined gifting. And that gifting defines our service to the whole body.

And so in the church, God has provided for the believer a place of security and acceptance. An avenue of worship and of service. All of which are things we need and all of which others need from us.

It is a mutually interdependent organism or body. Now, having said that God established the church for this purpose, the next question that reasonably arises, Which church? Which church has God ordained for this? Now, the answer to this is tricky. Because the word church, as I said in scriptures, is used both of the universal church and also the particular assembly.

We read in Hebrews that we have come to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. This is the heavenly Jerusalem. This is the spiritual Mount Zion.

This is what we've come to. We're part of this big, huge, global cosmic movement. But it also says in Hebrews 10, we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

Which has to do with a local gathering. Assembling with actual people in an actual place and time. So, if we are to do that, of course we're all who are born again, we're all members of the global body of Christ.

But how is it that we are to gather? With whom should we gather? Where should we gather? Is there any guidance from God on this? Well, as you go through church history, you'll find that, of course, in the beginning there was only one church in every town, as I mentioned. It had various congregations in different homes, probably for logistic reasons. But it was still only one church in Corinth, one church in Ephesus, one church in Philippi, and so forth.

This fact continued to be true to a certain extent for almost, well, 1,500 years. The problem is, that one church changed. That one church adopted many human traditions and many pagan traditions.

And departed in some ways from the Word of God. So that for about the latter thousand years of that 1,500 year period, the church was essentially backslidden itself, was apostate. And it was the only one around.

Well, if you had lived in the medieval times, the Roman Catholic Church was the only church in town. If you were a Christian and wanted to go to church, you'd go to the cathedral. And you'd there participate in the Roman Catholic liturgy.

And that would be all that you had in terms of institutional gathering. Now, there were some people who tried to break free from that. People like the Waldensians and the Hussites and others.

The Politians and several other groups that were probably what we would call evangelicals. However, they lived at the wrong time in history to be successful as evangelicals. They lived at a time where the Roman Catholic institution had the stranglehold on all of Europe.

And so if you happened to be of a dissenting group, it was like signing your death warrant to be joined to one of these groups. And many were killed, many thousands, many hundreds of thousands of Waldensians and Hussites and others like them were killed. Eventually what happened is the dissenting groups began to get government support.

Luther, for example, survived in 1500 not because he had something smarter than Huss or Wycliffe or the Waldensians knew, but he survived because he had the sponsorship of the German king who protected him against the Pope. And for the first time, a dissenting group actually got to survive long enough to have a second or third or fourth generation. And the Catholic Church couldn't really hurt him.

Luther, of course, was a Roman Catholic. He was an Augustinian monk until he got saved and even afterwards for a while. But he tried to reform the institution and it wouldn't reform.

And so they excommunicated him and he said, well, you can't fire me. I'm quitting. And he was protected by the German king.

And so he succeeded where others did not. That is, succeeded in living out and dying a natural death, though he started a rival movement to the Roman Catholic Church. But with the Reformation came the mentality that, well, if the institutional church is wrong, we can start another church that's more right.

The Catholic Church is wrong, so Luther is more right, so we can be Lutherans now. We don't have to be Catholics. But that was, in some senses, like opening Pandora's box.

Because once the mentality existed, well, if the church is wrong, then we can start one that's more right. It meant that those who were within the Lutheran Church who said, well, you know, Luther's not all right either, you know. They could say, well, let's go off and start our group now.

And so they went out and started another group. And then, you know, every group began to fragment like that until we live in a day where there's well over 5,000 Protestant denominations. Each one of them originally came out of an earlier existing institutional church, which they thought were not quite biblical enough.

And so they came out and started something else that they thought was more biblical. Now, this is one of the things that the Roman Catholic Church points to and says, well, you see, the Reformation was not a good thing. Until Luther's time, the church was one.

Yes, it was one harlot. But they say, but once Luther broke the dam and let out this flood of freedom to people to start their own groups that they agreed with, suddenly you've got all these denominations. Well, I would say this.

That has turned out to be not as good a thing as it could be. However, it's not because there was freedom to dissent from the Roman Catholic Church that all this happened. It happened where there is denominationalism.

Happens because there are people with a divisive attitude. You can separate from a group without being divisive. As long as you still consider yourself of one heart and one spirit with that group, just of a different liturgy.

Maybe some different theological convictions. Or maybe it's just that you don't want to have highly defined theological convictions as a matter of fellowship. Maybe you just want to fellowship with anyone who loves the Lord.

You can go off and start another group. But you're not being divisive unless by breaking off you're saying, we have no need of you. Because one member of the body can't say that to another.

What has very rarely happened is that a group broke off of a previous group and remained in good fellowship and good standing with that previous group. Instead, there was usually senses of betrayal, disloyalty, antagonism, resentment, arrogance, judgmentalism. And those kinds of things simply caused splits that were irremediable.

And they were not only problems in terms of institutional church. They were problems in relationships among brethren. Now, some of us have sensed that there is compromise in most denominations.

That there are some issues that we view. And I'm not saying you would see the same issues I would. But most of us would say, when we look at denominational churches, take your pick.

Whichever one you look at, you find some things there that don't seem to be entirely scriptural. That seem to be traditions of men. And so some of us have gone from church to church looking for the right one that doesn't have these traditions of men.

And guess what? I haven't found them yet. Even groups like the Church of God and the Church of Christ and the Brethren and some of these that actually have done this. Try to get out and just be biblical.

They all have their own, they still have their own theological distinctives that go beyond simply Jesus is Lord. Groups are all bad. Because I believe people can be the people of God and still have a lot of wrong ideas.

I hope. Because I probably have some wrong ideas. And I intend to be in heaven.

But there are groups, not only like denominations, but groups that we would call cults that have broken off. Because they say, look how corrupt the church has become. And here's the true group.

And in some cases, these people have really heretical doctrine. Like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons. They got some kind of a leader who goes after something really unbiblical as his doctrinal way of looking at things.

But even groups that have decent doctrine can become cults. If by cults we refer to those groups that have some authority above God in them. And of course, God's authority is known in the Word of God.

So any group that has someone they listen to more than they listen to the Scripture. More than they listen to the Bible. Is cult-like.

Even if their theology is okay. I have known groups whose theology could not be criticized. But they were cultic in that the leaders of the group did not believe anyone but those in their group were saved.

And to leave their group was to leave God. There are many people who have this dynamic in their group. And that is simply, that's scary.

And of course, all cults have this in common. One thing all cults don't have in common. Not all cults have terrible doctrine.

Many of them do. Some of them have decent doctrine. A cult, all cults have one thing in common.

And that is they have something or someone who holds more authority over the lives of the believers there than the Bible itself. That might be the pastor of a Baptist church or of a Methodist church or a Presbyterian church. That doesn't mean the Baptist denomination is a cult.

It might mean that that particular congregation has cult-like dynamics which are to be avoided. And some of us have just gotten disillusioned with that. And many people have become very disappointed with the sampling of the church that are available to them.

It says in Proverbs 25, Proverbs 25, 14, it says, Whoever boasts of a false gift is like clouds and wind without rain. Now, rain is desirable in an agrarian society like that of the Bible. Rain is something good.

I lived in Oregon where we get too much of it. We usually don't look forward to coming of rain. We prefer clouds and wind without rain.

But in the Middle East, clouds and wind meant a storm is coming. We're going to get some rain. Good.

Our crops will grow. We're going to be refreshed. We'll be able to refill our cisterns.

We'll be able to drink water. Maybe we'll take a few baths maybe. And they see the clouds and the wind coming and say, Ah, rain is coming.

But the clouds and the wind sometimes come and there's no rain. It says that's what someone is like who boasts of a false gift. Someone who offers something spiritually that they don't deliver.

And many of the churches have been like that. You go to them looking for the followers of Jesus Christ and you often go there and find the followers of some man or some organization. And it's like you've gone there looking to the clouds for water and there's no refreshing.

There's no water. And so many have left one church after another because of this disappointment. It says in Proverbs 13, 12, Hope deferred makes the heart sick.

And there are some people who have gone to one church after another being hopeful. Hopeful that this one will be the place where I'll find true fellowship. But then they don't find it there and their heart becomes sick.

They become resentful. Sometimes they just give up on Christ or give up on trying to assemble it all. But if they decide they don't want to assemble, that doesn't work because in their heart, if they're true Christians, they love the brethren and they cannot help but be drawn to assemble.

And so they find end runs around the institution to find real fellowship. It says in Malachi, I should point out since many people have not read Malachi, it's the last book of the Old Testament, but in Malachi, this prophet was writing to Israel at a time where the religious system had become apostate. The priests were corrupt.

The entire book of Malachi almost is written against the priests of Israel because they weren't teaching the word of God and he complains. People should be able to inquire the priest and hear the word of the Lord, but they didn't. People despised the church of Israel because of this compromise on the part of the priests.

And so people stopped bringing their tithes. When they brought sacrifices to God, they brought inferior animals rather than the best. And so the whole religious system broke down into something very corrupted.

However, we read this little note of encouragement in Malachi chapter 3 and verses 16 through 18. It says, right in the middle of this discussion of how corrupt the religious system had become in Israel, it says, then those who feared the Lord, there were still some. In the Old Testament, those are usually called the remnant.

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another. They found each other. They fellowshiped among themselves when they could.

They spoke to one another and the Lord listened and heard them. Now they weren't talking to him particularly. They were talking to each other.

But the Lord overheard. He was listening in and he heard the kind of things they were saying to each other. Heard how they spoke to each other.

He heard them express their heart. He saw the thirst, the unsatisfied thirst that they had of which they were speaking. They were very disillusioned, no doubt, with the whole corruption in Israel at that time because they alone feared the Lord.

And it says, the Lord listened and heard them. So a book of remembrance was written before him. The General Assembly and Church of the Firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.

Here's a book written with their names in it. It says, for those who fear the Lord and those who meditate on his name. And verse 17 says, God is speaking, they shall be mine, says the Lord, on the day that I make them my jewels and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.

Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. Those people who feared the Lord were like jewels to God. Why are jewels precious? Because they're rare.

There have been, it would appear, over the past 2,000 years, fewer who really fear the Lord and nothing else than there have been religious persons in general throughout most of the church history. But in every age there have been some. There have been a remnant that feared the Lord and spoke to each other when they could.

Sometimes they were burned at the stake by the religious establishment. Sometimes they got away with it. Sometimes they began to get sort of a holier-than-thou, self-righteous attitude because they saw that they were more biblical than the established religion and they got a condemning attitude toward the other churches and so forth, and so they became just as bad as them.

But there have always been some who just feared the Lord, who just loved the Lord, who just wanted the Lord. All they cared about was Jesus. And those are the ones that God says, they're mine.

Now, some of those are in institutional churches. I hope you don't think that what I'm getting at, I hope you don't think the bottom line of what I'm getting at is that this church is the church. As soon as those in this church begin to feel that that is the case, that's when I'll be leaving.

I'm tired of churches that think that they are the church. The fact is that the church is the body of Christ worldwide. The church includes Presbyterians and Baptists and Methodists and Nazarenes and Pentecostals and anyone who calls on the Lord out of a pure heart.

That's the true church. But the question of fellowship, the question of assembling together is what has become a felt problem with many. And especially so as many of us have become more concerned about the way we raise our children.

I have found that very typically the people who have found the institutional churches hard to tolerate are also the ones who have pulled their kids out of school and homeschooled them. And it's because in many cases they're concerned that their children not be corrupted by public school. But many have found that it's just as dangerous to put their kids in institutional church or youth groups and things like that because the corrupting influence of the public school is usually there.

And so there's this concern about the spiritual purity of the family and of the children. And while like a person like myself, I could fellowship in any church. I could go to any town and on Sunday morning I could just pick a church at random, go fellowship there.

I could worship God. I could get something, I hope, out of a message if there's anything there to be gotten. And I could enjoy the fellowship of whoever's there that really loves the Lord.

But that doesn't mean I consider every church a safe place to take my children. And that is the problem that is emerging right now. There have always been those who have had problems with the institutional churches that were offered in their area.

But now we've got the added phenomenon of people who are especially concerned about protecting their children, this homeschooling phenomenon, or even Christian schooling. Taking the kids out of public school in order to protect them from evil influences. Many have found that their kids who are protected at home from public school influences get all the same wicked influences when they go to Sunday school or to youth group.

And so there's this exodus of large numbers of serious-minded Christians from a lot of the institutional churches. But they're looking for fellowship. And they find it, I would say more often than not, they find it in homes.

That seems to be the arising phenomenon. Interestingly enough, that's where the first

Christians met too, in homes. They didn't have church buildings.

This group right here actually began as a home fellowship. It just got too big. And so they had to move out of the home.

But the question then is, okay, once they're in the homes, what do they do then? Once they've come out of the institutional denominations and start gathering in alternative situations, how can they avoid making the mistakes that others have made before them? Because after all, if you leave the denomination you're in and start meeting in the home with a few families that are like you, isn't that really how the Methodists got started? Isn't that kind of how the, really, the Baptists got started? Isn't that how the Pentecostals got started? I mean, how is it that you're going to avoid becoming yet another institutional thing? Well, I'm not going to tell you this morning because we're out of time for this morning. But I have a desire to talk about those things. Because there is always the danger that we will fall into the trap that we were fleeing from.

Like the person in the Old Testament of whom it says, they fled from a lion and went into the house and leaned against an adder or a poisonous snake. They got away from one danger, but they fell into another. Or maybe the same one, or one equally lethal.

We should not think ourselves wiser than previous generations of Christians. We are not. We are not more immune than they to sectarian attitudes or pride or just making mistakes.

And therefore, we need to make sure that we follow the Scriptures as closely as possible and be freed as much as possible from those traditions that have deadened other movements. You know, if you study church history, or even if you have lived in the church as long as I have, I've been a Christian for about 40 years now, or a little more. I've been in many churches.

I've experienced life in the church for about half a century. That's a very small segment of church history, but I've studied church history too. And I've discovered, both in my own lifetime and in the study of church history, that a real move of God, a dynamic spiritual move of God, can become embalmed in two or three generations.

And most denominations, I dare say, began as real moves of God, where the Spirit began to stir some people to go further with God than their denomination was going. So they, like Wesley, Wesley never left the Episcopal church. He was an Episcopalian or Anglican until the day he died.

But he started a movement within the church of revival and renewal, which was, of course, later became the Methodist Societies and the Methodist denomination. After he died, it became institutionalized as its own denomination. And although there are truly some godly Presbyterian ministers and Presbyterian people out there, I said

Presbyterian, that's true of them too, but Methodists is what I'm referring to, those who have come from Wesley's movement, there are some godly people there.

I think most of us who have been around would say the Methodist movement, just like most other denominations, has its share of deadness and institutional nonsense. I mean, nonsense to the point of going into liberalism. Almost every denomination started out as a biblical movement.

Almost every denomination on the planet now is moving into liberalism. You know, talking seriously about ordaining women and homosexuals and things like that. And, I mean, how do we avoid getting on that track? How do you take what is a move of God and avoid embalming it? How do you avoid the traps that others have fallen into? Again, I don't say that we are wiser than others, unless it is because we have the advantage of living after them and seeing their mistakes in retrospect.

But there are things we need to understand. They have to do with our whole mentality about what church is. Next time I speak on this, I'm going to be talking about what's right about the church.

There are things that make going to church essential. To assemble with believers is essential. But I also want to talk about how the primitive church in the days of the apostles differed, in principle, on many issues from almost every modern institutional church today.

In terms of their idea of what leaders are. In terms of their ideas of what members are. In terms of their ideas about how the church is financed.

In terms of ideas about how the church is made to grow. And a lot of issues that modern churches, I don't know if they are looking at the primitive church as much as they need to. Because we are told that, after we see a description in the book of Acts of the primitive church, we are told, and great grace was upon them all.

And God added to the church daily, such as were being saved. And they had favor with all people and so forth. I mean, some pretty good things accrued to that movement.

And while some things perhaps can be modified or maybe need to be modified to fit a different cultural situation, we shouldn't be too free about that. About making those modifications without good cause. I'm going to be, in the next sessions, Tuesday nights, talking about what happened to the church.

How the move of God, in the days of Jesus and the apostles, became institutionalized and bombed and became a dead religious political structure. And how to see the dangers and hopefully avoid those dangers in our generation. Because every generation has to face the same dangers.

And as I said, we are no better than others. We could fall as readily into the trap as others before us have. But I hope we may avoid it.

Well, I would like to have said more things positive this morning. This is just introductory, really, to what I want to say at length. So I hope you don't go away unfed.

But we will have more on this for those who are interested in the coming Tuesday nights.