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What Is Right About The Church?



Some Assembly Required - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg emphasizes the positive aspects of the church, despite the criticisms often expressed towards institutionalized religion. While acknowledging that the organization and leadership structure of the church may not have been explicitly outlined in the Bible, Gregg encourages Christians to gather together and be accountable to one another. He also notes that early Christians had a sense of community in which they shared everything in common and supported each other financially. Overall, Gregg suggests that the church can be a powerful force for good when it operates with sincerity and a focus on supporting its members.

Transcript

In our introductory session on this subject, *Some Assembly Required*, I talked about the fact that there are many who are in search of the church. They are looking for the authentic body of Christ. They're looking for the fellowship of the saints, the community of the believers.

And there are many samplings of that reality around. Every congregation where believers meet in the name of Jesus contains a sampling of the body of Christ. There is something there to it.

But I think that many have found from experience that along with the true experience of the body of Christ that is in many of the most frequent experiences that we have in churches, that there is other stuff too. There is baggage. There are concepts and practices and policies and programs and mentalities that some of us have come to think don't really have that much biblical basis and in some cases may be counterproductive to really discovering the life of the body of Christ that was normative in the New Testament and which Jesus intended to be normative throughout the entire age of the church until he comes.

I'd like to begin by saying that while this series is going to have some criticisms to make of the modern institutional church, I want to begin on a positive note and talk about what's right with the church. Now, when I say the church, I don't mean any particular

institution and I don't even particularly mean institutional church at all. I just mean the body of Christ, the company of the redeemed, which in our last session I mentioned can be understood either as the global body of Christ, depending on the context in which it's spoken of, or else of a particular gathering of believers.

And there's something very right and necessary about gathering with the believers. Many times when we've had experiences that were less than satisfactory, less than enlightening, less than edifying, in a series of gatherings in churches, we might become cynical, we might become disillusioned, we might say, well, no sense in continuing to meet with other believers. I can get just as much just by staying home and reading a good Christian book or reading the Bible on my own or listening to Christian tapes or listening to Christian programming.

There's a lot of ways that I can get edified and taught without attending any kind of gathering of believers. And there's a large number of people who are sound in other respects in their Christianity, but who have become disillusioned and cynical about all gatherings of believers. Some of the reasons are because of the political nature of the institutional church.

And I believe that the leaders in such churches are innocently mistaken as to what the role is of leaders in the church. But because they were raised, as we all were, in an institutional church setting, or at least in a society where when we think of church we think of a certain institutional thing, I believe that many of those who are trained in seminaries and who are brought up in the system to become leaders in this kind of an organization, they are forgivably blind because they've known nothing else. No matter which congregation you look at, no matter which denomination you look at, there are many things about them all that seem to reflect a certain style of organization and of leadership.

Now, I'm not pretending that all churches have the same form of church government. That is not the case. There are three very common forms of church government found among different denominations.

There is what's called the Episcopalian form, which is not just that of the Episcopal Church, but also the Roman Catholic Church. The Episcopalian form of government in the church is named after the word episkopos, which is the Greek word in the Bible that is in our English Bible is usually translated bishop. It would be very good for us to get the word bishop out of our vocabulary, even though it may appear in our favorite translation of the Bible.

Because it appears in our favorite translation of the Bible because of the ecclesiastical influence upon the person who translated the King James Version and every version since then. The word episkopos is in the New Testament usually or often translated bishop. However, it doesn't mean bishop in the sense that that word is currently

understood in the modern era.

The word episkopos comes from two Greek words, the P-E-P-I, which means over, and skopos, which as you might guess from the very sound of it, has a seeing, like a telescope or microscope, has this word skopos as one of its particles. So, P is over and skopos means see. An episkopos is literally an overseer.

And it's refreshing once in a while to find a Bible that translates it that way because the word bishop is so misleading. The word bishop now seems to have a high church ecclesiastical kind of a connotation. Just because of what has happened in church history since the time of the apostles, this word took on connotations it did not have in the New Testament.

A bishop was not a high church official. The word episkopos simply means an overseer. But because episkopos is the Greek word that is translated bishop in our Bibles, there are churches that follow a form of government called episkopal or episkopalian form of government.

And they believe that a bishop is an overseer over a group of churches in a locality or in a diocese. And each of these churches might have its own priest or minister, but they all answer to a bishop in the region. And so the real authority in the local churches is translocal, in a sense.

It is a bishop who is not necessarily in the congregation, but the minister in the congregation answers to that bishop. And that's called the episkopal form of government. And there are most of the high church older denominations, including Roman Catholicism, follow that form of church polity.

There is also what's called the Presbyterian form of government, which, again, is not limited to the Presbyterian denomination. The word Presbyterian comes from a Greek word also, presbyteros, which is the ordinary word in the Bible for an old man. Actually, the word presbyteros means an old man or an elder.

And this word is used in the New Testament both of ordinary old men and also of older men who hold recognition in the church as guides or teachers of the body of Christ. And so we find the appointment of elders in the churches by the Apostle Paul in Titus chapter one and also in Acts chapter 14. These elders in the Greek are presbyteros, or the singular is presbyteros.

And therefore, the Presbyterian form of government is an eldership government. And that would mean that the church is governed by a body of elders in the local assembly. That differs from the Episcopal form of government in that there's a bishop outside the local assembly who governs several churches.

In the Presbyterian form, there's a group of elders. They govern the church itself. And if

you've been around in many churches, you may know that many non-denominational churches and many charismatic and Pentecostal churches follow, in some sense, a Presbyterian form of government as well as Presbyterians and others.

There is then that form of church government that is followed mostly in Baptist-type churches called the Congregational form. There's also Congregational denomination. But the Congregational form of government is a democratic form of government where the people vote on policy and on bringing in a leader and ousting a leader and things like that.

The decisions, the authority rests in the majority vote of the congregation. This is the Congregational form of government. Now, all of these exist and have existed for a very long time in different denominations.

They all have one thing in common, and that is that they all assume that there are political offices in the church. Now, I didn't mention anything about a pastor in any of these. Most of these forms of government also include a pastor.

A Congregational church usually has a pastor, though the people vote on whether the pastor comes or goes or leaves, stays, whatever. In an Episcopal form of government, the pastor or priest is also subject to the bishop, but he's in the local congregation. In the Presbyterian form, the pastor serves in the local congregation along with the elders.

Now, this is one thing that is very different from the Bible. All of these three forms are different than what the Bible presents because the Bible doesn't anywhere present a pastor in a congregation. There's no example in Scripture.

There's no mention in Scripture of a congregation having a pastor. Now, in a later lecture in this series, I would like to talk about what the Bible does teach about this. But the thing I wanted to say about all three of these forms of church government is that they all presuppose that there are officers in the church that hold something like a religious-political role in the body of Christ.

It is my conviction, as I've studied the Scriptures and I've held, by the way, pastoral office and leadership office in a number of churches over the years. In the 30 years I've been in the ministry, I've been in leadership in churches. I've been in the congregation in what usually we call laymen in the church of many denominations, different forms.

And I have come to the conclusion, and I'll defend this later on, that in the early church there were no persons who held anything like political authority in the church, except with the very one exception possible, and that would be the apostles themselves. But even they shied away from being political leaders in the church. The apostle Paul said about himself in 2 Corinthians 1.24, he said, Not that we have dominion over your faith, but we are helpers of your joy.

For by faith you stand. In other words, you stand before God on your own faith, not because we're some kind of intermediaries between you and God, even though he was an apostle and the founder of the church. We'll talk more at another time about the biblical form of church leadership.

But the main thing I wanted to say is that almost all of us have been brought up, unless we were in a brethren assembly, perhaps, because the brethren gatherings have disagreed for a very long time, for centuries, with these other models. And much of my position agrees with what the brethren have taught, although there are some ways in which I would not find the brethren to be entirely as biblical as they think. For example, they have a certain way of conducting their meetings, which they insist is strictly biblical.

I would say that the way they conduct their meetings is agreeable enough with Scripture, but much of it is still of human origin, because the Bible doesn't state it. The Bible doesn't describe a church service. And so, to a certain extent, the brethren service, just like that of other groups that they criticize, has its own traditions that are of human origin.

I'm not here to say that traditions of human origin are bad always. There are traditions that are innocent. There are traditions that are innocuous, harmless.

But there are also, as Jesus pointed out, traditions that are harmful, traditions, the keeping of which obscures from our eyes the truth of this Scripture, so that Jesus criticized the Pharisees of his day in Mark chapter 7 and said, For well you reject the word of God that you may keep your traditions. And he said, Isaiah spoke accurately of you, saying, In vain these people worship me, teaching for doctrines the traditions of men. And that which was true of the Pharisees is certainly true of many ecclesiastical groups, perhaps the majority, and I will not say that I myself am fully exempt from blind spots either.

I do not present myself as the one who sees all things clearly. I don't know if any of us see all things clearly. Paul said, We know in part, and we prophesy in part.

But there are some things that many of us are beginning to see as we compare the Scriptures with what we actually find in the ecclesiastical world, the church world out there. And one of the main things is the political nature of the modern church, the institutional church. And there's going to be another time when I will examine that.

I'll point out to you how the church became that way in the early centuries. We'll have some lessons in church history there and what things changed and what things ought to be discarded in order to get back to having something much more like what the apostles had and established. Now, what is right about church? Well, gathering with other Christians is what I'm referring to as church right now.

You can gather with other Christians in a Baptist church or in a Pentecostal church or a Methodist church or a Presbyterian church. And you'll find Christians there and you will find some, hopefully, some advantage, some benefit for having been there. I say hopefully because I no longer think, as I once did, that it's better to be in some church, any church, than none at all.

I used to teach that if the worst church in town is the best you can find, because the other, not the worst, the best church in town is bad. Let's put it that way. It's better to go there than to none at all.

I later learned that was an unscriptural statement. The Bible nowhere commands us to go to church. Now, I realize the Bible says, do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together, but it is our tendency to read into that statement traditional ideas of what the apostle meant when he spoke of assembling together.

We think of a Sunday meeting and a worship service and so forth. The apostle said nothing about that in his statement. He simply said don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together.

But there is no place in the Bible that commands us to go to a church meeting. However, true Christians are always longing to be in the presence of other Christians, to share their hearts, to worship God together, to learn from each other, to encourage one another, exhort one another. And therefore, you don't have to command a true Christian to gather with other Christians.

He'll be desperately seeking the opportunity whenever he can find it. But going to a church meeting, as we typically think of that, is not specifically commanded, though I believe there's advantage in it if the church meeting is such that there's advantage in going to it. The Bible, however, indicates that sometimes going to church is worse than going to none.

Paul said that in 1 Corinthians 11. He told the Corinthians, when you come together, you come together for the worse and not for the better. Worse than what? Worse than if they hadn't come together.

In other words, their coming together was so disorderly and so wrongheaded. I mean, they were getting drunk at the Lord's table. There was all kinds of chaos in the service.

The women were, some of them, apparently out of order and so forth. And Paul said it's better not to get together than to get together whether you are. He said, when you come together, you come together for the worse and not for the better.

And that suggests that there are times when going to church is not better than going to none. However, none of us who are true Christians would ever be content to go to none. That is to have no fellowship.

We just need to find out what constitutes biblical fellowship. And one reason we need to know that is only because we have this nagging condemnation that comes with either from our own hearts or the devil or whoever is doing it. Or maybe from other church people on the outside who say, you know, what you're doing isn't really church.

What you're doing isn't really legitimate because you don't have X, Y and Z factors in your gathering which are necessary if you're really going to be adequately church. I remember some years ago, and I won't go into this in great detail, though it could go very long, but there was an organization in Oregon that was trying to get amateur Christian musicians to be booked for playing in churches and places like that. They wanted to manage them.

And initially they were interested in managing me and booking me to do some music in some churches. And I filled out an application they sent me. And they said, where is your church? Who is your pastor? Well, at that particular time, I hadn't joined myself to a church.

I was too busy fellowshiping. I was, for example, I was living in McMinnville, Oregon, and preaching in a pulpit every two weeks at a church two hours' drive away that didn't have a pastor. Eventually, Chris Graves became their pastor, and that's how I met him.

But for a year and a half before he came to that church on the coast in Oregon, I was driving there every two weeks at a two-hour drive. It was too far for me to really fellowship with the people during the week, but that's where I went at least twice a week. And then the other two or three Sundays a week, we didn't really have that much opportunity to get tied in with the church in our area, so we just fellowshiped where we could.

I got lots of fellowship. I was teaching in Bible school, had Bible studies and prayer meetings and worship times every day at our Bible school. But I didn't have a pastor.

So I wrote down the name of the last pastor I'd had, which happened to be someone in California. And these people who were running this organization called me and said, we got a slight problem with your application here. It indicates that your pastor is in California, but you live in Oregon.

And I said, that's true, I guess. I mean, he's the last pastor I had, the last pastor of a church that I once was a part of. And they said, well, you can't have a pastor in California when you're in Oregon.

I said, oh, why is that? And they said, well, there's not an adequate system of accountability there. I said, well, so what are you looking for in the way of accountability? They said, well, you need to have a local pastor who you're adjoined to his church and you're submitted to him and so forth. And I said, well, I don't have that in this town.

I do have plenty of accountability, however. Actually, I have lunch with a couple of pastors on a regular basis in this town of different churches, but I'm not a member of their church. And they said, well, then you don't have an adequate structure of accountability.

I said, well, I meet twice a week in the mornings with godly men to just fellowship for a couple hours early in the morning. Does that count for accountability? They said, no, you have to be a member of a local church. I said, well, you mean I could join any local church in this town? I could join the largest local church in this town? And the pastor might not even know my name, but you would think I was adequately accountable now because I was joined to this church.

They said, well, that's what we're looking for. Well, needless to say, I didn't end up working with that group. But that is the way many people think.

You need to have a local pastor. You need to have membership. You need to have accountability defined in an institutional sense.

And if you don't have that, you just don't have church. And if you don't have church, then you are in spiritual trouble. This is at least the mentality that we are confronted with many times.

Some of you may have never been confronted by it because you've never been out of a church. But I have. I've been in home churches.

I've been in regular churches. And I've been kind of churchless. We usually say between churches.

But people say, well, where do you go to church? Well, I'm between churches. When's the last time you went to church? Three years ago. Well, it's a big space between churches.

But I never felt like I was inadequately fellowshiped. You know, I had plenty of fellowship with the brethren. But there's this institutional model of church that people have that goes way beyond anything the Bible teaches.

And frankly, I've never really been convicted to do more than what Jesus or the apostles taught. Even if in the 2,000 years since that time, a great number of traditions of man have been heaped on that have turned church, in the minds of many people, into a really strange human organization that doesn't bear a lot of resemblance with what Jesus or the apostles established. For example, Jesus, when he established his church, simply called men together to be a brotherhood.

He didn't set some of them above others. He didn't give them a theology course, although he trained them for three years. We don't have any evidence that he took them

through a course in systematic theology, as pastors would normally be trained today.

But he just taught them how to relate, how to be honest before God, not to be hypocrites in their worship, how to love each other, how to resolve difficulties between themselves, how to lay down their lives for each other and for the truth. And he just worked on their character and their relationships, and then he left them and sent the Holy Spirit down and said, Well, keep this up, guys. Spread it around.

And so from the early beginnings, we have a family that Jesus called together. All they had in common was they were the children of one father, and they were brothers and sisters of each other. But it wasn't a full century after Jesus was gone before there began to be elements of institutionalization and organization added.

When we first read of it, and I won't go into this detail now, I'll save it for later, but in the writings of Ignatius, about 110 or 115 years after Christ, Ignatius began to exhort the churches. In seven letters that he wrote to seven churches, he exhorted everyone to be subject to the bishop of the church. Now, it was very strange, because prior to Ignatius, in the scriptures, we don't find reference to there being a bishop in the church.

That's not taught in scripture. Something else is taught than that. But by 115 A.D., Ignatius is taking it for granted that every congregation has a bishop in it.

And he is saying that baptisms cannot be conducted unless the bishop is present, the Lord's Supper cannot be conducted unless the bishops are present, and the church cannot meet unless the bishop is present. In other words, you now have, instead of a family that had all the dynamics of a family, you now have an organization that has all the dynamics of a cult. Really? And their theology may have been adequate, and they may have really loved the Lord, but the movement had changed.

Now, let me tell you why we should not give up on the church. If you happen to be among those that have been a little less than satisfied with the churches that you've taught, we should not give up on gathering. And as I said, I don't think any true Christian ever will really give up.

They'll always be looking. But there are certain things right about gathering. The first of which we find in Matthew 18.

And the scriptures I'm going to show you, I'm sure, are very familiar already. But in Matthew 18 and verse 20, Jesus said, For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. Now, gathered in his name, people gathering, doesn't take a lot.

It obviously, two or three is a quorum. And you can have more than that. And obviously, most gatherings, you know, where Christians get together for worship and so forth, hopefully will be bigger than that.

But there are some places in the world, in Turkey, for example, and in Iran, where a believer might not be able to find more than one or two other Christians. In fact, might not even be able to find that. But if they find one other Christian, where two gather in his name, there is he.

Now, what makes the church service desirable but that Jesus is there? If Jesus is there, what can be added to it? What is needed more than Jesus being there in order to make a gathering worth gathering for? The fact that Jesus is there is the thing that makes gathering the most commendable. Now, you might say, and most people do, Well, wait a minute, I don't quite get this, because I thought Jesus is with me even when I'm not gathered with other believers. If I'm alone, isn't Jesus there too? When I'm all by myself in isolation, can't I still talk to the Lord? Isn't he still present with me? Didn't he say, I'll never leave you nor forsake you? Didn't he say, I'm with you always? Yes, but obviously when Jesus said, where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

He's talking about something that is distinctive of gathering. There's no sense in saying it. I mean, it's a given that he's with them when they're not gathered.

So he's saying something else, something additional exists when we are gathered. Else there'd be no point in saying this. What is it that is additional? What is it that exists in terms of the presence of Christ when we're gathered that does not exist in the same sense when we are alone? Well, there's a couple of things, at least that come to my mind.

One is this, that for me to, I'm a physical person who is relating to physical world around me, physical people, physical things. We're born into and we're adjusted to life in a physical realm. When we become Christians, we now are, it's now obligatory for us to relate to a God who is invisible and non-physical.

And even Jesus, though he came down in the form of a man, he is no longer walking in that form among us. And therefore, we've never seen him. He's an invisible, non-physical presence to us today in the person of his spirit.

How can I relate to him? Well, I can relate to him in a sense when I relate to his people. Jesus said, inasmuch as you've done it unto the least of these, my brethren, you've done it to me. What if I want to do something tangible for Jesus? When I'm alone, what can I do for him? When there's two, I can do something for my brother and I'm doing it to him.

He is there for me to relate to in a tangible way where there's at least one other besides myself. When I'm alone, I can't relate to him in any tangible sense. I can't express in practical assistance or whatever my love for Jesus when I'm alone.

Because he doesn't have any needs, but his body has needs. And when I meet with

another Christian or two or more, there is the potential then for me to actually do something tangible. In the sense that I'm accustomed to doing things for people.

I can do it for Jesus because he is in the midst. He is there. Now, when he says, for as if two or three in my name, there am I. I don't think we're to picture it that there's three people here and then there's this Jesus as a fourth person there.

I think it's more this. When there's two or three gatherers in his name, he is there in those people. In the persons of those people, they are his body.

They are his hands, his feet, his flesh and his bones. And therefore, what is done to them is done to him. Any way that I relate to my brother is relating to him.

John said, if I can't love my brother whom I've seen, how can I love God whom I've not seen? Love has to be expressed in practical ways. And when it is, it's generally to somebody tangible. Feeding the hungry.

Housing the homeless. Or giving a ride to somebody who's out in the weather. He didn't ride.

I mean, doing something practical. How do you do that for Jesus? You do it for Jesus by doing it to Jesus in the person of his saints, in the persons of the Christians. Where two or more are gathered, he is there in a different sense that I can relate to him in the persons of his members of his body.

And the other sense in which he's there, it's related to the first, is that because two or more people are a broader representation of the body of Christ than I alone am, there is more possibility for the fullness of Christ's activity to be manifest when there are two or more gathered. When I'm alone, I mean, there's just so many things that I can do. I don't have all the gifts of the Spirit, but his body does.

And where there's two or three or more, then you've got more gifts, more manifestations of Christ. One person might have the ability to prophesy. The other might have the ability to discern something that someone else doesn't.

Someone might have the ability to teach. Someone might have the ability to give or to encourage or to minister mercy or some other thing. And where there's more than one, there's a corporate expression of Jesus.

Where there's only me, Jesus is with me, but there's no corporate expression of him. And you have to realize that when Jesus was on the earth, there didn't need to be a corporate expression of him. The man, Jesus of Nazareth, had all there was of Christ.

He was Christ. It says of him that the Spirit was not given by measure to him. The Father gave the Spirit not by measure to Christ.

He had all the fullness of the Spirit, all the fullness of the gifts, all the fullness of everything that is associated with Christ within one man. But now, since his ascension, he is the head of a body made up of many thousands or millions of members. And no one member has the whole expression, the whole giftedness, the whole manifestation in that one person.

But as you get the body gathered together, you have the variety of functions, the variety of aspects of the manifestation of Christ's ministry through multiple parties. And so, gathering together, Jesus is there in a couple of senses at least, but he's not when you're alone. He is present all the time, whether you're alone or not.

But when you're gathered, he's there in the persons of his people. There's a corporate expression of Christ, and there's the opportunity to actually do something tangible for Christ in serving him by serving his body. And there is, of course, the great opportunity for Christ to minister to you in different ways, through the gifts of different members, the body.

And so, it's an encounter with Christ when you gather with his brethren in his name, at least it's supposed to be. Sometimes there's so much baggage attached to the gatherings that any real encounter with Christ gets kind of muffled or forbidden by the structure or something. But anyway, the gathering of the saints.

Sometimes the most edifying is when it's not a gathered meeting. That is, when it's not an intentional meeting to be a church meeting, but when a few Christians are together and they just end up talking about the things of God and wonderful ministry takes place among them. But where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there, and that is the strongest argument for gathering.

And for not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together, even if it's only with two or three others. An assembly can be as small as two or three. We have the authority of Jesus Christ, and that's very fortunate too.

Because someone like Wes, for what, six years I believe, he could not find a church in the town he was living in that he felt comfortable putting his family in. And so just he and his family met together. Well, that was more than two or three, so that was a quorum.

Jesus was there. But of course, none of us believe that that's the ideal. The ideal is not simply to have two or three.

The ideal is to meet with as many brothers and sisters as are in our area or are available to us. And so some have had to settle for very slim pickings in terms of fellowship at times. But even those very small gatherings are adequate according to Christ.

They're authorized by Jesus because they're gathering in his name, he is there. Now,

because he is there, certain things exist in gatherings that differ from situations where Christians aren't gathered. One of them is in this same passage in the previous verse.

In Matthew 18, 19, it says, Jesus said, again, I say unto you that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. Now, once again, we have something that is true of us when we're alone in a different sense. When we're alone, we can pray and we have reason to believe that God hears.

And if we pray according to his will, he'll grant the petition. But Jesus indicates that there's another dynamic. Maybe it's simply an incrementally more potent thing.

But when there's two or more gathered agreeing about anything they ask, it will be done for them. Now, although the same kind of promise is made without reference to gathering, this time he makes it with reference to gathering, with reference to agreement among brethren. When he says anything will be done for you, if you can do that, it may be that he's thinking that it's so hard to find any two people who agree as touching anything that once you get that condition, that anything else is easy.

Finding two Christians to agree is not the easiest thing in the world. But when you do have two agreeing, probably the idea is when you're praying alone, we know that the prayers we offer according to God's will, he hears us. It says that in 1 John 5, 14.

But do we always know what God's will is? Are we always sure when we're praying that we're really on the beam of what God really wants? I suspect most of us have our moments where we think, well, I really don't know. You know, I kind of hope this is God's will. This is probably really what I want.

I hope God wants it, too. But when he says for two of you agree, if anything, it's like there's confirmation. Confirmation that this is the thing to pray for.

And we can both believe God for it. Now, I need to say about these two verses we just read, verses 19 and 20 of Matthew 18, that the context of this is somewhat different than the points I've been making. But I believe the verses do have this meaning, even as standalone considerations.

But in the context, Jesus is talking about church discipline. He's talking about if somebody sins against you, you confront him alone. If he doesn't hear you, you go with two.

If he doesn't hear them, you take it before the assembly. If he doesn't hear them, then let him beat you like a tax collector and a heathen. In other words, if you can't get a person to repent after several attempts, then count him to not be a part of the body of Christ.

Count him to not be a part of the assembly. And it's in that context that he says, if any of you agree to touch anything, it will be done. It may be that what Jesus has in mind in this particular case is what Paul was talking about in 1 Corinthians 5, when there was a man, an unrepentant sinner, living in incest, and Paul said, when the whole church comes together, and my spirit with you, deliver that man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit might be saved in the day of Christ Jesus.

That is, whether you come together and you agree about this. You agree that this man is not going to be included on the terms that he's choosing. In the fellowship, he has to repent first.

He's like a heathen, he's like a republican until that time. And so, in the context of Matthew 18, Jesus is talking about that subject. And when he says, where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst.

It's also in that context that if you put him out, I'm putting him out. I think this is what Jesus is saying. If the church does it, I stand with the church on this.

Now, having pointed that out, I still think that the two verses say something in their own right, even apart from the context of church discipline, that gathering together is of value because Jesus is there and because he promises some greater potency in prayer where Christians agree among themselves. There's another aspect of gathering worth considering. That's seen in Psalm chapter 22.

Now, although this is in the Old Testament, it is quoted by the writer of Hebrews. And the verses that are quoted here are said by the writer of Hebrews to be the words of Jesus himself. I believe it's in Hebrews chapter 2 that this psalm is quoted.

But in Psalm 22 and verse 22, Jesus, according to the writer of Hebrews, is saying this. Jesus says, I will declare thy name unto my brethren. He's speaking to his father.

We're the brethren. And Jesus says, I will declare thy, that is God's name, unto my brethren. In the midst of the congregation, I, Christ, will praise thee, God the father.

Now, that last line particularly, in the midst of the congregation, Jesus praises his father. Now, no doubt that's while the congregation is praising the father. But while the congregation is gathered and praising God, worshiping God, Jesus is in the midst of the congregation also praising and worshiping his father.

Perhaps through the mouths of his people. Again, I don't know that we're to understand this in terms of, here's the congregation, there's 47 people here, and there's a 48th person there, and that's Jesus. He's just the unseen member, and he's singing along with us.

That could be what it means, but I suspect what he means is, in the midst of the

congregation, in the Christians, as they are worshipping you, I am worshipping you too, in their midst. From their mouths, I offer praises to you. So that we are in the presence of Jesus, worshipping his father with him.

When we are gathered in the congregation, that's where he is. He's praising his father in the midst of the congregation as well. Now, there's another thing that intrigues me very much, that would make it very difficult, if not impossible, for me to forsake the assembling of the believers together.

And that is my interest in the prophetic voice. In Amos chapter 3 and verse 7, in Amos chapter 3 and verse 7, the prophet says, surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he reveals his secret unto his servants, the prophets. I just want to say, I am not a prophet.

And if God's going to reveal his secrets to his servants, the prophets, I want to be where they are. I want to find out who they are and where they are talking. And you find in the New Testament, where the prophets are, is in the congregation.

When the church comes together, in 1 Corinthians 14, Paul said, let the prophets speak two or three and let the others judge. That's at the church gathering. Paul said that he that speaks in an unknown tongue edifies himself, but he that prophesies edifies the church.

He speaks to edification and exhortation and comfort to the church. It is when the church gathers that the prophetic voice can be heard. Now, this is understood differently in different congregations.

Obviously, in a charismatic Pentecostal congregation, it would be understood that someone stands up and says, blessed be the Lord, and gives an oracle. In non-charismatic congregations, that prophetic word might be given without those exact words. It is possible that from the pulpit or from somebody sharing or from some other means, God might speak directly to your heart.

Now, what I find important is that God says in Amos that he will do nothing, but that he will first reveal it to his servants, the prophets. And God is doing things in this world. And I came to realize that about 30 years ago.

I was in a church and a Christian for about 12 years before I knew that God is doing anything. I didn't know God intended to do anything or was supposed to do anything. I just figured you get saved, you keep the faith, then you die and go to heaven.

And I wasn't really clear because I was just a kid at the time. I wasn't really clear on what was supposed to transpire between the time you got saved and the time you died. But I just figured you're supposed to stay faithful and whatever.

The idea that there was a God active doing things in the world and doing things perhaps

in our midst had not occurred to me. But now I understand that God has an agenda, that God is going forward in history. He is the Lord of history and he is carrying history forward and he is raising up kings and bringing down kings.

And, you know, he works all things according to the counsel of his own will, it says in Ephesians 20, 11. And I want to know what he's doing. Many years ago when I realized this, I prayed, God, whatever you're doing, don't leave me behind.

I want to be with you. I want to hear what you're doing. I want to know what you're doing.

I don't want to be back here, you know, piddling around in some quagmire of, you know, human tradition while you're moving on doing something more biblical, doing something more truthful, something more dynamic, something more spiritual. And it's very important to me that I be among the people of God and that I be among people of God who believe that God is doing things and that he reveals to his people what he is doing. He's not, you know, keeping us all in suspense.

In some cases, he doesn't, you know, he doesn't tell us everything right when we want to know it, but he tells us when we need to know it. And I would not wish to be living at a time when God is saying something to his people through the prophetic voice in the congregation and I happen to be absent. I happen to not be there to hear it.

I remember when I was 16, I was in a charismatic congregation, but very mildly so they didn't have excessive gifts in the church meeting, but they had an afterglow after the meeting, which I sometimes attended and sometimes I didn't. But I remember when I was 16, I talked to somebody at school and they'd been at the church with the afterglow the night before and they said, oh, and a prophecy was given and the Lord said this and that and the other thing. And I remember thinking, wow, a prophecy was given and I wasn't there to hear it.

You know, I just thought, I just thought, man, if God speaks, I want to hear it. Now, I realize I can't be everywhere at once. I can't be everywhere that God's speaking.

But I do want to, if God's speaking, you know, in my area, I want to be where he's speaking because I want to know what he's saying. I want to know what he's doing. And I won't tell you how because I don't know how.

That prophetic voice will manifest every time Christians gather. It may be different ways, but the voice of God is heard in the gatherings. So that's another reason to gather.

So we might hear from God and not just hear from God like I hear from when I'm alone. I do hear from God when I'm alone. Not all the time.

I don't want to give the wrong impression. God isn't talking to me in real noticeable ways

every moment of every day. But there are many, many times when God speaks to me.

But it's not the same as when he speaks to the church. Because when he speaks to me, he's got something to say to me that has to do with me. But I'm also part of a corporate thing that God's doing in the area I live in.

It's called the body of Christ. And what he says to me might have to do with my own personal behavior. But what he says to the body of Christ applies to us all.

And I like to know not only what he's saying to me, but what he's saying to us. And so I want to gather with the people of God. There is a fifth thing that I believe gathering provides.

And that is mentioned in Hebrews 10.24. In Hebrews 10.24, it says, And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works. Now, this is just before he says, Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together. He obviously has in mind the context of assembling as a time where we provoke one another to love and good works.

This suggests, of course, that when assembling takes place, there's not just one person lecturing like I'm doing here. What we're doing here tonight is not your typical, I believe it's not typical of what the assemblies were that the writer of Hebrews had in mind. That is more like a classroom than anything.

And many times church services are more like classes than they are like this kind of assembling. What the writer of Hebrews here talks about is encouraging one another, ministering to each other, mutually nurturing one another. I like very much the gatherings we have for communion on Sunday mornings because so many people have something to share.

Several people pray. Several people speak up. In fact, this last Sunday in particular, it seems to me that everyone who spoke and every song that was picked had some, more than usual, some direct relevance to me and something I was going through.

And I remember thinking, well, you know, this is really, every time someone spoke it was as if God was preaching to me. And I don't know if it would have been, and I was preaching at the second service. I don't know if I would have gotten anything out of that.

But I sure got a lot when the brethren all shared. And mutual nurture, where various members of the body minister to each other, to nurture each other, to provoke to love and to good works, happens in the body in a way that doesn't happen when you're all alone. This does include the phenomenon of accountability, though not necessarily what some people mean by that.

Accountability is not an institutional thing that comes by joining an organization. Accountability exists when you are transparent with other brothers or sisters and where

they know you well enough to know if you're going through something that needs to be corrected or something that needs to be prayed for or something where you need to be encouraged. It is a relational thing that takes place in real relationships and not necessarily in an institution.

Many times it is assumed if you've joined an institutional group, you're accountable. If you're on the outside of an institutional group, you're not accountable. That simply isn't the case.

The people who say that are thinking of accountability in an organizational sense, in a flow chart sort of sense. You've got the CEO there and you've got the board of directors there and you've got the managerial team down here and you've got the supervisors and you've got all these guys down there. The flow chart shows who's accountable to whom.

And accountable in that case means that if you blow it, this guy is going to come after you. And he's the guy who disciplines you. He's the guy who takes you to task.

And you see, ever since the church has come to be viewed popularly as a corporation rather than a family, the idea is you've got to be somewhere in that flow chart. You've got to be somehow connected in this network so that you know who you're accountable to. And so that if you start to drift, you know who's responsible to go after you and who you're responsible to go after and so forth.

None of that resembles anything taught in the Bible. Accountability exists when you have real relationships with people of a spiritual nature. And you might have any number of people you answer to not because you have some kind of position of answerableness to them but because you are related to them as brothers.

For example, during those years that I was not attending a church, I considered that I was very accountable because as I said, I met a couple of mornings a week with different spiritual brothers and we talked about the things going on in our lives for a couple of hours over breakfast before going to work in the mornings. And there wasn't anything about me that they didn't know. And we were talking about the things of God and I was as accountable to them as I think anyone can be to anybody.

However, it is possible to be in a church and have somebody that you're supposed to be accountable to but you never share anything about yourself. At the same time, a church I had been in briefly had a problem with one of their elders. He had been an elder in the church for over eight years.

He was accountable. He was a member of the eldership as well as of the church. He met with the elders a couple of times a week but he also was having affairs with two women in the church for eight years before it ever came out.

Now, was he accountable? If he was in the organization, it didn't help because no one

knew what he was really doing. He didn't really have any transparency in his relations with these people. But no one would have said he wasn't adequately accountable.

But a lot of good it did. The only accountability the Bible speaks of is mentioned by Paul in Romans 14 where he says, each of us shall give account of himself to God. We are accountable to God.

And because we're accountable to God, we make ourselves accountable to all. Paul said, I commend myself to every man's conscience. I present the truth and I commend it to every man's conscience.

That is to say, everyone is entitled to make a judgment of what I'm saying, what I'm doing, my ministry. I'm an open book. And you can make a judgment of it if you want to.

Because I'm accountable to God, I will receive correction from God through anyone. Now, it's interesting that Paul... Now, here's a good example of biblical accountability. We sometimes think that, okay, if you're accountable, that means you submit to the leaders of the church and do what they say.

That's accountability. There was no one in the Gentile churches more of a leader than the Apostle Paul. But look with me over at 1 Corinthians 16.

1 Corinthians 16, in verse 12, Paul says, As touching our brother Apollos, I greatly desired him to come unto you with the brethren. But his will was not at all to come at this time. But he will come when he shall have convenient time.

Now, what I find interesting about this is that here's none less than the Apostle Paul strongly urging Apollos, Go to the Corinthians. They need you at this time. I can't be there, but if you could go there, I'm sure you could help straighten things out.

Please, Apollos, please go to the Corinthians. He says, I don't want to. So he didn't.

Now, Paul didn't say, This guy is actually out from under his proper covering. He did not submit to me. I told him to go and he wouldn't go.

And Paul didn't even say Apollos had something more important calling for him. Paul didn't even say that God was leading Apollos differently. What Paul said was, It wasn't Apollos' will to do it at this time.

He didn't want to. I strongly urged him to come, but he didn't want to. So, well, he'll come when he comes.

Now, what's interesting here is that Paul has no criticism of Apollos for this. Apollos did not submit to Paul here. And yet, in Acts chapter 18, we find Apollos coming to Ephesus, and his theology is a bit inadequate.

And so Priscilla and Aquila take him aside and correct him theologically. It says in verse 26 of Acts 18, And he, that is, Apollos, began to speak boldly in the synagogue, whom, when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly. And when he was disposed to pass on to Achaia, the brethren wrote exhorting the disciples to receive him.

In other words, he received correction, so they recommended him as he was going on to Corinth from Ephesus. But what I find interesting here is, Priscilla and Aquila were not, as far as we know, not elders in the church. They certainly weren't apostles.

There was no sense in which Apollos was somehow, in some kind of flowchart, answerable to them. He was a visitor from Alexandria, just came to town. He didn't even know them.

He was preaching in the synagogue. They took him aside. They said, you know, you don't understand quite right.

And they taught him more perfectly. He received it. He was accountable.

He had no organizational tie with these people. But because he was interested in the truth, and he heard it from them, he received it from them. On another occasion, an actual apostle, Apollos says, go to Corinth.

And Apollos says, I just don't really feel like going there right now. And he didn't. Now, what I find interesting is that that shows that the understanding they had of accountability was not like that of the organizational accountability in the modern church.

The man was answerable to Christ alone. The head of every man is Christ, Paul said. But because I am concerned to obey my head Christ, I want to hear His will, as it may be expressed through any brothers or sisters who might know it.

And it can be a little child, or it can be my wife or my child or a friend or someone that I'm not related to organizationally in any sense. If I hear the word of Christ coming to me through them, that's what I will submit to. On the other hand, even an apostle like Paul could not order Apollos around.

Apollos was at liberty to do as he felt he should do. What he wanted to do before the Lord. Apparently, Apollos did not think that what Apollos was going to do was the will of God at this time, so he did something else.

There is a total freedom to follow Christ. And when a person wants to follow Christ, they will make themselves teachable and accountable to any voice that Christ might speak through to them. And that is the form of accountability that we find in Scripture.

We find no other. Although that changed as the church became more ecclesiastically organized and structured. Now, before we're done tonight, I want to just run through a couple of passages in Acts real quickly and draw some important points about the primitive apostolic assembly.

They were different than most assemblies that we find today. And not so much tonight, but in our next sessions, I want to show how we got here from there. I want to show what happened to cause the assemblies as they were in the days of the apostles to change into what they are in our day.

Once we see how these changes were introduced, it removes the mystery. And it makes it possible for us to say, well, hey, these changes aren't necessarily God-ordained changes. There's no reason we can't do this the way the apostles did it, the way Jesus had them do it.

And we don't have to feel bullied, I guess is one way to put it, by a standard that is not biblical, but which is imposed upon Christians many times by those who simply know no other form of church than that which institutionally has become normative in our day. But I like to look at six things about the primitive apostolic assemblies. And there are two passages of Scripture I'd like to read, and we'll draw these things from these two passages.

One of those passages is in Acts 2, beginning at verse 41. Acts 2, beginning with verse 41. It says, Then they that gladly received his word, that is Peter's, were baptized, and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common, and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men as every man had need.

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily, such as should be saved. Then if we turn quickly over to the fourth chapter of Acts, beginning with verse 31.

It says, And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul.

Neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own, but

they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses, sold them, and brought the price of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet, and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.

Okay, we'll stop right there. There are six observations I'd like to make about these early assemblies. Now, I realize, I want to make this clear.

What we just read in those two passages, we have to recognize that what we read was descriptive, not necessarily prescriptive. It's very important when we read historical material in the Bible to know there is a difference. There's a difference between that which is descriptive and that which is prescriptive.

I think you could easily see with those words how they differ from each other. Descriptive just describes what they did. It does not say they should have done this, they should have done something else, this is good, bad, or indifferent.

It just says this is what they did, this is what happened. That's descriptive. Prescriptive passages are those that say this is what you should do.

Let me give you an example of the difference between descriptive and prescriptive passages, even when it comes to do with the church service over in 1 Corinthians 14. 1 Corinthians 14, it might be. Let me see here.

Yes, that's it, verse 26. Thank you. How is it, brethren, when you come together, every one of you has a psalm hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation, let all things be done unedifying.

Now, there are many people who use this verse to say, you know, when we come together, everyone ought to say something. Everyone ought to either share a revelation or share a psalm or share a prayer or share a tongue or interpretation or a prophecy or a doctrine. That's not what Paul says.

Paul doesn't say this should be. He says this is how it is with the Corinthians. He says how is it, brethren, whenever you come together, you all want to talk.

But then he says, let everything be done unedifying. Now, notice the first part is descriptive. The second part is prescriptive.

He describes the way they are. When you come together, everyone has something to say. But here's how it should be.

Let everything be done unedifying. Now, he didn't say that everyone shouldn't talk. He's just saying that's the way it is.

He's not saying it's the way it should be. He's not saying every time Christians get together, everybody ought to say something. That, in a very large assembly, might not be very practical.

And in some cases, some should be silent in the church. But the fact is, there is a difference between that which merely describes what the church did and what commands or exhorts the church to do a certain thing. Now, in those passages in Acts, we are reading descriptive passages of what the early church was like in Jerusalem.

Some of the churches were a little different in some other places later on in the book of Acts. But there are still reasons to look at the most primitive, original congregations because they were doing something right. And they were being led by the Holy Spirit.

We're told they were filled with the Holy Spirit. I'm not sure we could be so certain that all the churches around us are led by people or filled with people who are filled with the Holy Spirit. That would suggest that there'd be spiritual results, spiritual fruit, and there should be a spiritual thing.

A lot of churches strike me as having a lot more of the nature of a political organization than a spiritual phenomenon. But that's my own subjective judgment. I think other people have made that judgment too, which is why a lot of people have left those groups.

But there is something pure. There is something successful. There is something desirable, something to be emulated, maybe not everything, about these early assemblies.

The first thing I'd like to observe is how often they gathered. How often should Christians gather together? Well, this doesn't tell us how often Christians should, but it tells us how often they did. And we see that in chapter 2, and verse 46.

It says, "...and they continued daily with one accord in the temple, breaking bread from house to house, etc." It was a daily phenomenon for them to gather. Likewise, in chapter 5, verse 42, we have that information given also. Chapter 5, verse 42, it says, "...and daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." So, there was this daily gathering.

Now, I don't know what these people did for a living. And I'm sure that it would not be possible for Christians in every society to gather daily. It's possible they had daily gatherings because so many people had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost.

And they were away from home. And their jobs were in other lands where they'd come from. And they were just staying around to get edified before going home.

And so, there was plenty of them who didn't really have jobs locally and who probably

just got together to fellowship and so forth before going back to their own home. And I'm sure that not everyone was able to gather every day. But the thing I would point out here is that they did not gather weekly as far as we know.

There's no reference in the whole of the Bible to the Christians gathering on a weekly basis. Now, I realize there are two verses in the Bible that sometimes are thought to teach that the early Christians met on Sundays. I'll show you what those verses are.

You can tell me whether they say that the early Christians met every Sunday. There are just two verses that are ever appealed to because that's the only two that could possibly ever be appealed to. Acts 20, verse 7. We read of when Paul came to Troas and he stayed seven days there and then he left to continue on his way to Jerusalem.

It says in verse 7, And upon the first day of the week when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morning and continued to speak until midnight. That's when Eutychus fell asleep and fell out the window. But notice it says, On the first day of the week, meaning Sunday, they gathered to break bread and to hear Paul preach.

Now, this verse, probably more than any other, has been used to prove that the early Christians met every Sunday. And maybe they did. I don't know if they did or not.

In Acts chapter 2 and Acts chapter 5 they met every day, not just every Sunday. This does not tell us that the disciples now were meeting just once a week on the first day of the week. It only tells us that this particular meeting where Eutychus fell out when Paul preached late happened on the first day of the week when they were gathered to break bread.

It does not tell us they only met on the first day of the week to break bread. Paul was leaving the next day. Maybe they especially had a meeting to hear him before he left.

And it happened to be the first day of the week. Maybe they met every day of the week. We don't know.

One thing we can't say is, we can't claim that this verse tells us that the believers now trim back their meetings to once a week. All we know is that this particular meeting happened on a Sunday. And Paul was leaving the next day and maybe that's why they met that day or maybe they met every day.

We really don't know. There's not enough there to go on. In 1 Corinthians 16 we have the other verse that is sometimes appealed to.

And that is verse 2. 1 Corinthians 16, 2. Paul is giving instructions to the Corinthians about taking up a collection to give to the poor saints in Jerusalem who have been hit by a famine and other problems due to persecution. And he says to them in 1 Corinthians

16, 2 So, upon the first day of the week, that's Sunday, let every one of you lay by him in store as God has prospered him that there be no gatherings when I come. Now, this is often thought to mean that they met on Sunday and they took an offering.

And each one put something in the offering on the first day of the week. Maybe they did. It doesn't say that.

It just says that he wanted them on the first day of the week to put something aside by themselves. They could do this at home. So, they'd have it ready when Paul came, and they could bring it and offer it.

It does not say anything about a gathering in this particular passage. It does not say anything about taking an offering. It says that someone on the first day of the week, probably because the Sabbath had ended and now, you know, you were able to go on to other things like working again, put aside something at the first, you know, at the end of the Sabbath, the first of the week, make sure you as a first order of business of the week, you put something aside.

Now, it may have been done at a meeting. We don't know. All I'm saying is these two verses in Acts 20, verse 7, in Acts 1 Corinthians 16, two of the only verses that even mention the first day of the week, and they don't tell us that the disciples had trimmed back their meetings to only meeting once a week on Sunday.

We do know from early Christian writings like the Didache and others that they did meet on Sunday eventually in the second and third century. It did become normative to meet on Sunday. Justin Martyr also mentions this in his writings, but this is a good while after the apostles' time.

And so we don't know anything about the meetings as far as the frequency of them in the Bible except that they met daily in the early days. And maybe they didn't meet daily all the time after that. We don't know.

We can see, however, that they didn't assume that going to church once a week was all that was needed to fill some kind of religious requirement. They gathered as often as they could. Can't do it much more often than every day.

Now, next question from these passages in Acts. Where did they gather? They did not have church buildings. The church did not build church buildings.

Now, that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with church buildings, but one thing it tells us is that they weren't necessary. They didn't need church buildings. Where did they meet? We saw in Acts 2, 46 and also in Acts 5, 42, the two verses we just looked at a moment ago.

They met in the temple, which was a public building, sort of like the town hall. The

temple had rooms you could rent or use for gatherings. In Ephesus in Acts chapter 19, Paul took the disciples aside and met in the school of Tyranus, apparently a public facility available for meetings like that.

And they met in every house, it says, house to house. They broke bread. They had meals together.

They had gatherings together in the homes, and also they had them in publicly accessible buildings. This meant they had absolutely no overhead costs for their facilities. You know, a home is already paid for or being paid for by the persons living there.

So there's no need for the church to be burdened with a real estate bill if they meet in a home. Likewise, if they met in the temple or the school of Tyranus, who knows, they might have paid a little rent, we don't know, but it's even possible that those were free public access buildings. The point is, the church didn't have to tie up a lion's share of its finances with a highly inefficient piece of real estate that's used only once or twice a week and ties up a great deal of money in purchase, insurance, and all kinds of things, which money could be used for the work of God otherwise.

They certainly weren't building gymnasiums and Sunday school wings and things like that. And once again, I don't say that the Bible commands us to meet in homes or anything like that, or forbids owning buildings, but one thing it tells us is that it never occurred to them that they needed church buildings. And it never was normative for them to have church buildings.

This doesn't mean that they would have disapproved had someone suggested it necessarily. It just apparently never occurred to them or they never needed it and so they didn't have them. Now, what did they do when they met? One of the best summaries of the early Christian gatherings is in Acts 2.42. They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine or teaching and in fellowship and in breaking of bread, which could refer to taking communion or it might refer to ordinary meals.

We know from the writings of Justin Martyr about a century later that they had what they called the meal of remembrance, which is what we call communion. And they also had the love feast, the agape feast. Justin Martyr mentions these also.

And that was more of a full-on meal. In any case, they did both and they broke bread together, they ate together and prayed together. So their gatherings didn't have much liturgy that we know of.

They prayed as a group, they ate together as a group, probably took communion together. They fellowshiped and they listened to what the apostles had to say. Now, we don't have the apostles here right now, but we have their writings.

So it is possible for us to do all those things. We can sit under the apostles' teaching where we read what they say and be instructed by it. We can pray, we can fellowship, and we can break bread together.

We do those things. We don't do it daily, but those things are all possible to do. What's interesting to note is that we're not told that they did anything else in particular.

Nothing very churchy is described here. There is not much of a liturgy that we read of. This later came in in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th century, this elaborate ritual of liturgy.

And that came along with a very significant change in the mentality of what church is and what Christianity is that began to emerge in the 2nd century, I believe, which we'll talk about another time. Here's another question we need to ask from these pastors. How did the church handle its finances? We do not read anywhere that they tithed.

You never read it in the New Testament of believers tithing. You never read of any command for them to tithe. Again, Justin Martyr, I quote him because he's one of the ones who wrote extensively in the early 2nd century of the way the church was done in his day.

He said that they don't tithe, but everything they have, they have in common. So Justin Martyr was killed about 164 A.D. He was martyred. But he did some of his writings around 132 A.D. So around 100 years after Christ.

Justin Martyr indicated they were still having all things in common. They didn't believe that tithing was the description of Christian financing. It was rather this.

Justin Martyr, I have a quote from him. I could just read it and think of it. I forgot I brought one with me.

Okay, this is from Justin Martyr. He wrote this about 138 A.D. It's in his first apology. Quote on the day named after the sun, meaning Sunday.

We hold a meeting in one place for all who live in the cities of the country nearby. The memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the overseer, that'd be the bishop, the Episcopal gives a talk, urging and inviting us to imitate all these good examples so they would read something from the scriptures, either the writings of the apostles or the prophets.

And then some overseer would give some kind of exhortation or teaching from what was read. Then it says, then we all stand up together and send up our prayers. As said before, bread is brought and wine and water after we have finished our prayer.

The overseer, likewise, sends up prayers and thanksgiving with all his might. The people give their consent by saying Amen. Now the distribution takes place and each one

receives what has been accepted with thanksgiving.

Those who are absent receive their share through the table servants or the deacons. If someone was absent from the church meeting, the deacons actually take the bread and the wine to their home so they could not have to miss that. And then next paragraph, he says, those who are well off and free willingly wish to do so contribute as much as each one wants to.

What is collected is deposited with the overseer. He uses it to care for orphans and widows, for those who are suffering lack arising from illness or any other cause, for prisoners and for travelers staying with us for a short time. Briefly, he provides for all those who are in need in town.

Unquote. Now, this is about a hundred years after Christ. The church, as you can see, was not very much different than it was in Acts chapter 2. What did they do? They got together, they heard the apostles teaching.

Though the apostles were dead, they read their memoirs and the overseer would give a little exhortation from it. They prayed. They broke bread together.

They had communion. And they contributed to the needs of the poor. What I find interesting here is they didn't pass the plate and have everyone put in their tithes.

What they did was, he says, those who are well off and free willingly wish to do so contribute as much as each one wants to. Now, that is those who are well off. Yeah, those who are not well off apparently didn't get.

It was not mandatory. It was not considered that they had to. Those who wanted to and had something to give would give.

And that money was not taken to give to a pastor a salary or to pay off a building. That money was given to the widows and the orphans and the sick and the unemployed and the travelers. In other words, the needy.

The church finances then in Justin Martyr's day as well as in the days of the apostles were given to the poor. Particularly the poor among the congregation, but apparently even those all in town who were poor had some maybe extended claim on the generosity of the church. So, the finances of the church, how were they done? They were done by people just giving freely what they had.

Now, in Acts 2 and Acts 4 we read that they had all things common. But that should not be construed to mean, as some people have thought it does, that they just, you know, when you became a Christian you liquidated your assets and just put all the money in a big kitty and they dished it out in some kind of communal way. The way it actually reads in the Greek, in both Acts 2 and Acts 4, is that they were selling their goods as anyone

had need.

In other words, this was an ongoing practice. This was an occasional practice. As people had needs, those who had extra sold their surplus and brought them to be distributed.

You can see that in Acts 2, 44 and 45. And all that believed were together and had all things common. As they had a common heart, they didn't consider any of their things were their own.

They all belonged to the Lord. They still held on to them until someone had need for them. And the way it should read from the Greek in verse 45, and they were selling their possessions and goods and part of them unto all men as every man had need.

That is, it was a practice that they had of selling their possessions. They didn't do it all spontaneously or automatically. But as anyone had need, it says they were in the habit of selling things, extra land or whatever they had, to help out those who had these needs.

In chapter 4, verse 32, or maybe, yeah. The multitude of them that believed were of all one heart and all of one soul. Neither said any of them that ought of the things which they possessed was his own, but they had all things common.

And it says in verse 34, neither was there any among them that lacked. For as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them. Again, in the Greek, it should be translated worth selling them.

It's in the present tense, not past tense. And bringing the prices of these things that were sold and laid them at the apostles' feet for distribution made to the needy, to the poor. So, the mentality was it's not like 10% of what I own belongs to God, so I have to put that in the church offering.

It's I don't own anything. All that I have belongs to God. And if any of God's people are in need, then they have a legitimate claim on my surplus.

If I have a house or land that I don't need, I can sell that and I can give it to someone who has need. I don't have to calculate does this account to more than 10% of my income? 10% was not a figure that they considered. We read nothing in the New Testament of Christians considering 10% to be the standard for their giving.

We find the opposite, that 100% belonged to the Lord and they gave as much as was needed by the needy. Now, I will confess to you that I've been in churches where I would not give so much as 10% in the offering because the money once given to the church never got into the hands of the needy. It went to pay a fat salary to the pastor, to pay for the new gymnasium the church was building and a whole bunch of other projects that didn't have anything to do with what God said He wants His money used for.

And for that reason, I never felt like I could give God's money in such a situation. But to give money to the needy, that is what Jesus said should be done with money. And to support the mystery of the Word, that is what the Bible says should be done.

And that's what the early Christians did. But they didn't have any financial overhead. They didn't need a tax-exempt status because people just gave as there were needs and it wasn't a thing of having some kind of kitty there or some kind of an account there that they were maintaining and building up the church finances.

Now, how was church growth accomplished in those days? How did they build the church? Or how did Jesus build the church? Well, we read in Mark 16, 20 and we see it confirmed throughout the book of Acts. In Mark 16, 20, it says, They, the apostles, went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the Word with signs following. So, they went and preached the gospel, the apostles did.

And God confirmed the gospel with supernatural things that He did. In chapter 2 of Acts and verse 43, it says, And fear came upon every soul and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. Likewise, in chapter 4 and verse 33, it says, And with great power gave the apostles witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and great grace was upon them all.

Now, the apostles did the preaching. Now, that doesn't mean ordinary churchmen couldn't do any preaching, but the apostles were set aside for that purpose. They were sent by Christ as His agents to preach and to bear witness of His resurrection.

Anyone could testify or preach the gospel if they wished. Stephen did it. He wasn't an apostle.

Philip did it. You didn't have to be an apostle to preach. But the preaching was essentially done by those that were set aside for it.

The majority of the congregation were spending their time listening to the apostles' teaching, breaking bread, fellowshiping and praying together and helping out each other financially. That's what the average Christian was doing. And because of that, great power and grace was on the ministry of the apostles as they bore witness to the resurrection of Christ.

It is because, it says in verse 32 of chapter 4, they had all these things in common, that with great power the apostles gave witness. There was a power behind the preaching because the church had a testimony in its lifestyle. The church was living differently than other people were living.

There was an alternative society established in Jerusalem alongside, parallel to, but going a different direction from the ordinary society of that town. There was a counterculture that was doing things a different way. And it was getting attention.

And it was impressive because the lives of the community proved that they had been supernaturally changed. And when that was taking place in their midst and people saw, hey, they're caring for each other. They're selling their goods and giving to the poor.

Then when the apostles preached, behind that was the visible testimony of the changed lives of the Christian community that gave power to the message. Let me just make one other point from these passages and then we're done tonight. What was the result? They met daily.

They gathered in homes and in public places. They ministered. They sat under the Word of God.

They felt they shouldn't broke bread and prayed. They gave their money. The growth of the church was done not by having plays and gimmicks and so forth to gather people in, but the apostles were out where the sinners were preaching to them and getting them saved and bringing them in.

What was the result of all this? In Acts 2.47 it says, And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. It also says they had favor with all the people. That didn't always happen.

Sometimes people persecuted them, but people recognized that these people were sincere. And initially, the first reaction was very positive. They had favor with all the people, but more importantly, the Lord was adding people every day to the church.

There are not very many churches I'm aware of in modern America where God is adding new converts every day. In fact, the church I grew up in preached the gospel every Sunday, but God didn't even add to the church every Sunday. There were altar calls every Sunday, but there weren't people saved all the time.

If half a dozen people got saved in the course of the year, that was a big harvest. But in their day, people were being saved every day. There was the blessing of God on the church in a way that does not appear to be there in many cases today.

In chapter 4 and verse 33, we saw that great grace was upon them all. And there was great power behind the preaching of the gospel by the apostles. Why? Because I believe the church was operating in a pristine purity that resembled what Jesus had intended when He came and started the thing.

And because the church was living as it should be living and conducting itself as it should be conducting itself, it was a potent testimony to the community. So that the community, they had favor in the eyes of people. Jesus said, when salt loses its savor, it's good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under the foot of men.

I believe the modern church is salt that's lost its saltiness. And it doesn't have favor with

all the people. We are viewed with suspicion.

We're viewed with cynicism. And we're viewed with contempt. Because we are viewed as people who claim that we're better than others.

But anyone can see that we're not. Anyone can see that we have as many divorces in our ranks. That we have as many rebellious teens.

That girls get pregnant and kids get on drugs. And people go off to psychiatrists and psychologists and are on psychiatric drugs in the church about as much as out there in the world. Why should the world be impressed with us? We tell them we have found the way.

And they look at the community of Christians and say, really? What's so different between what you're like and what we're like? Why should we believe you? But in the early days, it was different. The early Christians were manifestly different. They were an alternative society.

They did everything differently. They were animated by a different spirit. Their sincerity was clear to all who beheld.

And the gospel was enforced with power. People were added to the church every day. And I personally think that that is the way God wants it.

Now, there's a great amount of rubbish, I think, that was added to the idea of church and church going and church practice in the centuries that followed immediately after the days of the apostles. And we were born into a society that takes for granted many of these things about church that really weren't part of the original church and which I think have diluted the testimony of the church, if anything. I believe that we don't see the power of God.

We don't see the grace of God. We don't see the salvation of sinners on a daily basis today as much as they did because of things that we're doing differently that Jesus never ordained to be done. And so, I'm not going to talk anymore about it tonight, but I want to talk in future talks on this about how the church went into Babylon and what the way out of Babylon is again.

It's not hard to tell. If you read church history, you can see where each increment happened, where each thing moved a little bit away from the purity of what Jesus and the apostles established. And that started pretty early.

But eventually, you can see how what existed under the name of the church was an entirely different phenomenon than what the New Testament called the church. And yet, although there have been attempts at reformation of this since then, they have not really challenged the whole thing at its whole core, which is the whole idea of

institutionalization. I don't believe that Jesus started a corporation.

I think Jesus started a family. And as long as the church is viewed as a corporation, it has corporate officers and corporate membership and corporate finances and corporate blah, blah, blah, blah, you have something different than the family that Jesus started. The corporation may have some of the members of the family there, but the thing itself is a different thing.

And so, actually, I'm really looking forward to talking about some of these other issues because there's a lot of things that we take for granted that the Bible, I think, would speak against that we accept as normative in the church and we'll have to take those in future talks.