

OpenTheo

Some Assembly Required (Part 2)



Individual Topics - Steve Gregg

In this discussion, Steve Gregg examines the evolution of the Christian church from its early organic beginnings as a fellowship of believers to the institutionalized entity it has become. Gregg highlights the importance of maintaining the New Testament model for the church, which involves appointing qualified spiritual leaders, avoiding a divisive mentality, and practicing unity both globally and locally. He also suggests that small, non-institutional groups of Christians may be better equipped to survive persecution and maintain unity, and that the identity of being a follower of Christ transcends labels of different denominations and churches.

Transcript

In the first hour, I was talking primarily about why it is needful and desirable, and God's will, for us to be church-ed, gathered with other believers. We sometimes think of gatherings as being somehow either in a church building or, if we're in another place, still holding a meeting that's very similar to the meetings held in church buildings. I've been in home churches for many years, as well as going to churches, regular churches, but I find that it's very commonplace in a home church to hold a meeting very much like the meeting you hold in a regular church.

And I don't think there's anything wrong with that. If there's additional things, one thing that I've noticed in the home churches that I've been in, including the one in our home, is there's probably more eating than meeting, and that's not a bad thing. Actually, the early church met together for a gape feast.

It was an eating thing. You'd have meals together, which is a good fellowship situation, and you'd also, of course, do the kinds of things that, at some point during the day, see ours usually go for six hours, and I think a lot of home churches I've been to are that way, but four hours at least of it are eating and talking, and maybe an hour or two at the most would be something that looks like a church meeting, but a lot of times Christians feel like they have to have something very much like a church meeting in order to have fellowship, and I want to just talk about how the idea of church changed in the days of the early church. For example, in the days of the early church, as I mentioned, they

didn't have buildings.

Pastor Wes, who pastors this church and is hosting us here, he texted to Brian, and he was watching the first hour, and he said, maybe the speaker would like to move the meeting out into the parking lot because we're using a church building, and I was talking about how the early church didn't have church buildings, and it's true. They didn't for the first several centuries, though sometimes they did obtain public access buildings for larger gatherings, like at the temple, but most of their weekly gatherings apparently were in homes or smaller areas like that, but they didn't have buildings, and they didn't have a lot of things we have now. They didn't really have what you could call professional clergy.

They had servant leadership, which we still have in many churches, but the point is that the expectations of church began to change not very long after the apostles died. For example, with Ignatius, in the early part of the second century, around 110 or 115 AD, one of the church fathers, Ignatius, started saying that there had to be a bishop attending every gathering of Christians, and they couldn't marry, they couldn't be baptized, they couldn't take communion, they couldn't really do much of anything unless the bishop was there supervising it, and the idea was that Ignatius' concern was that there might be divisions in the church. In fact, I guess there were, that he was trying to counter, and the solution to divisions was to give the bishop more power of a more political type than the early elders had.

I don't believe the early elders had political power. In fact, Jesus commanded them not to. Jesus said the rulers of the Gentiles exercised authority over them, but it shall not be so among you.

He said to those who would be the leaders of his church, he said, whoever would be chief among you, let him be a servant or a slave of all. So that obviously was not a politically powerful position, it was a servant position, and you serve by leading, if you're a leader, that's your gift. Leading is one of the gifts of the Spirit, according to Romans chapter 12, the gift of leading is mentioned.

And so if someone has leadership gifting, then they serve the church by providing leadership. But serving the church by providing leadership is not the same thing as becoming the CEO of a corporation that resembles a secular corporation, or having a political power in the church. At least I don't see the resemblance of those two things.

And if you wonder how did that develop, how was it that John, when he wrote 3 John, castigated diatrophies because he loved to have the preeminence in the church, which just means being the first guy. Preeminence means the guy in charge, really. That was something that was not considered to be really Christian.

It wasn't proper, but it was starting to move that direction with certain power hungry

people. But it was Ignatius in the early 2nd century who began to, I don't know if he invented this, we don't have many writings from his time, he may have been simply in his writings reflecting what was now the norm in the churches, or he may have innovated it, but he started talking about the bishop as somebody who had something very much like controlling power over the church. And that just wasn't part of being a servant.

And by the way, bishops in the early church, that is in the apostolic times, were the same thing as elders. And there was never a time in the early church, at least in the New Testament times, when there was a single bishop over the churches. Rather there was an eldership.

And the word bishop was a synonym for elders in the Bible. It's used interchangeably in many passages. So by the time of Ignatius, which is only a generation after the death of the apostles, already the church was starting to have one man leadership instead of eldership.

I mean there were elders too, but the bishop was the big boss. And he had to approve of and supervise everything. Now that was no doubt intended for a good purpose.

You know, when there's heresy and there's divisions and things like that in the church, one way to resolve that is to put one guy in charge and say everyone conform to this man. That's not the way Paul settled things, interestingly. When the church in Rome was having some dissension between factions of the church, for example, there were some who would only eat herbs and some felt they could eat all things.

That was a difference of opinion and there was apparently some fighting over that. There were some who felt they should keep one day above another and others felt they should keep every day alike. This of course is documented for us in Romans chapter 14 in the first seven verses.

Now these were differences over which church members were seriously divided. And it's almost certain, I mean Paul doesn't say so, but given other evidence within the book of Romans, it's probable that it was the Jewish Christians that wanted to limit their diet and wanted to keep a holy day. And it was probably the Gentile Christians who saw no need to do that, not having been raised with the Jewish laws that Jews had been.

But the point is Paul didn't say, listen, I'm going to tell you all what to do. I'm the boss here. And you guys just, none of this bickering, everyone just agree with me here.

Everyone do it my way. No, he said, let everyone be fully persuaded in their own mind. He allowed there to be differences of opinion.

He did not assume that differences of opinion constituted disunity. Unity in the early church was not uniformity. That's why there's the whole discussion in 1 Corinthians 12,

that there's different gifts but one body.

And different gifts mean people are different from each other. They're not only different from each other in what they contribute, but as, of course, if human beings think, then people would be different from each other in what they think about a number of things. And Christians are allowed to think differently about a number of things.

It's not a sin to think for yourself, as long as, of course, you're submitted to the Word of God and seeking to understand it and follow it. But not everyone understands it the same. So, I mean, the differences of opinion can be tolerated, and Paul tolerated them.

He said, just let everyone be fully persuaded in their own mind. Now, he wouldn't tolerate heretical things that were destructive to the church, but he didn't see that differences of opinion had to be destructive. He didn't say, listen, there's some division starting here, so let's set up one man and everyone just let him decide.

You see, that eventually evolved into, of course, the Pope and the papal system. It began in Ignatius' time, as far as we know, and eventually it developed into a very powerful, politically powerful leadership in the church. And frankly, when the Reformation took place, that was not entirely abandoned.

There's something about institutional churches that still are tempted to see the Christian leaders of the church as political leaders. And that's what Jesus forbade. He said, that's how the Gentiles are, that's not how you should be.

You're supposed to be, if you're a chief, you serve. You're the least privileged. You're not the CEO that everyone follows and supports your plan.

You serve. You're a serving person who has a gift, just like any other person who has a gift. Use your gifts to serve.

And that's what all other people who have gifts are supposed to do. But that's not the way it is among the rulers of the Gentiles. In the Gentile, or even secular corporations, the highest officer is the one who has the privilege of bossing people around.

And we begin to see that in the early 2nd century with Ignatius. In all fairness, we don't find Ignatius saying that the bishop should boss people around. It's very clear that he put the bishop in a position where no one can do anything of significance without his approval, which is going that direction, it seems to me.

And as you go further into church history, after the time of Ignatius, later in the 2nd century, it was Irenaeus. And Irenaeus taught apostolic succession. And he also taught Rome's predominance in the churches.

Now, certainly the Bible doesn't teach Rome's predominance. And you can see how the

Roman Catholic Church grew from this assumption that if the Roman Church is predominant over the other churches, then the leader of the Roman Church, namely the bishop, is predominant over the bishops of the other churches. And that's exactly what Roman Catholic doctrine became, that the church has a bishop, and the church of Rome, like other churches, has a bishop.

But because Rome is preeminent over the other cities, the bishop of Rome is the one who's the boss. Now, the powers of the pope didn't develop fully until about 600 AD. But you can see already in the 2nd century the groundwork is being laid for the political hierarchy of the popes and the bishops and so forth.

And the idea of apostolic succession, I think, was very damaging. It's the basis of Roman Catholicism. The reason the Roman Catholics believe that the pope has the power he does is they believe in apostolic succession.

They say after the first 12 apostles died, there were others who took their places. And when those people died, others took their places, and so forth. And every generation, there was somebody in the apostolic office.

And as the Roman Catholic Church developed, and the reason I pick on them is because they are the church that developed. They are the institutional organization that called itself the church in the Western Hemisphere. And they began to say, okay, our bishops of our churches, and there really weren't other churches, they are successors of the apostles.

And therefore, they are apostolic. And just as the apostles could write scripture and it would become normative for the church, so our bishops can make decrees. They have to be in concert.

The college of bishops and the pope together have to make a decision. But when they do, it's as good as if the apostles said it, because they hold apostolic offices, the apostolic succession idea. Does the Bible support the idea of apostolic succession? Not on any page I've ever read of the Bible.

They point out that when Judas died, that he was replaced by Matthias. And therefore, you see, you have to replace the apostles when they die. But James was killed in Acts chapter 12, and they didn't replace him.

And I think the best way to understand that is they said, when they replaced Judas, when Peter was speaking about it, said Peter left his position. He abandoned his role. And therefore, there was a vacancy.

James didn't abandon his role. He was martyred, but he didn't leave his position. And therefore, he didn't lose his position or need to be replaced.

There were, of course, bishops of the churches after the apostles died who were ministering in the same location. But that doesn't mean they had the same authority as the apostles had to write Scripture or to set all the norms for the churches. That idea began to develop with the idea of apostolic succession, which Irenaeus talked about, and of course the idea of Rome being prior.

So we see that by the end of the 2nd century, you already have these accretions to the Christian doctrine and ideas of church and authority and so forth that are not found in the Scripture, but they're contrary to what's found in the Scripture. In the 3rd century, another important church father named Cyprian, he taught that there's no salvation outside of the church, which was based largely on the idea that the bishops had the authority to ordain priests because he also taught that the bishops have priestly functions. This was not true in the New Testament church.

There were no priests in the church there. The whole church is a kingdom of priests. It's a royal priesthood.

But priestly functions, that's not just the same thing as being a pastor. You know, if you don't have, let's say you have a Catholic background and the leader of your church is called a priest, and now you go to a Baptist church or a Calvary Chapel or some other church and you call the leader a pastor, a lot of times I've known former Catholics that just refer to the pastor interchangeably as pastor or priest or whatever. To them, these are just words that mean the guy who leads the church or leads the church service.

But a priest is a very different thing than a pastor. The word pastor means a shepherd. A priest is one who's an intermediary between God and man, who offers sacrifices.

Yeah, the Catholic priest offers a sacrifice. They call it the sacrifice of the mass, which they believe that the wine in the cup turns into the blood of Jesus, and the host or the bread turns into the body of Jesus. This is certainly not agreeable with what the Bible teaches.

But they believe that, in a sense, the priest every Sunday is, I don't know how to put it, they wouldn't say sacrificing Christ again. That would seem too rude. But in a sense, they are reconsecrating his sacrifice.

They're offering some service that only a priest can do. And if only a priest can do it, then only an official priest can do it. And in the Catholic Church, an official priest has to be appointed by a bishop who is of the Catholic Church.

And therefore, they say you have to take this Eucharist to be saved. That's why there's no salvation outside the church, Cyprian said, because if you're not in the church, then you're not taking the body and the blood of Jesus, you're not saved. Which is, of course, based on several suppositions that are, I think, totally unscriptural, including the idea

that the leader of the congregation is a priest, that he offers a sacrifice, and that the body and blood of Jesus are literally produced when the elements are consecrated.

These are ideas that were already coming up in the church in the 3rd century. We're talking about the 200s A.D. And frankly, in my opinion, this is beginning to introduce superstition into the church, and making the church not so much a family of brothers and sisters who fellowship like a family, turns it into a priestly meeting. It's a religion.

Christianity is becoming a religion at this point, instead of a family relationship. If Jesus wanted to start a religion, of course he could, but he never mentioned wanting to. He and his disciples, for the entire lifetime of Jesus, practiced the Jewish religion, which wasn't new at all, it had been around for 1400 years.

Jesus went to the temple, he went to the synagogues, he gave instructions to his disciples when they bring their gifts to the altar, if they remember someone has something against them, go make peace and then come offer your gift. The assumption of Jesus was his disciples and himself were already part of a religion, they didn't need to start a new religion. What he came was to bring a new kingdom, and a new covenant.

And I think the early church didn't operate like a new religion. It operated like a new family, a new community, under a king. But it became more of a religion.

You see, a society that lives under the rulership of a king, they live every day under their king. If you have a king, you wake up every morning and he's still your king. Every day, your obligation is to please the king, or to obey the king.

That's what a kingdom is, people who follow a king and obey him. If you have a religion, then you don't have to obey the king during the week necessarily, as long as you show up on the religious days, in the religious buildings, and do the religious things, most of which are simply rituals. Certainly, the Eucharist is merely a ritual.

Of course, the Catholic Church indicates that some kind of special magic happens during that ritual that you need to have happen or you're not saved. But again, that's the transformation of the church from a group of people who are actually saved because they have a relationship with God, to a group of people who may or may not have a relationship with God, but they make up for it by going and taking the Eucharist every week. Many of you are raised Catholic, maybe not, but I'm sure everyone has known a Catholic, or talked to a Catholic.

There are good Catholics, I won't say this, there are observant Catholics, and I think who really love the Lord. But I think it's very commonplace for people to be raised in a Catholic church, and they go to church on Sundays, but it never crosses their mind to live for God anytime that they're not at the church. They're not observant, and obviously the same problem exists in many Protestant groups.

The church meeting then became a religious time where you go to atone for the way you lived during the week. In the early church, if the way you lived during the week was something you had to atone for, and you weren't repenting of it, you were kicked out because you're expected to follow Jesus every day, your whole lifestyle. If you're living with your father's wife in sin, you'd be delivered over to Satan and not allowed to be in the church.

The church in the early days was a fellowship of people who took Jesus' lordship and kingship seriously. It evolved into something, especially after Constantine, which is not very long after Cyprian. Constantine essentially allowed, by becoming a Christian and being the emperor, it made Christianity popular.

People began to baptize their infants into the church, and eventually most of the citizens of Rome or the Roman Empire were in the church, whether they were saved or not. They were baptized as babies, and they're automatically part of the church just from birth. That means, of course, most of them never became real followers of Christ, but that didn't matter.

They were in the church. They followed the religious system instead of the way of life of the kingdom of God. That was something that was a very great corruption in the way church was seen.

As you know, while many churches are not guilty of this, there are plenty of people who go to church on Sundays, and it never occurs to them that the sins they're committing during the week are not okay. They just figure, hey, I'm saved by grace. I go to church.

I pay my tithes. In some cases, they go to the altar every Sunday, and churches have that. But they're not really serious about following Jesus, and the early church was a fellowship of people who were serious about following Jesus, and he was their king.

It became something. I'm not saying that Cyprian didn't take Jesus seriously. I'm just saying that his influence, perhaps he didn't know where it would lead, but it led into transforming Christianity into a religion.

Today, the world looks at Christianity as one of the world's great religions. Well, I guess if we're talking about institutional church behavior, that is a religion. But most of what they call religion is not what Jesus instituted or that the apostles necessarily practiced.

At least you can't find scriptural support for it, and it sounds like Jesus taught things that would be hard to follow if you're turning your lifestyle into a religious lifestyle rather than a real relationship with God. It's not just one of the religions, but that's what it has become. Now, Augustine, and we're going to take it much further than him, Augustine is the most influential church figure in history.

He's the father of Roman Catholicism. At least that's how church historians refer to him.

He's also the father of the Reformation.

No one ever had as much influence on the church as Augustine, not even Paul or Peter, because there's more people who believe what Augustine taught than who believe what Paul or Peter taught. For example, all the Reformed churches are Calvinistic. Jesus and Paul didn't teach Calvinism, but Augustine did.

He invented it. Therefore, a lot of the things Constantine taught became part of the Catholic Church. So a huge number of Christian people follow Augustine at the expense of really believing what Paul and Peter said on certain subjects.

Augustine specifically taught that the church is not a fellowship of spiritually regenerative people so much as it is an organization. This is like the final step in making the church an institutionalized entity. He also taught that tradition has authority.

Now you might know, I don't know how much you've studied Roman Catholicism, but the Roman Catholic Church believes that church tradition has the same authority as Scripture. That's partly because the bishops of the Roman Church have the same authority as apostles. They are, after all, the apostles' successors.

Therefore, the argument is that the traditions that have been developed and approved by the College of Bishops and the Pope are as true and as binding on Christian conscience as the Bible is. So, for example, all the teachings about Mary that are not found in the Bible, they are traditions of the Catholic Church and they're considered to be just as trustworthy as if they were in the Bible. The Catholic Church believes the Bible and tradition are equally authoritative.

Now, the Protestant Reformation rejected that idea and said, no, only the Scripture. That's where we get the idea of sola scriptura, only the Scripture has that kind of authority. The traditions of the church do not.

However, the Reformation still held on to some traditions that are not in the Bible. There's still plenty of Catholic practice in Lutheranism and in Presbyterianism and some of these churches that broke away. They say sola scriptura, but, for example, they still baptize infants.

That's a Catholic practice. It's not a biblical practice. You don't have any case in the Bible of any infants being ever baptized or that it was ever taught that they should be baptized.

But many of the Reformed churches still practice it. So you can see that although the Reformation tried to move away from some of these accretions of tradition that were brought in gradually in the first four centuries of the church, and then more were added. Once you have the Roman Catholic Church, the gate's wide open for any kind of doctrine to come in as long as the bishops can be persuaded to agree to it.

So you get purgatory and you've got the Marian doctrines and you've got, well, they already had the Eucharist idea of transubstantiation. But these are things that are not in the Bible, and they are things that came to define Christianity. Now, again, none of us here are probably in the Roman Catholic Church, but we are in churches, most of us, that have roots.

I mean, I don't know of any institutional church, Protestant or otherwise, that didn't have its roots in the Roman Catholic Church. Some of them are a few generations removed, because the Protestant churches were the Lutheran and the Reformed, the Calvinist, that is the Presbyterian, and so forth, and eventually the Wesleyan churches. But then eventually other churches broke off of them, Anabaptist churches and congregational churches and Baptists and so forth, and more denominations off them.

But all of them were really kind of, if you go back in the ancestry of every denomination, they came out of a church that came out of a church that came out of a church that came out of a Catholic church, if they're in the West. The Eastern Church is a different thing, but most of us are not from the East, and so it's not as relevant to our personal church history. Not that the Eastern Church wasn't as important as the Western Church, but most of us simply don't have a background that traces to the Eastern Church, so we've got to limit ourselves to what's relevant to us.

So how do we get back to something more of a New Testament kind of understanding of church and practice of church? Well, there have been many attempts to do so. Even during the time before the Reformation, there were groups that saw the errors that had crept into Roman Catholicism and broke away, but they didn't succeed for long because they were hunted down and killed by the Catholic Church. The Jesuits started the Inquisition, especially to hunt down Waldensians and Albigensians, which were a couple of groups that broke off and didn't believe the Catholic Church was correct.

Albigensians were actually kind of heretical, but Waldensians, probably we would share most of their doctrines. It's interesting that before the Reformation, there were groups that would be much more like us than even the Reformers were. The Waldensians had very Protestant and even Anabaptist type views, I think, on many things.

There were the Paulicians, and there were some other groups like that that broke off, or they were dissidents from the Catholic Church, and they held their secret meetings, and they were persecuted, and if caught, they were killed or tortured until they would recant. This would include the followers of Tyndale and Wycliffe and Huss as much as 100 years before Luther's time. But Tyndale and Huss were killed when Wycliffe was not caught, so he died a natural death, but these are guys the Catholic Church hated and tried to get rid of.

And one way or another, they did manage to get rid of them, but then when Luther came along, something had changed. A hundred years earlier, John Huss, who had been

burned at the stake by the Catholic Church, had taught most of the same things that Luther was standing for. In fact, Luther was regarded to be guilty, when he was on trial, of being a Hussite, a follower of Huss.

And the reason that Luther didn't get burned at the stake is not because they didn't want to burn him at the stake, but because between the time of Huss and the time of Luther, the printing press had been invented. And Luther had the advantage of being able to hide out and print Bibles, print tracts, and print his theology, and distribute all over Europe while the Catholic Church was trying to hunt him down. And so by the time he came out in the open again, there was so much sympathy for his views, especially in Germany and some other parts of Europe, that he could walk around freely, and the Catholics wouldn't touch him because he was too popular.

And that's why the Reformation succeeded to perpetuate itself up to even until our own time, whereas earlier groups like Huss and Tyndale and Wycliffe were unable to do that. They didn't have a printing press. So then the Reformation was an attempt also to go back more to a New Testament model of church.

But again, everybody has their blind spots. We all have blind spots. We all see things the way we were taught to see them, and it's a little hard to break free.

Some people make a harder effort to do so and manage to go further. But Luther and Calvin, they saw some very important things and restored to the church, at least the churches that followed them, some things that the Catholic Church had obscured for centuries. And so they improved things, but they had their blind spots too.

Like I said, they still baptized infants. Luther had a doctrine of the Eucharist very similar to the Catholic. The Catholic doctrine was that the bread becomes the actual body of Christ, and the wine becomes the actual blood of Christ.

That's the Eucharistic transubstantiation doctrine of the Catholic Church. Luther saw it almost the same way. He didn't say that these elements turn into the body and blood of Jesus, but he said the body of Jesus, the real body and presence of Jesus, is above, below, beside, and through the bread, and that the real blood of Jesus was above, below, beside, and through the wine.

The wine didn't turn into something different, but you were still literally taking the real body and blood of Jesus when you took the Eucharist. Now, a reformer contemporary with Luther, his name was Zwingli in Switzerland, he agreed with Luther on almost everything except that. Zwingli believed that taking the bread and the wine was simply a memorial of the death of Jesus, not something magical, not that it conveyed some kind of miraculous consumption of the real body and blood of Jesus, but that it was just symbolic of that.

Luther couldn't work with Zwingli over that because it was too big a difference for them. Now, of course, many Protestants, including myself, would take Zwingli's view on that issue, but you can see that even those that were trying to throw off the Roman Catholic yoke were still retaining much of that view. No doubt many of us still retain many views that have become long-term traditions in the Church, which would be helpful for us to re-look at.

For example, what is the Church? From Augustine's time on, the Church was seen as an organization with a hierarchical bishop and popes and priests and so forth, clergy. Now, Jesus definitely established leaders in his Church, the Apostles namely, and the Apostles would appoint elders in every Church, but the elders were not political leaders. I'm not even sure we'd call them religious leaders.

They were older brothers in the family who were there to watch out for the safety of the younger brothers. That's what they're told to do, to look out for wolves, to kind of shepherd them along like an older brother might with a younger brother. That's really the assignment they had.

Eventually, of course, they became political leaders in the Church, and that's where, frankly, I think things began to change. But the Church is not really an organization. It is organized, but that's a different thing than an organization.

Basically, every time we sit at the table and someone serves us food, it's an organized table, it's an organized meal. Someone cooked each of the foods deliberately and served them up, and arranges them on the table and stuff. That's organized, but it's not an organization.

Dinner together is not an organization. An organization is like an institution, and this is an important thing that I think changed in the Church when at least probably as soon as they started talking about apostolic succession, is that there's no evidence that the early churches had a certain number of elders who, when they died, they left a vacancy of office, so they had to stick another one in there. That's how institutions are.

Institutions have offices that outlive the officers, like a kingdom does. The king dies, someone has to replace him. Now, in the Judges, which when Israel actually was run as a government under God directly and the way that God wanted it before, they rebelled and wanted a king, a judge would be raised up by God, a spiritual man.

The Spirit of God would come upon Gideon or upon Ehud, and he would minister in the need, in the emergency, but when he died, there was no office to fill. There wasn't a judge after that until the next time there was a crisis, and God would raise him up. And the one he'd raise up wouldn't be related to the previous one.

There was not like an office that was perpetually there, and you had to fill it with people,

whether they're good people or not. And that's the problem you have when you have an institutionalized structure, that you have offices, and you have to fill the offices. And, you know, hopefully almost every denomination started with spiritual leaders.

But as generations go by, well, the leadership offices get vacated when people die, and then they just say, well, someone's got to be in that, and a lot of times they don't have spiritual people to put in those offices. A lot of times they just fill the offices because they are there. That's how it is with our government, isn't it? I mean, we have a certain number of senators, a certain number of representatives, we have a certain number of Supreme Court justices, we have a presidency.

All of these are offices that as soon as they're vacated, they need to be filled. And that's just the way institutions have to be. Governments have to be that way pretty much.

But what it means is you might have had a great Supreme Court in a certain generation, but because there's always got to be the nine, and you can't always find a great replacement for the one that went out, you end up having sometimes a deterioration. That's what happened to Israel when they wanted a king. They got a king, now you have a hereditary thing.

David was a good king. Solomon, kind of good. Solomon's son, a total jerk.

And you get down a few generations later and the office is held by people who are worshipping Baal and Molech and offering their children to demons. Why? Because someone has to sit there. Someone's got to be there.

And so the church became like that. The leaders of the churches became officers rather than just older brothers and servants. And that's something that I think would be very hard to change in institutional churches, honestly.

I just don't really know how you'd change that there. But I suppose it could if leaders were very committed to doing so. The main thing, though, is that the church became a different kind of a thing than it was before.

It was a family with organic relationships, not hierarchical institutionalized relationships. So, you know, when Jesus said, you know, don't let anyone call you rabbi, don't let anyone call you teacher, don't let anyone call you master or whatever. He said, you only got one master, you only got one teacher, that's your Lord.

But he says, you are all brothers. He's talking to the apostles here and as the leaders of the church, don't let anyone call you master. You and they are brothers.

This is not a hierarchical institution. This is a family here. And of course, older brothers have much to offer to younger siblings.

And it's a natural thing. Now, Paul and Barnabas and others, Titus, under Paul's instruction, would appoint elders in churches. And we had just assumed appointing elders means you're appointing someone to be the boss.

Well, why would we assume that? That's because we've really probably never known any other kind of church structure. But in the early church, if somebody wanted to have the preeminence over others, he was considered to be on the wrong path. And frankly, if you didn't have people who qualified as elders, it's not like you had to have a certain number of elders anyway.

So you put some people who aren't qualified in. But frankly, most churches have that kind of a problem. They're set up as corporations.

Even their corporation papers probably suggest that they have to have a CEO type person, senior pastor. And then they have to have like board of directors type people. And they might be maybe an eldership.

And they function like the eldership and CEO, the board of directors, the CEO of any other kind of corporation because they are a corporation. And as a corporation, to get your paperwork and stuff to be a corporation, you have to have that kind of stuff. And that means, of course, that if you want to have five elders in a church, well, you've got to have five men who qualify.

But what if you lose a couple of them because they move out of town or they die? And you don't have two guys who really are qualified under Paul's qualifications for eldership. Well, you've got to find the closest thing you've got and stick them in there because there's an office to fill. And because of that, you have the church having leaders, as history went on beyond the apostles time, having leaders that were very much unqualified by Paul's standards because there was this succession you had to fill.

I was in a church in Idaho once for a while that was very non-institutionalized. They didn't have a name. They didn't have a 501C3.

They didn't have a pastor or even elders. They didn't have a statement of faith. It was just a bunch of homeschooling families that decided to start fellowshiping together in a home.

And then they got too big for the home, so they rented this little chapel. But no one was the official leader, and they didn't even give the group a name. But they functioned very well as a family.

And then one guy came to the church, and he was a leader of a home group, and they kind of joined with our group. And he called me one day, and he said, Steve, I'm really concerned about our church because we don't have elders. Now, I personally believe in eldership.

The Bible talks about eldership. But I said, well, but are we missing anything? I mean, we don't have elders, not recognized elders, but there are certainly older brothers in the church. Is there any function of the church that's going unmet? He said, no.

But he says, what if a wolf would come in here? I think we need to have some recognized elders to kind of protect the flock against wolves that may come in. I said, well, consider this. We've got mature brothers in the church that would no doubt confront and deal with heretics and wolves that would come in the church.

But if you have appointed elders, then you have an office that has to be filled, and it's something even a wolf could aspire to obtain. And this happened in the early church. Eventually, the shepherds were the wolves.

Eventually, the bishops of Rome were not even converted people. They were people who were fathering children out of wedlock. They were extorting money out of people.

I mean, they were just wicked men who wanted power. And because the church had offices that were considered to be power positions, an unscrupulous person could aspire to get that office. And if he played his cards right, he could get one.

And then you've got the church as being governed by unscrupulous wolves. Now, if you don't have the offices, if you just have the church is guided by the mature Christians in the church, you've got protection against wolves. I don't think any wolf could come into like our home fellowship and get very far with our people.

Because there's some older Christian brothers there who would see to it. They don't hold any office. I don't hold any title in my home church, but, you know, I teach most of the time.

But that's kind of a teacher. I'm not a boss. I'm not a leader.

But I guess what I'm saying is once you have the structure, an institutional corporate kind of structure, then it's easy for the wrong kind of people to take over that structure. If you have really a family, let's just say there was a big family, real family, you know, a mom and dad and 12 kids. And these kids, you know, they grow up and they're dutiful children.

They follow the ways of their parents and so forth. If a visitor came to the home or a foster child into the home and started disrupting things, I think the children, if they're dutiful children, would express their disapproval. They would recognize it.

And if they, in a family like that, they might not be able to get rid of the kid, although the parents could. They would probably distance themselves, at least from the behavior of that person. The church is supposed to be made up of real Christians.

It's another way the church changed, by the way. Once the whole Roman Empire became Christian, then everyone who was born in the Roman Empire was a Christian member of the church. They were baptized and they're part of the church.

So that the church, instead of being a fellowship of true followers of Christ, became simply a generic big umbrella for everyone who wasn't rebelling against their upbringing, was sitting in the church. Fortunately for them, I guess, the church didn't require much of them, but they'd genuflect a few times and pay their tithes and take the wine. But really, it wasn't a fellowship of believers anymore.

And Luther's movement wasn't either. Luther, because of supporting infant baptism, when Luther succeeded in breaking free from the Catholic church, he just started a Lutheran church. And there were Lutheran countries and Catholic countries.

And if you're born in one country, you're in that church, you're in a different country, you're in a different church, but you're still born into the church. So it's still not a fellowship of believers. It was the Anabaptists who first suggested that the church is supposed to, I mean, after the Reformation, first they suggested that the church is a fellowship of believers.

And you're not baptized into it as an infant, you have to actually become a follower of Jesus first. And they were, of course, recovering in that respect something of the idea of the true church. Now I think, frankly, I believe the Anabaptists had their own traditions sometimes that they followed, but they were trying to be radically following the Bible.

The problem is, even you get three people who are all interested in radically following the Bible, they're still going to have some differences of opinion about some things, because no one understands the Bible perfectly. But the idea here is that the idea of the church being an institution with secular type offices, except they're religious. And everything about the church being a secular corporation, except everyone filling the offices is supposed to be a Christian person, a spiritual person.

And the persons who are paying for it are supposed to be Christian people. So it's like a Christian corporation, but it's still a corporation. And this also involved the church becoming sort of partners with the government.

That happened, obviously, rather hard to avoid, actually, after Constantine's conversion, since he was the government, he was the emperor. And now he was a member of the church, and a whole lot more of the pagan Romans decided they better join the church too, because they could see what side of the bread the butter's on, the emperor's a Christian. And he'll like us better if we're Christians too.

And so you get all these people coming into the church, but all the government officials are in the church too. And so, instead of persecuting the church, as the Roman

government had done for a couple centuries before that, they were now in the church. And so there began to be this sense of a mixture of the church and the state.

How do you differentiate? If the emperor is the head of the state, he's also in the church. Then, of course, Constantine began to give privileges to bishops in the church, and privileges to church buildings, and things like that. And, of course, our government still does that, in a way.

I mean, churches, if they're corporations, if they're 501c3 corporations, the government still gives them favorable tax treatment, and so forth. Now, I know some people who've said that Christians shouldn't have 501c3 corporations, because they're then beholden to the government. And there is a sense in which you are, but, like, I have a 501c3.

I'm not a church. I haven't started a church, but my radio program's 501c3. And people say, oh, you shouldn't have that, because you're beholden to the government.

I've never had a government official come to me and tell me what I can do and can't do. If they did, I'd tell them where they could shove that 501c3. I wouldn't need it.

But, I mean, it's helpful, as long as they're not interfering. Now, churches are beginning just now to feel the pinch of being beholden to the government. And they may feel it more in the near future, because of this mixture.

The government thinks they can tell churches when they can meet and when they cannot. How many people can be in the church now, I mean, and whether they have to wear masks, or whether they can sing or not. The government has no legitimate say over those kinds of things.

The church is not a government agency. It's subject to the king, Jesus. And, therefore, it's a separate entity than the governments of the world.

But that's not all that clear when the government is still giving you tax exemption, things like that. They can threaten to take it away if you don't hire a gay youth pastor or something like that. When you've got the church joined in some measure with the state, then we have not yet seen all the ways the state may interfere and corrupt the church.

And many churches, thank God, are led by people of conscience who will not go there. I mean, they will give up the 501c3 before they would allow what they recognize to be sin to be legislated into the church by the government. But lots of churches, they wouldn't give up the 501c3 for anything.

And you're going to see an awful lot of churches compromise in this area. But think about it. If there never had been, let's say, if the position of a clergyman in the Catholic church or in reformed churches or in modern churches, if the position was not recognized as a job, a paid career, then the government couldn't tell you who you have

to hire if he's not hiring anyone.

See, that's one thing. The ministries I've been in, I've been very concerned about that. I ran a school for 16 years.

I've had the radio show for 23 years, both of which were 501c3s. But we didn't hire anyone. Everyone was a volunteer.

And, you know, if a transgender person came up and said, you've got a position open you're hiring for, and you have to hire me, and if you don't hire me because I'm transgender, I'll take you to court and take everything from you. And that has happened to certain Christian companies. I don't know about churches yet.

I mean, we'd simply say, we don't have any jobs open for anybody. We don't have any jobs. We don't have any employees.

We're just a family here. Everyone does what they do for free. And, you know, there's not many people who are going to want to get a job that doesn't pay anything or want to sue you over not hiring them for a free job.

But the church in the early days would never have been in a situation where Pontius Pilate or Herod would say, you've got to have an equal number of, you know, prostitutes, you know, in your church office working, you know, the typewriters, whatever, as you have whatever straight people or moral people. I mean, the government didn't have anything to say about the church because the church was not part of the government, was not looking for the approval of the government. But that did change.

That did change after Constantine's time, and the church has not entirely broken free from that yet. As I say, that'll compromise a lot of churches. There are other churches that will not compromise.

They'll give up that government benefit before they will compromise, thank God. Think of what John MacArthur, of course, has been doing. He's not letting the state tell him whether he can meet or not.

I don't know if they'll yank his 50123 or even throw him in jail, but he's not going to budge. And he shouldn't. Mennonites are not budging either.

You're hiding in the woods, like the ungrounded church, yeah. Well, that's what the church in the Soviet Union did, too, according to Richard Wurmbrandt. They were not allowed to meet ever, and so they went out in the woods and places where they might get caught, but probably wouldn't.

And that's what we're probably going to end up having to do. You know, the largest church in the world, I don't know if it still is, but I think it still is, but it certainly was for a

long time, this Assembly of God church in Seoul, Korea, under Paul Young-hee Cho. And they live under the threat of North Korea.

Seoul is only a stone's throw away from North Korea and very vulnerable to any invasion or whatever. There's tunnels under the demilitarized zone. They're always finding them, just like we're finding them from Mexico into California.

They're always finding these tunnels where the North Koreans break in to South Korea. But Cho, I went to his church once, and I also followed his ministry somewhat. They emphasized that their church had to be prepared for maybe being taken over by the communists, at least their country being taken over by the communists.

And so they were very strong in emphasizing small groups to be independent of the church. If they had to go underground, they'd already be in groups that were in homes and places where the government might not know about. I don't know that the church has to be paranoid, but I'm not sure they were paranoid.

I think that was quite reasonable on their part, although they haven't been taken over yet by North Korea. And we shouldn't be paranoid either, although we know that there are some trends in this country that could portend our faith being illegal, or at least us practicing it faithfully. And we need to be aware that the institutional church is a big target.

Small fellowships, family gatherings of Christians of multiple families and so forth, get together to worship and to eat and pray and sing and maybe study the Bible together. These are much more hidden targets. And the churches usually in communist countries survive by having these smaller groups.

They're non-institutional groups. They don't get 501c3s and so forth. Now, I guess what I'm saying is, why not have a 501c3 if you can without the government interfering? After all, that way you have tax exemption and nothing wrong with a tax exemption.

I'd like that more though. But some churches, because of the wedded with the government, are not going to have the backbone, probably. Some don't already, to really stand up to Christ when the government says, well, you do that and we're going to yank your corporation.

But the church isn't a corporation. I mean, churches usually are, but the Church of Jesus Christ is not. The word church in the Bible is used three different ways, and we need to be aware of it.

In Ephesians, for example, the word church always refers to the global phenomenon of the body of Christ, the temple, the family of God worldwide. You never find Paul addressing or speaking of a local church in Ephesians. And that's the first sense in which we need to understand the church, that Christ has a body made up of every disciple the

world over.

They don't all meet together with each other. They don't even know each other. They're too far spread out.

But they are known by God, and they are like leaven in a lump, as it were, in society. In every country where Christians are, they are an influence for God, evangelizing and trying to make disciples. That's the global church.

We're all part of it. As soon as you become a believer, you're part of it. But we'll never know everyone in it until we go to heaven.

And we're all together there. But then there's the local churches, the church in Philippi, the church in Thessalonica, the church in Laodicea, the church in Ephesus, and so forth. And Laodicea, Thyatira, and Pergamon, and all those, Sardis, and Smyrna.

These are - this just refers to all the Christians in a town. The church in such and such a town is made up of all the Christians in that town. It's based on the concept of the global body of Christ.

It's just the local sampling of believers in Jesus, the local sampling of the global body that happened to live in a certain area. Now, in the Bible, all of these Christians in one town were one church. They were all to be united.

They were all to be cooperative. They might not all meet in one building if there are too many of them. And therefore, there might be several smaller congregations.

Those are called churches, too. There's the church in Priscilla and Aquila's home. There's the church in Philemon's home.

Now, these were probably not all the Christians in their town, but they were a gathering of the local church, where there were probably other gatherings of the same local church in the same town just for logistics. But they were all one church in that town. Unlike today, in those days, if you were a Christian, you were committed to the body of Christ in that town.

And, you know, churches of different denominations today often do attempt to have some kind of crossover fellowship with other churches. Usually, they don't have joint meetings with them. Some might, but they usually don't.

But in most towns, there's a ministerial association where the pastors of different groups get together once a month to talk and pretend like they're close friends. I know that they're pretending because I've been to some of them, and they talk like they're good friends, but they never contact each other during the week or during the month between. I mean, I'm sure they like each other.

I'm not denying that. But they're also in competition with each other. They're not really partners.

There's a sense in which they see themselves as partners because, of course, they're all trying to keep Christianity alive in that town. But their brand is what they're committed to. And you can tell because if one of the churches in the same town loses their pastor, let's say he dies or retires and moves away.

I don't understand the concept of the pastor retiring, but I can see him moving away or dying. They don't go to the church at the next corner and say, Do you have anyone there who could fill in our pulpit until we, you know, I mean, we're after part of the same church in this town. They call headquarters of their denomination on the other side of the country.

You know, I don't know where all the headquarters are for all the denominations. But when I was in Calvary Chapel, I guess Coach Mason was headquartered when Chuck was there, although that's not still quite the same way. But Assemblies of God, for example, their headquarters in Springfield, Missouri.

And if an Assembly of God church in Florida or in Oregon or in California or New York, if they lose a pastor, they'll probably contact Springfield, Missouri and say, Can you send us another Assembly of God pastor? And yet they're supposed to be part of the body of Christ in the town. But they're more committed to other churches of their denomination translocally than they are to the local Christians a block away. And this is something that has become, to my mind, it's a very bad development.

The church globally is one church. That sampling of the global churches in a town is one church, too. There are different congregations and they can be called churches in a sense, but they are all part of the one church in their town.

And until they start acting like it, I think we won't have quite the same kind of concept of church that they had in the days of the Apostles and need to have. Well, one thing that we really have to do, and one thing I need to do is quit, because it's time to quit. But we need to practice unity.

And like Richard Wurmbbrandt said, in the underground church in Romania, there were no Lutherans or Baptists or Catholics or Pentecostals, which are the denominations that were most current in their country. In the underground church in the woods, there were no denominations. All those denominations were represented there, but they didn't think of each other in terms of that way.

They saw themselves as part of the persecuted body of Christ, and that was a very positive development that came from persecution. I would like to see that develop without the persecution. I'm not sure why God would have to send persecution to get us

to do what he's told us to do all along, what the church was supposed to do.

Paul said in Ephesians 4, too, endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. We've all got one Father, one Lord, one body, one faith, one hope, one baptism. We might have some other opinions that we don't share, but we have all those things, and those are the things that define us.

So why wouldn't we be unified? We need to learn to practice unity. To do that requires that we don't do something that the church has done for the past 2,000 years since probably, well, I don't know when it began. It wasn't in the apostles' day, but later.

That is that we don't get threatened by people having a different opinion about something. Every denomination started when someone in a previous denomination who saw things almost the same way as that denomination began to see something differently. And because either they despised the people that didn't agree with them, or the church itself that they were differing from saw them as threat, they had to separate and take with them the people that they agreed with.

And that started a new denomination. The interesting thing is there was probably never any really big issues that they disagreed with their previous churches about. Just some small thing, some minor thing, something that Christians could easily disagree with and still be in fellowship together.

But instead, it's the ego and the fear of people disagreeing. You know, people, they say, well, you don't agree with us, go somewhere else. My wife and I were attending a church in Temecula where they had a couple of beliefs that were different than ours.

We weren't making a fuss over it, we didn't even bring them up. But I am a public figure and I have a website and so forth, and some of the church members saw that I hold some different views than others in the church. I was not intending to ever mention them.

Not that I'm ashamed of them, I just didn't want to make trouble because I can prove my mind to be true and they couldn't prove theirs to be true. So I didn't want to be troublesome. But the thing is, some people actually came up to my wife and said, why don't you guys go to the church down the street that holds the same view as you do? I thought, isn't that just the way so many Christians think? We want to have a hermetically sealed group of people here that are all uniform.

And we can accept the fact that some Christians might not see our way, but they better not be here with us. They should go and find some people who agree with them. That way none of us ever have to grow.

None of us ever have to be confronted with possible differences of opinion that might prove to be instructive to us. We can just hunker down and never have to change or

think or be challenged because everyone who doesn't agree with us has got to go somewhere else. That's why there was a reformation.

Luther didn't want to start the Lutheran church. He wanted to be a Catholic. He wanted to reform the Catholic church.

They didn't want to be reformed. Okay, what do you do? They're button heads. Well, one thing they could do is say, well, we certainly aren't seeing it your way, Mr. Luther.

We've seen it this other way a long time and we're just not convinced that you're right. On the other hand, we can see you're sincere and that you're a follower of Jesus and that you love the word of God. So we can live with you.

I mean, we'll just work on this. Let's keep dialoguing on this. Maybe you'll come over to our side.

Maybe we'll see it more your way later. Who knows? We're not institutionalizing ourselves so we have to have all these doctrines fixed that never can change by more light that comes to us. And yet, disunity exists because people are carnal.

That's what Paul said to the Corinthians. As long as you're saying, I'm of Paul, I'm of Apollos, I'm of Cephas, are you not carnal? He said, are you not babes? It's immaturity. Christians are supposed to love.

That's what they're known for. They're not told to agree about everything, but they are told to love each other. By the way, let me just say this.

We are told to agree. And I'll just close with this focus on this particular passage in 1 Corinthians 1. I recognize what time it is. In 1 Corinthians 1, this is a church, probably the first of the churches of the apostles, that began to have some serious problems with division over favorite teachers.

And in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 10, Paul says, Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. Now, see, that sounds like we're supposed to agree with each other. How are we going to obey that today? You've got Baptists, Pentecostals, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, you've got Catholics, you've got Episcopal, you've got Eastern Orthodox.

All people who love Jesus, who are seeking to follow God, following their convictions, different than ours. How can we all say the same thing? How can we all be perfectly joined together in one mind and one judgment? I mean, I know how we could. Everyone could agree with me.

But the problem is, the people I would suggest that to say, well, why don't you instead agree with us? And you get 10 different opinions, and everyone says, we're willing to be united and all agree, as long as you come over to our convictions and agree with us. How are you going to decide who everyone's going to agree with? Well, I think the very effort is a mistaken of what Paul's saying here, because you have to read further. And it'll explain what he's saying.

He says, for it has come to my attention concerning you, brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, I'm of Paul, or I'm of Apollos, or I'm of Cephas, or I'm of Christ. Now, that's where they're not all saying the same thing.

He says, you all need to say the same thing. Well, what? We certainly, sure, certainly have some of you saying, I'm of Paul, or others saying, I'm of Apollos, or I'm of Christ. They're not saying the same thing.

But they should all say, I'm of Christ. Now, most pastors have heard comment on this usually say, those who are saying, I'm of Christ, they were just as immature and divisive as the rest. They just were more sanctimonious and thought, you guys are heretical denominationalists, but we are of Christ, as if that was a bad thing.

Now, Paul was saying, I am of Christ, is the right thing to say, and you can tell by his very next verse. He says, now this I say, now he says, verse 13, is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? In other words, he doesn't so much rebuke those who are saying, I'm of Apollos, or I'm of Cephas, but those who are saying, I'm of Paul. He felt like he was in a position to criticize them saying, listen, was Paul crucified for you? No, well, who was? Well, Christ.

Then you're of Christ, not of Paul. Were you baptized in the name of Paul? Of course not. Well, whose name were you baptized in? Christ.

Then you're of Christ, not of Paul. You should all say the same thing. You were all baptized into Christ.

You were all died for by Christ. You all should say, I am of Christ, because you are. You're not of Paul, Apollos, or Cephas.

You're all of Christ. You need to say the same thing. All of you need to say the same thing, not four different things.

And the one thing you should all say is, I am of Christ. Now, if that's really your identity, then you're not saying, I'm a Baptist, or I'm a Lutheran, I'm a Calvary Chapel, or I'm a Catholic, or anything like that. You're saying, I am of Christ.

And that means the people who have other labels on the can of the churches that they

go to, they're of Christ, too. And when you meet them, you realize you disagree with them on something. That's why you're in different denominations.

But you're all of Christ. And whoever Christ accepts, you'd better accept, unless you're better than Christ. If you can't accept someone, he thinks it's acceptable.

Remember when Jesus rebuked Peter, when Peter was kind of, you know, being conditioned to accept Gentiles? Jesus said, whom I have cleansed, or what I have cleansed, you do not call unclean. You don't call it common. And he was talking about, you Jewish Peter should not call Gentiles unclean, because they're going to be believers, too.

Now, in the Jewish mind, there's nothing more different than a Jew and a Gentile. Certainly, a Baptist and a Methodist, no different, are much closer than Jews and Gentiles were. But Jesus is saying, listen, you're prejudiced against these guys.

I've called them clean. Don't you call them unclean. And when we meet another Christian who differs from us, instead of being threatened by it, we should say, if this person loves the Lord, God has declared him clean.

How can I call him unclean? How can I not fellowship with someone that God fellowshiped with? Paul said to the Romans in Romans chapter 15, that we should accept one another as God and Christ has accepted us. Well, on what basis did God accept us? On the basis that we belong to Christ, certainly. Well, do they belong to Christ? They do.

So we have to accept them just like God accepted us. Instead of saying, I'm threatened by the fact that you disagree with me on some things, I'd say, hey, you have as much right to follow your conscience in Christ and seek the truth and be led by the Spirit. And maybe we're in a different place right now, but if we're led by the Spirit, we'll be led closer together.

But not if we separate and reestablish ourselves in our own thought patterns and don't ever allow anyone else to suggest that there's another way of seeing some things. This is not what Paul did. Paul said, let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind.

Unless someone's teaching a different Jesus or a different gospel or a different spirit, then a different view about whether you keep one day holy or not, that's tolerable. A different view about whether you can eat all things or not, that's a tolerable difference. And frankly, a difference of opinion about the mode of baptism, that's a tolerable difference of opinion.

Some of us would be sprinkled, some would pour, some would dip. I believe in immersion. But even the early church recognized a tolerable flexibility there.

In the Didache, which was an early church document from the late first century, they

said you can baptize in running water, or if there's no running water, then try to baptize in cold water. If there's no cold water, try warm water. And if there's not enough water, just pour water over the head and say, I baptize you.

That's obvious that if there's enough water, you're going to do something more than pour water over the head. Pouring water over the head is the concession that is made if there's not enough water to baptize you. So obviously the normal mode was immersion, but it's okay if you have to resort to another mode.

It's not like God's going to judge you on a technicality here. And a lot of times I think we judge others on a technicality. Some people think if you don't have the same view of the divine election as I have, then you're a heretic.

Well, who says? You? I mean, who's deciding who's a heretic? That used to be decided by big councils of bishops and things like that. Now every individual Christian feels like they or their pastor has a right to decide who's a heretic and who's not. Why don't we just ask not is somebody a heretic, which is something we're not really in the position to judge.

We're not competent in many cases. We can say they're wrong. That's different.

I can say a man's wrong without saying he's a heretic. But everybody's wrong. I'm wrong.

We're all wrong about stuff. So join the club if you're wrong. The real question is, are you following Jesus? If you're a follower of Jesus, among the 12, there was a tax collector who collaborated with the Roman government, and there was a zealot who ran guerrilla raids against the Roman forces.

And they're both in the same fellowship, the 12 apostles. They didn't agree, probably. They probably came around to agreeing, eventually.

But they had to get along before they agreed. And that's because they were following Jesus. If you're going to follow Jesus, you're going to have to follow along with everyone else who's following him.

We don't get to sort out the ones we like better in order to say, well, they can be part of the fellowship and this other patch cannot. Unity in the church is the main thing Jesus prayed for. He prayed in John 17 that his disciples might be one, even as he and the Father were one.

He said, so the world might know that you have sent me. In other words, the unity of the church is to be the biggest testimony. And that's what it was in the first church, in the early church.

Their unity, their love, they're laying down their lives for each other, even laying down

their finances for each other, whatever. Their unity was a testimony, and they had favor with all the people. And God added to the church daily, such as should be saved.

But today, if Jesus is still hoping that the church will convince the world that he is real and really sent from the Father by our unity, he's probably fairly disappointed at the moment. The church has got to stop seeing itself as so many different competing businesses competing for the same clientele and resenting people who are in the other competing businesses. The church is not a business.

The church is a family, and all people who follow Christ are in the family. And when we learn to be unified with the whole body, maybe we'll actually see what Jesus thought would happen, and the world would know that Jesus was sent by God.