

3. JESUS NEVER TAUGHT THAT THE CHURCH WAS AN INSTITUTION

When most people talk about the church, then it's usually in the context of *going to church on Sunday*. This is understood to mean entering the sanctuary of a church building to attend a worship service. It is also generally thought that a church is a particular kind of church organization or denomination such as the Catholic Church or the Methodist Church. These two understandings of the word *church* are the most common in the English language.

Nowhere do the scriptures mention either of these meanings when referring to an *ecclesia*. What people understand with the word *church* today has grown far apart from what Christ and his students understood when they spoke of the *ecclesia*. One can search all the scriptures and never find anything that resembles a modern or medieval church. In the scriptures there is no such thing as a building called a church, a governmentally approved, non-profit organization called a church, or a network of churches that have a distinctive name.

There is also no such thing as church life in the scriptures in the way that phrase is usually understood today. Church life can mean various things to various people but in general it usually includes a variety of the following: attendance at worship services on Sundays, trustee meetings for leaders, religious concerts, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School, youth group meetings, Bible studies, church camp, funerals, christenings, weddings, denominational conventions, and holiday celebrations.

It is difficult to imagine the students of Christ involved in any of the above. Even a Bible study would be strange for them, not because someone like Peter or Paul would have anything against studying the scriptures, but because it would be unimaginable for them to go about it in the way that is typical of most Bible studies: i.e. meet once a week for an hour, maybe two; sit around in comfortable chairs; exhibit little of what one might call the results of serious study; and then leave in time to catch the evening football game.

“Church life” in an institutional church is not only a problem because of what it entails, but also for what it does not include. The Christian scriptures have plenty to say about what “life in the *ecclesia*” is supposed to be, and for the most part it is completely lacking in most churches. The primary example of how believers interact

is in the context of *Jesus Christ interacting with his students*. This makes good sense, because according to the scriptures *following Christ* is the essence of what it means to be involved in the ecclesia.

The example of Jesus with his students is referenced on page after page of the scriptures, whereas church life as described above is not mentioned on a single page. This demonstrates the power of human traditions to not only add something to the scriptures but to completely cover up and ignore what *is* in the scriptures.

The life of Paul

Another example in the scriptures of how followers of Christ should work together and relate together is that of Paul with his students and his fellow workers. This example is also ignored in churches. Instead, the examples most likely to be followed in churches today go back to the traditions of medieval churches with their religious buildings, their hierarchal authorities, their liturgies, and their holy days.

The letters in the Christian scriptures often provide instructions concerning how believers should interact with one another. One of these letters is the first one Paul wrote to the ecclesia in Corinth. The big problem he wanted to solve with the letter concerned the many divisions that existed among the believers there. His instructions are very different from anything we usually associate with the goings on in a traditional church. It demonstrates once again how very far the institutionalized churches of Christianity have strayed from the ecclesia as Paul understood it in the first century. And it shows how much the behavior of “church goers” today differs from what the writers of scripture envisioned for the believers they were writing to.

Following are some of the more obvious differences between the ecclesia as described in the scriptures and a typical church today. First, a sample of principles in the scriptures:

1. Fathers should teach their own wives and children. Fathers are the main authorities among men in God’s chain of command.
2. Leaders in the ecclesia are to be men who have proven themselves in their own families. They are only qualified if they love their wives, and have believing children. They should also be humble and mature believers who know the scriptures and can teach them well.
3. Believers are not to love the world, which means they are not to live for prestige, possessions, or pleasure.

4. Believers should have the goal of being disciplined, sacrificial, focused students of the scriptures and of getting others to do the same.
5. Believers should follow the example of Jesus and his students, and of Paul and his students.
6. Jesus is the absolute leader of the ecclesia. All authority is his.
7. Believing women are supposed to be quiet when believers (the ecclesia) are together. They are supposed to learn the scriptures; the older ones are to teach the younger ones; they're not to complain; they're to be more concerned about their inner beauty than their outer person.
8. Believers should not make distinctions among themselves.
9. Believers should be generous, frugal, modest, not concerned with externals, not show-offs, not hypocritical, not demanding, not complaining, not childish.
10. The emphasis of believers should be on daily obedience to Christ and on encouraging one another to love and do good.
11. Believers are people who have accepted Christ exactly as he is, and who demonstrate their belief through a love for his words and a readiness to follow them.
12. Love is being obedient to Christ's commands and doing for others what Christ would do for them. Love speaks as Christ speaks and acts as Christ acts.

Now compare the above scriptural principles with the following typical practices in institutionalized churches today:

1. Programs for youth groups are often led by young men or women. Most fathers do not know the scriptures and do not study or teach them at home.
2. Most leaders are unqualified. The main qualification of leaders is the completion of a university degree and an ordination by a denomination or the board of a 501c3 non-profit organization.

3. Most members are encouraged to be involved in the things of the world in relation to possessions, prestige, and pleasure. Such things are portrayed as the blessing of God.
4. Teaching methods involve weekly Bible studies, sermons, Sunday schools, conferences, retreats, and educational institutes. The content is heavily institutional and traditional.
5. There is much involvement and expense in the celebrating of services such as funerals, weddings, Sunday worship, and various holy days (holidays).
6. Institutional churches are led by a variety of authoritative men who bear titles such as pope, archbishop, monseigneur, priest, bishop, elder, apostle, pastor, minister, superintendent, and many others. Some are even monarchs in certain countries.
7. Women are often leaders or speakers, and they sometimes lead or work closely with the husbands of other women.
8. Churches often make a significant effort to have impressive buildings, entertaining worship services, attractive social programs, and fun youth groups. Large sums are invested in sanctuaries, church buildings, and many “holy” accompaniments to these structures such as ornamental crosses, stained glass windows, statues, icons, paintings, and altar ornamentations.
9. Churches emphasize worship services, youth programs, social involvement (fellowship), and missions. It’s the worship service, however, that requires the lion’s share of time and money.
10. Belief is not primarily related to accepting and following Christ but at issue is usually assent to organizational creeds and perspectives which are then expected to be confirmed by regular church attendance.

These two lists could not be more different. The first has its source completely in the scriptures. The second is based on traditions of Christianity. The first reflects the life of Christ. The second mirrors the tenants of many religions. The first list, the scriptural one, is rejected and ignored by most of Christianity’s leaders. The second, the traditional one, is embraced by the same leaders.

The ecclesia in the scriptures

When people read passages in the scriptures in which believers are together and the word *church* is used, it is easy to superimpose present-day images of church meetings on these passages. People can be envisioned entering buildings with crosses on top, taking their seats in pews, and listening to leaders speaking from pulpits. The believers in the first century, however, did not think of the ecclesia as a building, nor did they think of it as a formal kind of meeting. Can you imagine Jesus saying to his students: *OK guys, that's it for today. Go home and chill out. Check back in tomorrow at nine am. It's Sunday and a lot of people will be coming to church.*

It's a ludicrous thought that Jesus or Peter or Paul would ever convene a church service. They were always serving God. There was never any thought that there were times when they were officially in session and times when they weren't. When the scriptures talk about "unbelievers entering your midst," it's easy to think that means only during a "church service." For Christ and his students, however, it meant anytime. They were always involved in the work of the Lord.

The believers in the scriptures are not sometimes open for business and sometimes not. They aren't seen going from one official meeting to another. They don't pack their life with Christ into particular places or particular times. They are always serving the Lord; always coming together to encourage one another to love and good deeds; always about the work of the Lord; always "in the ecclesia" whenever they are together with brothers and sisters of faith.

To understand the ecclesia, it's necessary to understand Jesus Christ and look to his example. He lived ecclesia; he demonstrated life in the ecclesia; he *is* the ecclesia. We can't look at our culture's churches and superimpose what they have become on our understanding of what Christ and his students meant when they referred to the ecclesia.

The ecclesia is not an institution

All countries have governmental regulations that determine the establishment of an institution. The regulating authority is derived from whomever has the political power, be it a king, a party, an elected body, or a tribal leader. Such authorities grant institutional status. This is one means by which rights and privileges are meted out to individuals and groups in many areas of life whether they be governmental, educational, economic, occupational, or whatever.

Institutionalization takes place the moment an organization, a company, or a society is officially recognized and confirmed by governmental decree. This process is always the backbone of institutionalization. Other institutional measures are attendant to this process. These include the power of appointment and accreditation, the establishment

of hierarchies of leadership, the use of certain executive powers, the bestowing of rights and privileges, the right to establish contractual relationships, the assumption of legal identities, the standardization of procedures, the founding of training centers and other related institutes, the right to have employees, and the exercise of disciplinary measures.

Institutionalization takes place on two levels: The first is determined by governmental decree, and the second is left to the self determination of the institution. These can be illustrated with the institution of Major League Baseball. MLB has to fulfill certain legal requirements of the United States government to stay in its good graces. That's the first level of institutionalization. MLB can also determine requirements of its own such as which teams can join, what rules should be observed during games, the dimensions of the playing fields, etc. These are examples of institutionalization at the second level.

Institutionalization is not a part of the essence of any activity. Baseball exists without the major leagues. Institutionalization takes an aspect of an activity and establishes governmental authority over it. It ensures in the case of our examples that no one can *legally* participate in the institution of Major League Baseball without the proper documents and without fulfilling official requirements. To attempt to do so would constitute a violation of the law.

These principles of institutionalization also lie at the basis of any institutional church. Even churches that like to think of themselves as independent are institutions as long as they are non-profit organizations, enjoy the legal identity of religious institutions, and have officers and directors. It doesn't matter if a church is one of the biggest institutions in the world such as the Catholic Church or just a single small group of people who have incorporated as a church under the laws of a state. Such a church is an institute and it is beholden to the powers that be to run affairs according to the dictates of the instituting authority.

It should be clear to anyone who reads the scriptures even superficially that the ecclesia of Christ cannot be defined or called into being through a process of institutionalization. The scriptures liken the ecclesia to the body of Christ in one context and to the family of God in another. It is not something that can be established by the recognition and empowerment of a governmental agency. It is the creation of the Kingdom of God and not of any earthly kingdom.

Institutions are a part of the world

Does the fact that the ecclesia is not an institution mean that institutions should always be avoided by individual believers? Not at all. Jesus Christ lived within the confines of many institutions. The most powerful was the Roman Empire which was one of the

most prolific law makers of its time. It was to fulfill one of the dictates of Rome that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem to be registered in a census. Jesus was born at this time. He was taken by his family to Egypt (another institution) to escape an edict by the local king who decreed that all the male children under the age of two around Bethlehem should be executed. Institutional authorities carried out this gruesome task.

Are institutions always evil? This cannot be claimed. Institutions often fulfill organizational needs and make much of life orderly, controlled, and safe. The common thread of all institutions is that they always determine lines of authority and grant them powers and jurisdiction. One cannot live in the world and avoid institutions, but neither are institutions the only means of regulating human behavior, nor are they necessarily the best.

People who work in institutions often chafe against the arbitrariness, inefficiency, and confinement of institutional controls. Often people would much prefer the freedom of a self-regulated system. Most realize, however, that self-regulation is seldom possible because of the unbridled nature of man. Without taskmasters in a hospital or a business or a school there is the probability that too many individuals would become irresponsible and neglectful. As most people have experienced, however, even institutionalization seldom puts an end to the inventive wastefulness of man.

The ecclesia of Christ

The most widespread relational network of man is not a worldly institution. It is the human family. It exists in thousands of different cultures and has managed to survive in spite of myriads of pressures placed upon it. The family continues to be the relational backbone of all cultures, and it is the family that most nearly parallels the ecclesia of Christ.

Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God was surprising because its institutional elements were as different as Jesus himself. Yes, there was an authority, a king even, but that king was a humble servant with no desire whatsoever for worldly power, prestige, or wealth. There was also an organizational blueprint, but it had nothing to do with hierarchies or institutional procedures: it was the example of a teacher with a small group of students, and the plan was that the students go and make more students.

In calling his body of believers the ecclesia, Jesus gave it the name of the most remarkable political institution of its day. It was the term for the ruling council of a Greek city state whose members were members by birthright and not by appointment. Its members were all considered equals which was an unusual circumstance for any political body in the first century.

Jesus ceded no human authority to his ecclesia. He kept all authority for himself. His students called the ecclesia Christ's own body and said he was the head of it. They also called it Jesus' own family and they said he was the first born into it.

The leadership in Jesus' ecclesia was unlike that of any earthly institution. Unlike worldly leaders, they were not to exercise authority or power. They were not supposed to lord it over others. Instead, the leaders in the ecclesia were to be the servants of all. Nor were the leaders to be elected officials. Instead, they were to be individuals who were qualified by their performance in their own families. In other words they were to be men who stood out by their faithfulness to their wives, by their performance in raising their own children, by their understanding of the teachings of Christ, and by their involvement in making others students of the scriptures.

The purpose of Christ's Kingdom also dictated against the ecclesia being an institution. It had no political manifesto for a changed and better world; it had no theocratic plan; no plan to unite nations; no blueprint for world domination; no master plan for a Christian empire. In short, the ecclesia of Christ was never intended to be a worldly institution. In fact, the moment that any human instrument attempts to subjugate the ecclesia to its jurisdiction, it results in a caricature in which buildings of stone replace human bodies, human authorities replace the Father and the Son, human traditions replace the scriptures, liturgies and ceremonies replace daily obedience, institutional membership replaces faith, and maintaining church membership replaces the principle of walking in the light as he is in the light. The Spirit of God and the family of God simply cannot be institutionalized.

Examples of practical life in which there is no institutionalization

Some would say that an understanding of the church without institutionalization is impractical. The fact is, however, that much of man's practical life is not institutionalized. Here are some examples:

1. *The functioning of families:* Though most societies make marriage a legal entity, all attempts to institutionalize the key relationships of father, mother, children, and all the other close relational ties have failed miserably. Nevertheless, the family remains the most powerful communal glue in the world.

2. *Circles of friends:* The key relationships are experience-based, voluntary, and trust-related. They are among the most familiar and trusted units in the world. These relationships commonly supercede all institutional lines. Many institutions only function well because of informal circles of friends within them.

3. *Informal lines of communication:* They often function apart from and in spite of institutional barriers. People relentlessly set up informal networks of communication

which are often completely invisible to institutions. Even prisoners of war in the most hostile of environments have managed to set up lines of communication.

4. *Informal support groups*: They spontaneously develop in all human situations: prisons, companies, schools, military units, homes, neighborhoods, markets, during emergency situations, and wherever people come together. They often outperform institutions in providing basic needs.

5. *Human language*: All of human communication is based on language. Though attempts have been made by governing bodies to institutionalize aspects of language, human beings have always used language, adapted language, and learned language at all ages, in all cultures, and at all times without institutional restraints.

It should be noted that the scriptures relate all of the above phenomena in one way or another to the ecclesia of Jesus Christ.

The ecclesia is governed by higher laws

The follower of Christ is by no means one who simply goes unfettered through the world thumbing his nose at all human authorities and institutions. The ecclesia actually has a higher standard than any earthly institution. It has a set of standards and a set of bylaws. They are the writings of the apostles of Christ. It has a CEO who is God the Father. It has a general manager who is God the Son. It has managers in charge of training and logistics who are called husbands and wives. It has assistants and servants who are the older fathers who managed their families well. It operates according to a law that supercedes all the laws of man: the law of love. It has a goal which is to make people students of Christ. This is the ecclesia of Christ, the members of the Kingdom of God on earth. It's the only perfect blend of heaven and earth, and of the spirit of man and the Spirit of God.

The quandary of human institutionalization

On a purely human level, institutional life and non-institutional life are constantly performing a kind of relational tug-of-war in the experience of people. It's a struggle that can be characterized as the tension often present between the formal and the informal, the regulated and the unregulated, the required and the volunteered, the structured and the spontaneous, the slave and the free. All nations and societies have produced their own mixes of law and freedom and each mix has its advantages and disadvantages.

Judaism also has examples of shades of institutionalization. Certain things about God's chosen people were not supposed to be institutionalized beyond what God had determined. They were matters that were not supposed to be regulated into well-

defined human behavior. Instead, they were to remain attitudinal issues of the heart. One concerned the position of the king of the Jews. This was one position God desired for Himself. He was supposed to be the ultimate leader of the Jews. They were to look to Him as their king. The time came, however, when the people were not satisfied being different from the nations around them. They began to demand a human king.

God was displeased with this demand but ultimately allowed it saying that they would suffer much because of their desire for an earthly king. God granted it as an object lesson for them. Ultimately the Jews did suffer much under their kings.

Another example of limited institutionalization is the command concerning the Sabbath. It was designated a time of rest and had a limited amount of specification. It was meant to be a blessing to the people. There was room in the instruction for people to demonstrate how much their heart was in it. The Jewish leaders, however, began to define in great detail exactly what it meant to “keep the Sabbath.” They institutionalized it into a monstrous list of do’s and don’t’s that became a great burden for the people. What they did was a perfect example of institutionalization run amok.

Jesus confronted a Judaism in the first century that had practically institutionalized itself into oblivion. Not only was the Sabbath a quagmire of restrictions, but the entire Jewish leadership, family life, understanding of the scriptures, and temple services had become so covered with human traditions that Christ no longer considered the typical Jews of that time to be descendants of Abraham. He went so far to say that Satan was their father.

The Jews had indiscriminately decided to define the Law of God in greater detail than did the authors of the scriptures. The result was that they “covered” the true law and elevated their own additions making them more important than the words of the Law of Moses. This is the effect of human tradition as it relates to the scriptures. It ultimately not only becomes added information but it becomes information preferred to the scriptures.

One of the big differences between the Law of the Jews and the message of Christ regards the issue of institutionalization. The contrast between them is made many times in the scriptures. (Romans, Matthew, Hebrews, Galatians, and Luke/Acts, just to mention the main ones.) The Christian scriptures claim that Christ’s message takes people completely out from under the demands of the Law of Moses.

In the Jewish Law there were priests, a temple, sacrifices, a holy land, a holy city, a holy people, the sign of circumcision, water baptisms, the Sabbath, feast days, altars, tribal determinations, prohibitions and penalties, and many instructions—some so detailed that they included building materials, colors, numbers, and times.

When Christ came, he did away with all of this. He replaced it with something that the scriptures say was far greater. He came with the message of the Kingdom of God. It was meant not just for the Jews but for all peoples. No longer did lambs need to be sacrificed; Christ, himself was the lamb of God who was sacrificed once and for all. There was no need for the Law of Moses because one greater than Moses had come: God's only Son. His words were characterized as the law of love. There was no need for a temple: Christ was building a temple not out of stone. Believers themselves were temples of the Spirit. There was no need for a high priest because Christ, himself, was the high priest and he made every believer a priest in the Kingdom of God. There was no need for a circumcision because there was now a circumcision of the heart through belief. There was no need for a holy place of any kind—no city, no temple, no land, no altar—because each believer was a citizen of heaven and belonged with Christ in the heavenlies.

In this great message of the Kingdom—also called in the scriptures the law of Christ, the good news of Christ, and the law of love—what did the writers mean when they spoke of the ecclesia? Was it supposed to be the institutionalized side of the message? Was it supposed to be everything the temple had been under the Law of Moses? Was it supposed to be a sanctuary with an altar? A place for sacrifices? A holy place where followers were supposed to meet on holy days? An institution made legitimate by human governments?

It is unthinkable that Christ ever meant any of this for his ecclesia of the Kingdom of God. The ecclesia was never supposed to be institutionalized into a Christian version of Jewish legal requirements. Paul wrote an entire letter to the Galatians to protest the attempts of Jewish believers who tried to “reinststate” Jewish practices into the message of Christ. He used hard words saying that it was a curse for anyone to do that.

There is nothing in the scriptures concerning believers that is less institutionalized than the ecclesia. In one place it is called Christ's own body; in another it's his family. One is born into the ecclesia by faith. No one enters the ecclesia by fulfilling membership requirements or going through a membership rite. Water baptism is certainly no institutional requirement of membership. The water baptism of the prophet John was a baptism of repentance for the Jews. Christ, however, baptizes by the Spirit. He baptizes not in water but in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It's Christ who places one into the ecclesia on the basis of a person's faith in him.

The language of institutionalization is missing in the scriptures concerning the ecclesia of Christ. There is no mention of a member ever having to “change membership” from one ecclesia to another. There is no mention of different sorts of ecclesias in a city. There is no mention of an ecclesia applying to a government for legitimization or for legal acceptance. There's no usage of institutional names. There are no examples of institutional statutes.

When a writer of scripture spoke of the ecclesia in a city he meant all the believers in the city. It is out of the question to think that any believer would be excluded for institutional reasons. There simply are no institutional reasons. The members of the ecclesia are brothers and sisters. They belong together as family. They cannot be divided by institutional definition.

Institutionalization is not necessary for direction and order

Does lack of institutionalization imply that the ecclesia of Christ is therefore doomed to be disorganized and leaderless? Not at all. Christ reserves headship of the ecclesia for himself, and this is not at all an impractical leadership. It means that he expects his followers to be serious students of his word, and he expects all family fathers to exercise their authority in the family by being heads of their homes who love their wives and teach their children. He also expects the mature, tested, and exemplary men and women in the ecclesia to be available servants who are concerned that young believers become serious students of Christ.

The “leaders” in Christ’s ecclesia have the task of living like Christ did, working daily with students, and challenging them to know Christ and follow him every day of their lives. They are not “institutional leaders” with titles and positions who spend their time doing all the things that concern institutional churches such as the running of programs, the construction and maintenance of buildings, the administration of employees, and the staging of weekly worship services in a sanctuary. Rather they live just as obscurely, just as devoted to a small group of students, just as sacrificially, just as disciplined, just as truthfully, and just as courageously in the world as Christ did. They take their instructions from his words and follow them daily.

Christ’s ecclesia is very naturally his family. The children want to grow up and be like him. Like any family it can never be an institution. Leaders cannot be arbitrarily elected. Positions are not there to be filled. Attendance at formal meetings does not define its purpose.

Church membership

Church membership is an intense and historically convoluted topic in the world of institutional churches. Some of the older generation can still remember when there were hard and fast boundaries between the various denominations. Not only was the Catholic-Protestant divide a major barrier, but even the differences among various Protestant denominations could lead to the problem of “split families.” Such difficulties have become less ominous in the tolerant modern world where it is no longer unusual for people to be church hoppers or church samplers who resist organizational commitments. Nevertheless, it is still quite common for institutional churches to be competitive in their quest for members and possessive of the members

they have. It continues to be a common practice for churches to teach that there is such a thing as local church membership, and it is often still required that members transfer their memberships when moving to another locality.

Such practices and perspectives about membership in the ecclesia cannot be observed in the scriptures. There are no instances in which memberships are transferred. In fact, there are no examples in which a church membership is granted to an individual by any sort of official documentation.

The scriptures simply do not address many of the issues that surround the traditional views of church membership. They do not condone factions in Christ's ecclesia; they do not treat the ecclesia as a public institution; they do not mention issues of changing or transferring memberships from one ecclesia to another; they do not refer to churches as being characterized by buildings or organizational structures; they do not refer to anyone facing the choice as to which church to join; nor do the scriptures record any church leader complaining about losing members to another church.

It does not take a great scholar in the writings of scripture to recognize that the institutional concerns of Christianity have strayed far from the reality of the ecclesia of Christ. It seems impossible according to the scriptures for Christ's ecclesia to be anything other than simply his ecclesia. There is no indication that an ecclesia can be given any kind of supplementary label apart from a simple geographic locator such as the ecclesia in Philippi or the ecclesia in Philemon's home. And there is no reason to think that these phrases mean anything more than "all the believers in Philippi" or "all the believers who frequent Philemon's home." It is out of the question to assume that the ecclesia Paul wrote to in Philippi is a particular local church with a defined membership as opposed to other ecclesias in Philippi.

Importance of qualifications

It is particularly important to note that those responsible for fulfilling certain tasks in the ecclesia of Christ are given these tasks because of their maturity and past track record in their own families, not because they have attended a certain school or been appointed by an organization. This is a crucial teaching of the scriptures that is ignored by practically all institutional churches.

Many titles have been given to institutional church leaders such as popes, cardinals, archbishops, pastors, monseigneurs, priests, trustees, and superintendents. Many other titles are worn by the leaders of monasteries, orders, mission groups, and parachurch organizations. They all contrast significantly with the three "leaders" that the scriptures mention—*presbuteros*, *episkopos*, *diakonos* (*older man*, *keep-an-eye-on-things person*, *servant*). They were never meant to be positions in a hierarchy of an institution and never foreseen as positions in an ecclesia by any of the authors of scripture.

Can the ecclesia exist without a hierarchical structure?

Though many have observed in institutional churches a great deal of contradiction with the teachings in the scriptures, they nonetheless often see no option to having a structured leadership. The problem is one of practicality for most people. It seems too wishy-washy to believe that the ecclesia can work if it is simply understood to exist without any outward forms to define it.

There is a sense in which this is true. For example, the function of serving or being a servant requires a form (a person) to do the serving, but it is not necessary that the person be further “formed” by being integrated into an organizational framework that determines who that person is to be, what school that person has to have attended, and of which institutionalized church that person needs to be a member.

It is a mistake to think that an institutionalized form for the ecclesia has to be assumed because there is no other alternative. And it is particularly a mistake when the alternative is overlooked, and when that alternative that is overlooked is actually spelled out in great detail in the scriptures. The scriptures do suggest a form for the ecclesia and for those who are supposed to be the leaders in the ecclesia, but it is nothing like those of business organizations such as General Motors or public institutions such as schools or religious organizations such as the Catholic Church.

The first very practical form that defines the ecclesia is the body of writings we call the Christian scriptures. They form a tight network of instructions for everyone in the ecclesia. Though written documents may not seem integral to organizational forms, a closer look will reveal that they are almost always the basis of human organizations. Charters, declarations, statutes, constitutions, mission statements, and many other written manuscripts define and authenticate many kinds of organizations. Without these statements, most organizations would be like ships without rudders.

The Christian scriptures are the concrete expression of the message of Christ in this world, and it’s in these scriptures that we observe two dynamic examples of human interaction that illustrate the functioning of the ecclesia of Christ. The first is the example of Jesus with his students. This provides a comprehensive demonstration of his goals, how he communicated with his students, and how he interacted with the people around him.

It is an indictment of traditional Christianity that it has made the ecclesia into an organization patterned after authoritative human institutions rather than let it be oriented around the example of Jesus with his students. It is this interaction of Jesus with those closest to him which is so richly documented in the scriptures. A huge slice of the total text of the Christian scriptures is based directly on the backdrop of Jesus with his students, and none of it bears any of the markings of institutionalized religion.

The second example of interaction is related to the first: It is the example of Jesus' first students with their own students. In particular, the life of the apostle Paul is constantly held up as an example for the people in the ecclesias to follow.

These two examples—the life of Christ and the life of Paul (and the other original students of Christ)—are constantly referred to by the writers of scripture to demonstrate the principles that are the foundation for the household of God, *which is the ecclesia*. It's important to remember that it is Christ's ecclesia; he's the one, who more than any other, lived the life that he wants his people to follow. His followers are supposed to be students who pay attention to his words. They are to treat one another like fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters, not like members of a club or an institution. They are to live and serve one another as though they were flesh and blood, not like people of a worldly organization. They are to accept one another for no other reason than that they are family, not because they share an organizational name.

This means being concerned above all that their fellow believers become serious students of Christ, and that means being students of his words and doers of his words. Life in the ecclesia is life as Christ lived it with his students. It has nothing to do with getting people to attend “worship services” or celebrating days or engaging in any of the external practices of a religion. It's the life of Christ that is the function for which there should be a form, and that form is obviously a very dynamic one—one that includes intense learning of the words of Christ and the daily doing of those words.

The examples of Christ and Paul give any believer plenty to work on in terms of his or her daily life; they offer instruction in terms of how to relate to other believers and to the people in the world. More form or structure is not needed, and most certainly a hierarchical leadership pattern is completely unnecessary. According to the scriptures, there is no need for authoritative higher-ups because Jesus has reserved all higher-up levels of authority for himself. The writers of the scriptures were convinced that Christ is very capable of organizing his own ecclesia. No one has to take that over. Anyone who takes the words in the scriptures seriously will be a follower of Christ and will have no need of human authorities to order their world. Instead they will search out and willingly work with those who are exemplary followers of Christ.

The fact is that the highest hierarchical position of any human being in the scriptures is that of the father in the family. The next is the mother. The complete hierarchy of scripture looks like this: God the Father, God the Son, the husband, the wife. That's it. This is the only hierarchy mentioned in the Christian scriptures. This is another reason why the *presbuteros*, *episkopos*, and *diakonos* in the ecclesia are not part of a hierarchical structure and why no one can be considered any of these three who has not been tested and proven in the sphere of the natural family. The family has priority. The only actual leaders in the Kingdom of God are family fathers and any authority they have is limited to their own families. It extends by no means to another man's family.

The scriptures are particularly jealous of the family relationship. The husband-wife-children relationship is the most sacred of all relationships. No one has any right whatsoever to inject any authority into that holy sphere. This is because God created the family as an image of Himself. He created man and woman to be his image. Their oneness is the reflection of the oneness of the Father and the Son.

The traditional church institutions that have developed over the centuries are by no means representative of the ecclesia in the Christian scriptures. They are much more like the Jewish organizations in the day of Christ. They were parties led by the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Rabbis, none of whom were established as leaders in any of the Jewish scriptures. They had taken over Judaism and had organized it according to the traditions of their elders. They constantly came into conflict with Jesus Christ.

Were Christ to roam the streets of any Christian culture today, he would most likely experience the same conflict and rejection from Christian churches as he did from the Jewish leaders in the first century. They would not be willing to follow his example. They would not take to the streets with him. They would not give up their authority, their prestige, their properties, and their comfortable lifestyle. They would prefer to continue following the traditions of earlier teachers than to obeying the scriptures.

Jesus Christ is just as different today as he was in the first century. The crowds still approach him and yet ultimately reject him. The religious leaders still claim to be the teachers of the scriptures, but their behavior and their dependence on traditions denies these very writings. Still today, there are a few who come to the Christ of the scriptures and walk the narrow path with him.