

# The Gift of Church

## HOW GOD DESIGNED THE LOCAL CHURCH TO MEET OUR NEEDS AS CHRISTIANS

by Jim Samra

### SUMMARY AND CRITIQUE BY:

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The section and chapter titles, in this paper, which are in all caps, are Samra's.

All direct quotes in this paper, taken from "The Gift of Church" are in bold text.

### INTRODUCTION

Samra lists eight things that are required **"to be a church"** (19): doing the mission of God (149), preaching the Word and administering the sacraments (19), church membership (150), church discipline (19), covenanting together (150), being united (19), operating in grace (19), and leading pastorally (151). Crucial to his definition is the fact that the church is not just believers, nor is it a gathering of believers, but in order to find the church, you must **"go to your local church"** (153). The "going" to church is necessary because the church, according to Samra, is a **"tangible, physical assembly"** (152), **"led by pastoral ['spiritually gifted and ordained'] leaders"** (151). According to Samra, **"There are endless varieties of ways in which Christians can gather together. How do we determine which of these gatherings constitutes a 'church' and which do not? The benefits I have presented in this book are benefits particularly given to the church, not to other groups that meet even if the people gathering are Christians"** (148). Samra states, for example, **"Co-workers who gather together for prayer every morning are doing something wonderful, but they are not a church"** (149). In summary, then, Samra concludes, **"The above eight criteria help to delineate what I believe the Bible means by the word 'church' and to differentiate 'church' from groups like women's Bible studies..."** (152).

In the New Testament, when the apostles wrote to the *ekklesia*, the "church" they were writing to were believers (1 Corinthians 1:2). "Gathering" is not what defines the church, it is one of many things believers, that is, the church, does. The church is all the believers of this age (Ephesians 1:22-23). Believers are the church because they have accepted Jesus Christ as their God and Savior (1 John 5:13). They are members of the church because they are baptized by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). The New Testament also describes the body of all believers in a particular city. For example, *Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ... to all who are beloved of God in Rome* (Romans 1:1, 7). Paul, in his letter to the Romans, was not writing to all of the believers of this age (although the truths contained in his letter certainly apply to all believers in every place and in every generation). Paul, also, was not writing to the believers in Philippi (they had their own letter from Paul). When Paul wrote Romans, he was writing, based on his own confession, to the believers living in Rome. Notice that Paul was not writing to some Christian group within the group of believers in Rome.

Christians gathered for different purposes, at different times, and in different places throughout the city. But there was no separate recognition or designation for each of those gatherings. The “local church,” which Samra claims is a “gift,” is today’s church, not the church that began in Acts 2. When the apostles wrote to the churches of various cities, they wrote to all the believers in those cities—the apostolic church—the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13, 27). When Samra uses the word “church” throughout his book, he is not talking about the New Testament apostolic church. For Samra, essential to the definition of church is a place where people assemble on Sunday morning under the leadership of a pastor. Obviously, he does not say that is all that church is, but it is a necessary part of what he believes defines church. We can see the beginnings of Samra’s idea of church in the New Testament. The believers who assembled, as the church age developed, inevitably welcomed non-Christians into their midst. These people claimed to be Christians but were not actually believers. Thus the “professing church” came into existence. Paul dealt with this issue with the believers in Corinth, *I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person—not even to eat with such a one* (1 Corinthians 5:1-12, emphasis mine).

Paul was frustrated with the believers in Corinth because they were tolerating the sin of the “so-called” Christian who was gathering with the true believers. The sin of the professing Christian was affecting the true Christians, something which inevitably happens with an assembly, that is, with the professing church. Paul wanted the believers—the true church—to *clean out the old leaven* from their assemblies. What is clear in this passage is the fact that the true church is something distinct from the professing church (1 Corinthians 14). John Walvoord explained the difference between the two this way: “That these local congregations cannot be equated with the body of Christ is evident from such passages as Revelation 3:14-19 where the church of Laodicea obviously includes those who are not regenerated. Thus in apostolic days arose the early organized church which later developed into the far-flung body of professed believers which constitutes Christendom in its largest dimension” (*The Church in Prophecy*, 24). The problem, throughout Samra’s book, is that he equates the true church with the professing church (and the universal church). Paul saw the professing church as something the true church had to deal with, not something which was synonymous with believers or to be pursued, defended, or justified by believers.

To summarize our differences, I am arguing that the churches the apostles wrote to were true believers. They were identified as distinct churches based on which city they live in, not *where they go* within the city. But Samra states, “**Today, when we want to experience the jaw-dropping, spine tingling, presence of God, ... we are supposed to go to church**” (28). I am making the claim that the New Testament uses the word “church” to describe a specific kind of people not a specific kind of organization. Samra disagrees. “**The promise of his presence is given to the church because it is the institution that Jesus himself has designed to be able to house his presence**” (34-35). Samra emphasizes his point when he says, “**It is impossible for the church not to be an institution ...**” (154). Samra continues, “**The church must not be overly institutional, but it will always be an institution. The difference is that it is designed to be God’s institution**” (155). I do wonder, if God designed the institutional church, why it would be wrong or how it would even be possible to be “overly institutional?” In summary, then, I understand the Bible to teach that the church is believers of a particular place. Samra argues that the local church is a particular place with people (who may be believers or unbelievers). “**The Scripture clearly highlights the local church as the place where God intends us to find community**” (63). Samra uses this example from 2 John 1, “**The apostle John writes to ‘the chosen lady and her children.’ The lady is the local church. The members of the church are her children**” (81).

## MORE ASSEMBLIES

Samra compares the difference between the excitement of being at a *Beatles* concert to listening to their CD at home as one reason for his argument that **“God intends for us to experience his presence in a unique and powerful way through the church, because God is uniquely present when the church assembles”** (24). Samra makes his case for God’s unique presence in the assembly out of the Old Testament. **“Like the Tabernacle, Israel continued to assemble regularly at the temple and frequently experienced God’s visible presence while hearing his voice in a unique way”** (27). Based on his statement that, **“the word translated ‘church’ in the New Testament is the same word translated ‘assembly’ in the Old Testament”** (28), Samra makes this claim: **“When his followers gather, Jesus will be powerfully present, just like the visitation of God at Sinai”** (29).

Samra believes that the experience of Israel in the wilderness is the same experience of church-goers today because the same word is used in both places. It is surprising that Samra would make this kind of error in interpretation. Biblical scholars will tell you that meaning comes, not from how a word is defined, but from how a word is used by the author. Meaning always comes from the author, not the dictionary. “To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning is to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation” (E.D. Hirsch, “Validity in Interpretation,” page 5).

## AN UNFORTUNATE LINGUISTIC TWIST OF FATE

**“Anyone reading the Old Testament in Greek will find *ekklesia*, which means ‘assembly,’ used regularly to refer to God’s people assembling in his presence. In other words, since *ekklesia* is used throughout the Old and New Testaments, anyone reading the Greek can see the answer to the question, “Where do we go today if we want to experience God’s presence?”** (28).

First of all, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, not Greek. So it is quite misleading to make a case that they had *ekklesia* in the Old Testament since the word was not “used regularly” there. In fact, it was not used at all. Second, the obvious conclusion an English-only reader would make from Samra’s statement is: “Well, I don’t read Greek, so I guess I can’t ‘see the answer’ for myself.” Apparently, the believer who does not know Greek is supposed to be thankful for people like Samra who can explain to them what their Bible *really* says. Is the truth concerning the church absent from the English-only reader? If I don’t know Greek, how can I know if Samra is correct drawing these conclusions from the Bible?

The word *ekklesia* is actually the combination of two words, “call” and “out of.” An *ekklesia*, then, is a “called out” people. But the word can also mean “assembly.” According to Charles Ryrie, “The Greek word *ekklesia* meant an assembly and was used in a political, not religious sense. It did not refer to the people but to the meeting; in other words, when the people were not assembled formally they were not referred to as an *ekklesia*. The word is used in the same secular Greek way in the two places in the New Testament (Acts 19:32, 41). When the Greek word is used in the New Testament, it takes on much richer and fuller aspects to the basic secular meaning. For example, the people themselves whether assembled or not, are the *ekklesia*” (*Basic Theology*, “What is the Church,” Charles C. Ryrie, 69).

Ryrie's conclusion is that *ekklesia* means "assembly" in a secular sense. However, if we take Samra's definition, then the church is only the church when they are at church. In other words, if assembling together makes believers the church, then they are not the church when they are not assembled. Ryrie and I would both disagree with that. It would be much more accurate to say that the church, that is believers, are a group of people who have been "called out" of the world—called out of a life of slavery to sin—into the body of Christ (Ephesians 2:2, 2:11-13, 5:8; Colossians 1:21; 1 Timothy 1:13).

## JESUS' ASSEMBLY

Samra then applies the example of an Old Testament assembly to Jesus' statement in Matthew 16:18, saying, **"Understanding this background is helpful when we try to make sense of what Jesus means when he refers to the 'church.' Jesus is not inventing a new term or a new type of gathering, rather He is saying: 'I will build my assembly'"** (28, emphasis his). It seems to me that Jesus was saying the exact opposite of what Samra is saying. Jesus may have been using an old term, but He was using it in a totally new way. Jesus was not saying, "I'm going to build another assembly—experience just like the one at Mt. Sinai." He was announcing His intention to create something totally new. Something that had not been seen or done before. Something *which has been hidden from the past ages and generations* (Colossians 1:26). And not only that, it is *something which for ages has been hidden in God* (Ephesians 3:9), unrevealed in the Old Testament, *the glory of this mystery ... which is Christ in you* (Colossians 1:27). Paul was not talking about what Samra calls "Jesus' assembly," he was describing a body of believers whom *He [Christ] chose in Him* (Ephesians 1:4), *the church of God which He purchased with His own blood* (Acts 20:28), baptized in the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13), a people God has *predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son* (Romans 8:30) – Christians (Acts 11:26).

## THE THEOLOGY OF GOD IN CONCERT

**"Experiencing God in the midst of an assembly, the gathered people of God—his church—is like hearing God in concert"** (32). **"When we assemble together here on earth, we are able to worship him acceptably"** (33). When Jesus met the woman at the well, they discussed this very issue. It seems that the Samaritan woman was confused about both how and where to worship. Jesus took the opportunity to correct her wrong thinking—the idea that there is a place to go or that a gathered people is necessary in order to acceptably worship God. The Samaritan woman said to Jesus, *"Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you people say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship."* Jesus said to her, *"Woman, believe Me, an hour is coming when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth"* (John 4:20-21, 23-24).

Jesus explained to the Samaritan woman the kind of worship He desired. He did not suggest a form nor did Jesus support the idea of having a particular location. His discussion with the Samaritan woman was consistent with His teaching on other subjects involving the worship of God. *Your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. ... When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you. ... Your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you* (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18).

## BUT WHY CHURCH AND NOT OTHER ORGANIZATIONS?

Samra argues that other Christian organizations are inferior to the institutional church. He states, for example, that the organization of the church is like breast milk and other organizations are like baby formula (89). It is interesting that he does not deny that the church is an organization. He argues, rather, that God prefers one organization over another. **“The promise of his presence is given to the church because it is the institution that Jesus himself has designed to be able to house his presence”** (34-35). Samra seems to think that these other groups **“desire to control the gathering of God’s people”** (35). According to Samra, **“Jesus didn’t tell us to pull any kind of group of Christians together and then wait for him to show up”** (34). Samra then compares the people who gather in other organizations to the Israelites who made a golden calf at Mt. Sinai. **“These gatherings are often more a reflection of the ‘Egyptian’ gods of this world”** (35). Samra does not deny God’s involvement in Christian families, Christian schools, or even in Christian para-church organizations. But, he says, **“His [God’s] expectations and guidelines for how we can best experience his presence in worship are incorporated into his design for the church—not for other institutions”** (35).

Worship is attributing worth to God. How “we can best experience his presence” became part of worship is a mystery to me. Biblical worship is a focus on God. If the quality of my experience is part of worship, then worship is partly about me. If the Lord is worthy to be praised (Psalm 18:3), isn’t He worthy whether I experience anything or not? Also, am I to believe that Christians who worship God at home or at school or while gathering with believers in some “para-church” organization cannot receive “the promise of God’s presence” because they are in the wrong place? I doubt that even the believers in Samra’s own church would say that this idea is biblical.

## SEEING GOD IN CHURCH

Samra recalls a woman speaking to him, one Sunday, about the sermon he had just given. She was moved by one particular thing Samra had said. But while the woman was re-stating the memorable words, Samra noticed that it was not what he had said at all. Then it dawned on him what had happened. **“You see, in addition to the words they were hearing through my prepared sermon, God was also speaking directly to their hearts. These were real, tangible experiences of God speaking to them. That’s what happens when God’s people gather. God shows up—and he speaks!”** (36). Statements like these sound like we are empowering God to act. The thought that God cannot do something until His people gather so He can then “show up” is ridiculous.

Furthermore, the idea that God speaks today is an attack against the closed canon of Scripture. This is an unavoidable mistake when one believes that revelation continues today. When you believe that God is speaking to you at church or through the leadership of the church, you inevitably will have to choose one “word of God” over the “Word of God.” When the institutional church claims the authority of God, then they will eventually compete against the authority of the Bible. Is our God a God who goes against His Word? Are we to live on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4) or out of the mouth of our church leaders?

Samra acknowledges that God's presence can be experienced in nature and His Word. But Samra believes that they are not sufficient, and, by limiting yourself to those two forms of revelation, **“something would still be missing from your experience of knowing God—something essential, foundational, and irreplaceable”** (39). To make his case that the church is inseparable from the building you go to on Sunday, and is the only way to experience the **“unbridled joy of God”** (39), Samra quotes Psalm 95:1-2.

**Come let us shout praises to God,  
Raise the roof for the God who saved us!  
Let's march into his presence singing praises  
Lifting the rafters with our hymns! (39)**

Apparently we must have roofs to raise, and rafters to lift if we are to not miss anything in our experience of knowing God. Since the idea that this concept existed in the pages of Scripture was surprising to me, I looked up Psalm 95:1-2 myself. Here's what it really says:

*O come, let us sing for joy to the LORD,  
Let us shout joyfully to the rock of our salvation.  
Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving,  
Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.*

There are no roofs, there are no rafters, there is just a man of God encouraging other believers to praise God in song. In fairness to Samra, he did acknowledge that he quoted this passage from “The Message.” I'm just wondering why he would use the Bible to make his case, and then not quote from an actual translation of the Bible.

## **WHY THE LOCAL CHURCH AND NOT SOME OTHER KIND OF GROUP?**

**“The means by which God enables us to experience unity with other believers ... is through the common institution of the church. The church is the only institution that is intentionally designed to accommodate this level of diversity”** (53). **“One of the blessings of diversity is that it allows for differing ways of viewing God and his truth. How much less would we understand about the doctrine of justification by faith if we had only the letters of Paul or only the words of James?”** (54).

Samra believes that allowing for differing views is a good thing. And he uses, as an example, the words of Paul and James on the issue of justification by faith. What Samra considers a good example, I believe is a serious problem. If Paul and James have “different ways of viewing God and truth,” then we don't have an infallible text of Scripture (John 10:35). Even further disturbing is the substance of what Samra believes Paul and James differ on—justification by faith. If James wrote that we are justified before God in some different way than Paul said we are justified, then not only do we have an errant text, we cannot know what it means to be justified!

## THE CITY

As to what Samra is referring to when he says, *The City*: **“The church is God’s field, God’s building, God’s temple”** (16). **“Today as we await the complete arrival of the heavenly city, God gives us the gift of the local church which is the manifestation of the city of God”** (62). **“Are the followers of Jesus called to be restless wanderers waiting for the arrival of this heavenly city before we can know the joy of being home? Thank God the answer is, “no.” God gives us the gift of the local church which is the manifestation of the City of God”** (62).

How would Paul answer Samra’s question, “Are the followers of Jesus called to be restless wanderers waiting for the arrival of this heavenly city before we can know the joy of being home?” *Knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord* (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). Paul sees us from our individual bodies to being at home with the Lord with no “local church” in between.

Why does Samra want to argue that the institutional church is the city of God? **“The church is uniquely designed to make us more like Christ and therefore is the place where we develop community”** (71). Samra got this idea through a word study. **“When we study the word *koinonia* in the New Testament, ... there is only one community that is named using this powerful term. Both Acts 2:42 and in 1 Corinthians 1:9 use the term as a title for the local church”** (63). **“God refers to the church by this common Greek word, *koinonia*—the community. It’s almost as if God is telling us that all other relationships, partnerships, and communal affiliations are shadows of the real thing, the church—the place where God provides the way to change us from restless wanderers and to give us true community with his people”** (63).

Let’s look at the two verses Samra mentions above: *Our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord* (1 Corinthians 1:8-9). Who is Paul talking about here? Is it the people who are members of a local church or who go to church? Where is the institution in this verse? Am I to believe that it is the people who gather on Sunday morning who are going to be confirmed by Christ and blameless in the day of judgement? Are church-goers the ones who are called by Christ and have fellowship with Him? Or is Paul saying to the Corinthians the same thing he said to the Romans, the same thing he would say to all believers in Christ, *Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name’s sake, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints* (1:4-7). The “all who are beloved of God in Rome” are the same as those “called into fellowship with Christ in Corinth” and are the same as born again believers today.

There is no “community” in these verses. What there is, is our fellowship with Christ—something available to all who believe, all who have been called of Christ, all who have received His grace—all saints. In 1 Corinthians 1:9, Paul is talking about the fellowship that believers have with Christ because of an individual, personal, relationship with Christ. God isn’t calling us into an institutional church community, He is calling us into fellowship with His Son. Samra’s conclusion that **“the church—the place where God provides the way to change us from restless wanderers and to give us true community with his people”** (63) is completely absent from 1 Corinthians 1:9.

Acts 2:42 says, *They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.* The NASB version of the Bible translates the word *koinonia* in Acts 2:42 as, “fellowship” not “community.” The KJV also translates it “fellowship.” The NRSV, the ASV, the NET, and the NIV all translate *koinonia* as “fellowship.” Are all of these different groups of translators incorrect about *koinonia* meaning fellowship? The job of a translator, as I understand it, is to choose, from many possible definitions, the one definition that best fits the context of the passage in which the word is used. Strong’s Concordance #G2842 also defines *koinonia* as “fellowship.” Of course, just because *koinonia* is defined fellowship does not mean that that exact definition is appropriate in every context. The word *koinonia* is used 19 times in 17 verses in the New Testament. The Greek concordance of the NASB lists three other possible New Testament uses of *koinonia*, “contribution,” “participation,” and “sharing.”

When we look at the context of these New Testament passages, we see exactly what we would expect considering the appropriate usages of this term. In Philippians 2:1 all believers have in common a *fellowship in the Spirit*. Are believers who are not assembled in a church excluded from fellowship with the Spirit? If they are, how would you define their relationship with the Spirit? Peter reminds us that, as individual believers, we *share in the suffering of Christ* (1 Peter 4:13). Paul also used *koinonia* to describe his ministry with Barnabas. *James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles...* (Galatians 2:9). Apparently individual believers can have *koinonia*. I certainly would not consider Paul’s ministry and relationship with Barnabas “a shadow of the real thing” since it did not take place in church. According to Bob Definbaugh’s study of Acts 2, “The most common expression of ‘fellowship’ in the New Testament is that of sharing financial resources – giving: *Contribute to the needs of the saints* (Romans 12:13). *Now the one who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with the one who teaches it* (Galatians 6:6)” [“Fellowship,” *bible.org*]. Surely believers who do not go to church can participate in this form of fellowship. Actually, Samra acknowledges this form of fellowship but says it is less effective **“both quantitatively and qualitatively”** (98). Samra uses this example, **“You could find someone who looks like they need \$20 and give it to them. Or you could give that \$20 to the church to their benevolence ministry. There are three primary reasons why we are able to accomplish more through the church”** (99):

- God has given the church a diversity of *spiritual gifts*
- God has given the church *specific leaders* to oversee the work
- God has given the church *special access* to divine powers (99)

## GOD’S CREATION

According to Samra, **“... the Scriptures clearly highlight the local church as the place where God intends us to find community”** (63). With Samra, it’s not just that the institutional church is where community can be found—it cannot be found elsewhere. Samra compares other organizations to the city Cain built after having been exiled for killing his brother. **“The problem with Cain’s city was that Cain is the one who designed and built it”** (64). When believers in other organizations gather and seek community, **“all of these attempts at community have been designed and built by selfish fallen human beings. In the church, God has designed an organization that at the same time uniquely addresses our distance from God and others”** (64). Because this particular organization is God’s choice among all organizations, Samra believes that the institutional church is **“uniquely designed to make us more like Christ”** (71).



According to Samra, the organizational church “outranks” all other institutions, “...his church now has pride of place among all the social groups of the world, surpassing even the family” (73). What Samra claims that the Bible “clearly highlights” is not very clear to me since I could not find a single verse where God compares the institutional church to other organizations and then tells us the church is better. Apparently, it is not as clear to Samra either since he fails to list any verses in defense of his claim. Samra’s problem with Cain’s city is that it is “designed and built by selfish fallen human beings.” He is correct. That’s the problem with all organizations—including Samra’s!

Samra’s church is just as much an organization built by selfish fallen human beings as any other organization. Of course, there can be good organizations and bad organizations, but there are not God-designed organizations and man-designed organizations. There are only organizations, and they are all man-made. God is building up the body of Christ and He has given specific gifts *for the equipping of the saints for the work of service* (Ephesians 4:12). God is not building organizations, He is building believers. These believers are to use their gifts to equip other believers to obey Christ and serve His body through mutual edification (Ephesians 1:3-14, 15-23; 2:1-7; 3:1-13, 14-19; 4:1-7; 6:14-20).

## WHY DON'T I FEEL MORE COMMUNITY IN CHURCH

It is not surprising that, considering Samra’s case for the pinnacle position of the church, he would conclude, “**While many Christians rightly denounce pornography, adultery, and prostitution, how many of us think twice about church hopping? Although pornography, adultery, and prostitution are radically more abhorrent than church hopping, in many ways the same spirit animates both classes of actions**” (75). Of these sins mentioned, involving sexual immorality, there are a considerable number of verses in the Bible condemning such behavior (1 Corinthians 6:18; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). But I cannot find a single verse in the Bible against “church hopping.” I can see why pastors would not want their members leaving to attend other institutions, but what I can’t see is those same pastors discouraging new-comers from staying in their church when they arrive from a different church. Is there a department or support group helping new-comers return to the church they hopped from so that they will not be committing this type of sin? And if church hopping by church members is that condemnable, then how much worse is it when pastors leave their church in favor of other congregations? Finally, Samra admits that sexual sins are “radically more abhorrent.” But how, then, can he justify comparing adultery to church hopping if one is that much more sinful than the other? Furthermore, if the Bible no where calls church hopping sinful and in countless places calls immorality sinful, how is it valid to make any comparison at all?

## THE CHURCH AS MOTHER

According to Samra, “**The Bible is not only clear that Christians need maternal care to grow, but it teaches us that the church is the one who provides that care. As Paul finishes talking about his work as an apostle using maternal language in Galatians 4:19 he launches into another discussion in 4:21-31: ‘The Jerusalem that is above is free and *she is our mother* (4:26, italics added). As we saw in the last chapter, ‘the Jerusalem that is above’ refers to the city of God which is present in our time as the church, the earthly gathering of God’s people”**” (81). As I have evaluated Samra’s book to this point, I have noticed two repeated problems. Samra’s claims are either lacking Scriptural support altogether, or the passages cited in support of his points are not correctly interpreted in the context they were written.

Here, for example, Samra quotes Galatians 4:26, claiming that this verse is describing the local church. But when we read the cited passage, we see that Paul is comparing the present Jerusalem to Hagar and Mt. Sinai, calling those things slavery. Paul then contrasts that with a heavenly Jerusalem, Sarah, and freedom under Christ through the Spirit, concluding, *So then, brethren, we are not children of a bond-woman, but of the free woman* (Galatians 4:31). Believers, brethren, are the “children” of the free woman—*indwelled by the Spirit and free from the law* (Galatians 5:1). “The Jerusalem that is above,” is not the “earthly gathering of God’s people,” it is God’s people, whether they gather or not.

## MOTHER CHURCH

Samra compares the institutional church to motherhood and specifically to breast milk in contrast to other institutions, which are like baby formula. **“Since human beings have not been able to design adequate replacements for the things that God has originally designed (breast milk and motherhood), what is the likelihood that we as humans are able to design a replacement for the spiritual nurturing God created the church to provide”** (90)? The Bible does use milk imagery to describe “the spiritual nurturing” of believers. *Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation* (1 Peter 2:2). Paul states that believers are able to grow *in respect to salvation*, if they long for the pure milk of the word. What word? The Word of God (Romans 10:17). But Samra says, **“The church is the place where ...we are transformed from children to adults”** (94).

## SPIRITUAL GIFTS—A GREAT RECIPE

Samra wants us to **“Keep in mind that these promises are given to the local church, not to small groups of Christians.... There are no promises that guarantee the full range of gifts for those involved in ministries apart from the local church. Our modern day para-church ministries, as helpful as they can be, are not truly representations of the body of Christ”** (101). Earlier in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul said, *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit* (12:4). In other words, these gifts are for believers who are indwelled with “the same Spirit” for the purpose of serving the body of Christ. They are given *according to the grace given to us, ... according to the proportion of his faith* (Romans 12:6). There are no “promises that guarantee the full range of gifts” to those participating in any particular kind of organization. The “necessary spiritual ingredient” is the Holy Spirit.

In his section on spiritual gifts Samra says, **“Parents will certainly have particular gifts of the Spirit, but they will not be gifted in every way. Without a church community, how will children be exposed to all the spiritually empowered wisdom, teaching, encouragement, and mercy that they need? Imagine a family that believes they can raise their children to spiritual maturity apart from the local church”** (101). **“Even many in the secular community seem to recognize that it takes more than just a nuclear family to raise a child. Hillary Rodham Clinton wrote a book famously titled, ‘It Takes a Village.’ The message of her book was that it takes more than an individual parent or even a family to raise a child properly—it takes a larger community. For those who belong to God, that larger community is not just a village of neighbors, it’s the church of Jesus Christ!**

**It takes a Church could be another title for the New Testament, since the overall message of the Gospels and letters of the New Testament focuses on the establishment of a new community of people for the purpose of fulfilling the mission of God”** (159).

If we are going to follow Samra's example when it comes to how we should raise our kids, we should consult or reference the world, "the secular community," then make "Christian" adjustments to their ideas. I want to argue that believers should always avoid getting advice on spiritual matters from the world, since *We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one* (1 John 5:19).

Moses told sons of Israel exactly how they should raise their children. He said, *You shall therefore impress these words of mine on your heart and on your soul... You shall teach them to your sons, talking of them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road and when you lie down and when you rise up* (Deuteronomy 11:18-19). Moses commanded the Israelites to teach their children the Word of God. They were not told to assemble with the larger community of the nation of Israel. They were told that, as parents, they were responsible to raise their children, teaching them on a daily basis. The New Testament also mentions how children ought to be raised. *Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord* (Ephesians 6:4).

Because raising children to spiritual maturity is the job of parents, God commands children, *obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother* (Ephesians 6:1-2). With respect to raising children, the Bible is clear about what is required. Parents (the father and mother of the children) are required, and the Word of God is required. If a case can be made, from the Bible, for any other requirement, it would be that the discipline of the Father is required (Proverbs 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15, 17). The Bible gives no other commands concerning how children should be raised. The concept proposed by Samra and Clinton is their idea, not God's idea.

## **WITHOUT ITS HEAD, A SNAKE IS ONLY A ROPE**

According to Samra, **"The church is able to accomplish more because God has given the church specific people who lead—shepherds for the sheep. A leaderless group will never accomplish much of value"** (103). **"Some today object to the idea of "leaders" in the church. Perhaps they are simply echoing the sentiments of those who challenged Moses in Numbers 16:3"** (104). Martin Luther objected to the authority of the leaders (the clergy) of the church. Was he "simply echoing the sentiments of those who challenged Moses"?

**"Sometimes good ideas have bad consequences. In the 1500's during the Reformation, Martin Luther argued vigorously that every believer is also a minister. As wonderful as this truth is, taken too far, it can have unintended consequences"** (104). Samra does not object to the priesthood of the believer, he just objects to its implications. Samra gives his readers the impression that the priesthood of the believer was something Martin Luther came up with. He is correct that Luther argued vigorously for that truth. But Luther didn't just have a good idea he took too far—the priesthood of the believer is biblical. It wasn't Luther's idea, it was God's idea. *To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father* (Revelation 1:5-6).

The priesthood of the believer is a wonderful truth because it's true. What Samra finds objectionable about this is the fact that the priesthood of the believer removes the Old Testament distinction between laity and clergy. Believers are a kingdom of priests, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As such they have access to God through Jesus Christ—clergy are not necessary (1 Timothy 2:5; 1 Peter 2:9-10).

Samra would not object to believers obeying Christ. But it seems that Samra wants believers to obey pastors as well. **“Throughout the Old Testament, the leader of God’s people failed time after time. Pained by the failure of these leaders, God made a solemn promise to his people in Jeremiah 3:15: ‘I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding.’ Jesus, the Great Shepherd of his people is simply first in a line of shepherds who would fulfill the promise of Jeremiah 3:15. When Ephesians 4 lists gifted leaders Jesus gives to the church, one of those is the “pastor” (103).**

In the context of Jeremiah 3, God is petitioning the nation of Israel to repent. *Return, faithless Israel, declares the LORD ... acknowledge your iniquity, Return, O faithless sons, declares the LORD; For I am a master to you (3:12-15).* If they would repent, God told Israel, *I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding (Jeremiah 3:15).* But just before this promise is made, God said, *I will bring you to Zion (3:14).* And after verse 15, He said, *It shall be in those days when you are multiplied and increased in the land, declares the LORD (3:16).* From Jeremiah 3 we can conclude that God promised shepherds to the nation of Israel who would serve the people of Israel, in Zion, in those days. Jeremiah 3:15 is not about today, it’s not about the church, and it’s not about pastors. We see the fulfillment of this prophecy in Jeremiah 10:21, 22:22, and 23:1-2 not in the church.

**When Ephesians 4 lists gifted leaders Jesus gives to the church, one of those is the “pastor” (103).** Though your translation may use the word “pastor,” it is important to note that the word translated “pastor” in Ephesians 4 is, actually “shepherd” (Strong’s #4166, ποιμήν). There are no pastors mentioned in the Bible because the local church is not mentioned in the Bible. “Pastoring” is an occupation. The gifts of the Spirit are not given in connection with a person’s career, they are given in connection with a person’s salvation—according to their faith. A pastor, if he is a believer, may or may not have the gift of shepherding, but his position as pastor is not synonymous with the gift of shepherding. Shepherding was used, generally, as a figure of speech for leadership throughout the Bible (see Ezekiel 34:2-8; Isaiah 56:11; Jeremiah 23:41; Matthew 9:36; John 10:11-16; Hebrews 13:20) and is an appropriate gift for any believer who leads with compassion, such as a lady showing hospitality (2 John 5-6) or a man helping visiting missionaries (3 John 5-8).

## **SPECIAL ACCESS TO GOD’S POWERS—MORE THAN NATURAL**

When someone is sick, Samra says, **“It is significant that God does not tell us to call our doctors, our Bible study leaders, our friends or our spouses. He says specifically to ‘call the elders of the church.’ Why? God has given the local church unique access to His power, and these leaders are able to draw on that supernatural power to accomplish miraculous things” (109). “God has granted his church and its leaders, like the prophets of the Old Testament unique access to his supernatural healing power. The authority, access, and promise of Christ’s power are not given to individuals in this way” (111).**

Samra’s claim that local church leaders are able to draw on “supernatural power to accomplish miraculous things” is confusing to me. Obviously, the church is full of people who are hurting, sick, and dying. If their leaders have “supernatural power like the prophets of the Old Testament,” why aren’t they exercising their ability? It seems to me that they are either delusional, or deceiving themselves (and others), or seriously lacking compassion, since they fail to use their “God-given” ability to help their own people.

When we look at the New Testament, the authority, access, and promise of Christ's power was given to His apostles. New Testament apostles were physically called by Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1). After Judas betrayed Christ, the remaining apostles looked for a replacement. Peter said, *"Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection"* (Acts 1:21-22).

According to Luke, the conditions for choosing an apostle were twofold: They had to have walked with Christ among the other apostles, and they had to have witnessed the resurrection. In addition to that, their apostleship was authenticated by miracles (Hebrews 2:3-4). As Greek expert Dan Wallace says, *"Signs and wonders and various miracles" is the normative description of healing and miraculous deeds. The sign gifts lasted only through the first generation of Christians. Once the eyewitnesses were dead, so were these gifts* ("Hebrews 2:3-4 and the Sign Gifts," *bible.org*).

## THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF GOD'S GRACE IN THE CHURCH

**"The church is called and empowered...being absolutely and totally full of grace, Ephesians 2:6-9"** (120). **"The glory of God is seen both in the person of the Son and in the collective witness of the church!"** (emphasis his, 121). **"The church is the recipient of the fullness of God's grace, both in its breadth and depth"** (123). **"Because the church is designed to be the most diverse institution possible (as we saw in chapter 2), it makes perfect sense that we would find the full breadth of God's grace expressed in the church"** (121). **"God refuses to abandon the church. God's continued acceptance of his church, despite our repeated offenses and failures, is one of the ways in which we reveal the love of God to the world"** (126).

Samra argues, in this section, for what he calls the "scandalous grace" of God. The fact that this phrase does not exist in the Bible leaves us only Samra's words to determine his meaning. That **"God loves his church and accepts his people regardless of their behavior"** is, apparently, the essence of this "scandalous grace." Samra concludes, **"Grace is given, not simply as a license to continue to sin, but in such a way that it leads to change and transformation, demonstrating the power of God. The church is shown scandalous grace so that it might become an agent of grace to others"** (127). I'm not going to deal with Samra's statement: "Grace is given, not simply as a license to continue to sin." I am going to assume he did not mean to connect the grace of God with any acceptance of sin on God's part. Instead I want to deal with this idea that God's grace can be found in the "church." Samra's claim that the institutional church is **"an agent of grace"** is, in my opinion, the most disturbing and most un-biblical statement in his book.

Do we find the **"full breadth of God's grace expressed in the church"**? When Samra suggests that the grace of God is found "in the church," it sounds as if he is attempting to control the gift of the grace of God. Is an infinite God who uniquely dispenses His grace through the Holy Spirit now confined to distributing the fullness of His grace to or through the gathering of the local church? *But who is able to build a house for Him, for the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain Him?* (2 Chronicles 2:6; Isaiah 66:1-2, Acts 17:24-25). To tie the grace of God to anything man-made, man-controlled, or man-distributed is to take responsibility for what is clearly a gift only God can give. Grace comes from God. *"Grace is the unmerited favor of God and is the basis of our salvation, justification, election, faith, and spiritual gifts"* (*Ryrie Study Bible: Ephesians 2:8-9*).

A person may be gracious to another person by showing them kindness, compassion, or forgiveness. But no person or organization, no matter what authority they claim in your life, can dispense the grace of God. “At Calvary’s Cross [grace] *charis* leaps forward an infinite distance” (Kenneth Wuest, *Treasures from the Greek New Testament*, 17). The forgiveness a person offers another person keeps you in good relations with that person, it does not forgive sin at all. All sin is against God (Psalm 51:4). And God is the only one who can offer an individual the grace he needs (Luke 5:21; Exodus 34:6-9; Psalm 103:3; 130:4; Isaiah 43:25; 44:22; 48:11; Daniel 9:9).

Finally, when the grace of God comes from the “local church,” it must take on this “scandalous” title which is absent from the Bible. The very reason grace is effective for the salvation of sinners is because it is not scandalous (disgraceful, shocking, outrageous, monstrous, criminal, wicked, sinful, shameful, atrocious, or appalling). The grace of God is precisely the opposite of everything scandalous. When Paul said, *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God* (Ephesians 2:8), he did not say that some of that grace comes from the church—he said it is *not of yourselves*. How exactly will God show His grace? *In the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus* (2:6-7). God’s plan is clear and it does not involve the church—it involves Christ offering grace to individuals who come to God for the forgiveness of their sins. *In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace* (Ephesians 1:7), ... *being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus* (Romans 3:24). Samra believes in “The Gift of Church.” Paul believes in “The Gift of His Grace.”

It is the grace of God through Christ that makes someone a member of the church—not the other way around. Yet, Samra maintains, **“In order for the grace of Jesus to be delivered effectively, the agent of his grace must first gather together as the church to receive his grace before they can deliver it to the people...”** (136). So, according to Samra, the church (the agent of the grace of Jesus) must gather to receive God’s grace. Then, those who gather can deliver the grace of God to the people. If this is true, then that makes God dependant on the gathering for the deliverance of His grace. If God is choosing to use the gathered church to transmit His grace to people, then the church is indeed the **“sacred institution”** (15) Samra claims it is. This idea is not new. It was aggressively supported by the Council of Trent which “made it infallible doctrine that the [Roman] Catholic church is God’s chosen organization to mete out all God’s sacramental grace. Not only is the Roman Catholic Church, through its priesthood, the only divinely instituted organization on earth..., but they also have divinely granted power” (*Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*, Norman Geisler, 243). The authority claimed by the Roman Catholic Church sounds identical to Samra’s statements concerning the gathering of his protestant church.

I would sum up my criticism of Samra in the same way Geisler sums up the Catholic Church, “Roman Catholicism has ... corrupted the pure grace of God by placing it in the control of a human institution and its hierarchy” (244). Does grace come through the church? John settles it with one verse. *For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ* (John 1:17).

## **GRACIOUS GOD, GRACIOUS CHURCH**

As an example of how God’s grace is being manifested by the gathering of the “local church,” Samra says, **“It is noteworthy that most para-church organizations and other informal gathering of Christians generally do not regularly take up a collection when they meet”** (127).

**“Interestingly, most para-church organizations solicit money from those outside their ministry, but many systematically do not incorporate opportunities for those to whom they are ministering to participate in the grace of giving. The lack of a regular practice of giving is actually a sign that the fullness of God’s grace is not being manifested by these gatherings”** (130). What I find more interesting than Samra’s opinion, here, is the fact that Samra has taken the responsibility of deciding for us which activities are “a sign of the fullness of God’s grace” and which are not.

## **LYING ABOUT GOD**

**“While we may long for the church to be a place where every person is well behaved, every service is excellent and edifying, and every experience is life changing and powerful, the church—if it is to be the church of grace that God intends—will always need to be a place for messed-up, hypocritical, and judgmental people. That’s what the world needs”** (134). The last thing the world needs is something which is “messed-up, hypocritical and judgmental.” What the world needs is a Savior. Does Samra really believe that by giving sinners more of what they already get in the world, somehow that is going to communicate Christ to them? Here’s what Paul believes the church should be: *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect* (Romans 12:2).

The world does not need “messed-up and hypocritical,” they need “good and perfect.” Samra’s dilemma is caused, once again, by his bad definition of church. If you start with the idea that the institutional church is approved and sanctified by God—that it is sacred—then how do you explain the fact that it turns up, time and time again, to be quite corrupt. The best solution to his problem would be for him to change how he defines the church to correspond to what the Bible says, then Samra would not be in the uncomfortable place he finds himself in, having to explain why God has chosen to offer grace to the world through something which looks exactly like the world. What inevitably ends up happening is that the organizational church ignores, tolerates, and condones the sin of its members. When you make the church an extension of God, then you make God the one who is ignoring, tolerating, and condoning sin.

**“We are naturally gracious people. Our natural tendency is to see the immorality, hypocrisy, and incompetence of the church and walk away. But when we walk away from the church because it is not what we want it to be or even all that it can be, we end up proclaiming to the world a false god—a legalistic, judgmental god. By embracing the church as a fallen mess of sinful people, filled with faults and failures, we proclaim the true God—one who is full of all grace—to the whole world”** (134).

First Samra states that the church is “a place for messed-up, hypocritical, and judgmental people.” Then he states that we are naturally gracious people who walk away from immorality. Let me see if I am following this: When I walk away from the church because of its sin, I am proclaiming a false god, but when I embrace the sinful people in the church I proclaim the true God. Is the grace of God being proclaimed to the world through His acceptance of sin in the “church?” *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?* (Romans 6:1-2). The apostles did not embrace the church as a “fallen mess of sinful people.”

The message of the New Testament for believers is: *Flee immorality* (1 Corinthians 6:18), *do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts* (Romans 6:12), *deny ungodliness and worldly desires* (Titus 2:11-15), *Abhor what is evil* (Romans 12:9).

## CONCLUSIONS

**“Finally, we should all be reminded that Jesus himself was consumed with zeal for God’s house (John 2:17). Jesus was not apathetic, negligent, or complacent about the church of his day. Being fully engaged in the life of the church, furious about her shortcomings, and graciously working for her survival ... well, that’s what it means to be like Christ”** (143). The church did not begin until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2)—after Jesus had died, rose, and ascended into heaven. Concluding that the temple was “the church of Jesus’ day,” does not take into account the time in which Christ lived or the text of Scripture which recorded those times. Jesus did make periodic trips to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (John 2:23-24), but never did He “engage in the life of the church [which Samra equates with the temple].” *Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them* (John 2:24). Jesus wasn’t involved with the temple and its corrupt leadership at all. His ministry centered around His disciples (John 17:12) and was primarily in the cities of Galilee (Matthew 4:23). If the temple was the church of Jesus’ day, Jesus had a para-church ministry!

If the temple was the church of Jesus’ day, as Samra suggests, and if being like Christ means we are “fully engaged in the local church and working for its survival,” then why did Christ condemn the religious leadership of the temple when, clearly, they were “fully engaged and working for its survival?” When a false witness came to testify against Jesus, he said concerning Jesus, *This man stated, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and to rebuild it in three days.’ The high priest stood up and said to Him, ‘Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?’* (Matthew 26:62). The leadership of the so-called “church of Jesus’ day” fiercely defended the temple. And yet Jesus said to them, *you do not understand the Scriptures or the power of God* (Matthew 12:24). Though they were doing exactly what Samra calls, “Christlike” behavior, Jesus warned His disciples about them, *beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees* (Matthew 16:11).

**“Jesus’ testimony is for churches. Not for individuals. Not for some ethereal universal church. But for genuine local churches—both those seven historical churches listed in the early chapters of Revelation and Christ’s local churches today. Jesus is coming soon ...he expects that when he returns his people will be engaged and actively involved in local churches all over the world”** (144).

Jesus is coming soon. First Corinthians 15 describes the return of the Lord, when *the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed* (15:51-52). While discussing Christ’s return, Paul tells us what he expects us to be doing: *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord* (15:58). Paul did not say, “be actively involved in your local church.” He said to be steadfast and immovable—holding fast to the words of the apostles (1 Corinthians 15:2). How are individual believers to live as we wait for the return of the Lord? *Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless...* (2 Peter 3:14).



When Jesus returns to the earth there will indeed be people “actively involved in local churches all over the world.” But those people won’t necessarily be His people. The Bible predicts a progressive increase in the immorality of the professing church with the end of the age revealing a church characterized by apostasy (Matthew 24:4-16; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2:1-3:18; Jude 3-19; Revelation 3:14-16; 6:1-19:21). According to John Walvoord, “One of the sad notes of prophecy as it relates to the end of the age is the prediction that instead of the [professing] church becoming better as the age progresses, it will grow worse and end in utter apostasy. First Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-13; and 2 Peter 2-3 combine in a testimony that the age will grow progressively farther from the truth and will justly deserve the judgment of God at its close. The New Testament reveals that the development of apostasy will be in three stages: (1) The doctrinal and moral departure of the [professing] church prior to the Rapture, i.e., during the last days of the true church on the earth. (2) The apostasy in the professing church after the true church is Raptured, i.e., in the period immediately following the Rapture. (3) The final apostasy in which the professing church as such will be destroyed and the worship of the beast, the world ruler, as the human representative of Satan will be inaugurated (Matthew 24:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12; Revelation 13:4-8; 17:16-18)” (John Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy*, 33, 182).

Jesus’ testimony was for individual believers—those people who turn to Jesus Christ for salvation. John said, *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name* (John 1:12). All those who “believe in His name” are genuine believers—members of the church. When John wrote to the seven churches of Revelation, he was not making a plea to the members of a particular organization within the city. And he was not writing to the leadership of a “church” building where Christians may have gathered. John was writing to the individual Christians who lived in those cities. His message was for believers, and his commands were for believers. *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will grant to eat of the tree of life which is in the Paradise of God* (Revelation 2:7). It was “the individual who has an ear” and “the individual who overcomes” who will eat from the tree of life. What is required is that each believer “hear what the Spirit says.” What the Spirit says is not found in organizations, whether they call themselves a “church” or not. And it is not found in other believers, whether they call themselves “pastor” or not. What the Spirit says is found where the seven churches of Revelation found it, in the letters of the apostles—the Word of God.

Concluding thoughts: Samra and I both graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary. But Samra’s view of the church is a significant departure from the doctrine of the Seminary’s founder, Lewis Sperry Chafer, who said, “No responsibility or service is imposed on the church per se. Service, like the gifts of the Spirit by whom service is wrought, is individual. It could not be otherwise. The common phrase, ‘the church’s task’ is, therefore, without biblical foundation” (*Systematic Theology*, Volume 3, 149).

The priesthood of the believer is biblical. No justification can be made, from the Bible, for any distinction between clergy and laity. And the authority of the pastorate is completely absent from the Bible. Organizations may help or hurt people, but they are not “of God” or “not of God” based on the title they choose to put on their sign out front. God does not deal with organizations, God deals with individual people. In the Bible, God’s people were not destroyed for a lack of pastors, assemblies, or communities. They were destroyed for a lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6, Romans 10:1-2).