

The Local Biblical Church Is A Family

If you go to any conservative, Reformed church on Sunday you will most likely be part of something fairly formal and organised. You may be welcomed (though not always) and someone may speak to you afterwards. But apart from that you will have had precious little Biblical fellowship. For the most part you were focused on the back of someone's head, had no opportunity to participate and were subjected to a formal speech lasting anything from 10 minutes to an hour which was the centrepiece of the event. For the majority of the time (or even all the time) the talking was done by one man, who was treated with greater honour than everyone else.

Brethren, virtually none of this is Biblical and an apostle whisked from the past to attend such a meeting would have little idea where he was (apart from the subject matter of the songs, prayers and sermon). He would not recognise it as a Biblical church meeting.

Now many folk will defend their church experience by saying that more intimate fellowship is found in the mid-week meetings (though some wouldn't even admit to that). But even these meetings are mostly formal and few allow any kind of open fellowship. Many mid-week meetings are like mini-Sunday meetings, but with coffee and biscuits. But even if the mid-week meetings admitted open participation, the point is that the main meeting on Sunday does not, and this is the meeting we have the most information about in the NT – all of which encourages mutual edification.

Many church leaders also bewail the knowledge and understanding of the majority of their members. However, these same church leaders only give their flock formal instruction in a short sermon on Sunday (some also give a formal Bible study mid-week, but surprisingly many do not). Again this contradicts the apostolic pattern for instruction laid down everywhere in the NT.

Biblical principles regarding church life resolve these and many other problems that the current church finds itself in.

We could argue about the need for the church to be an organism rather than an organisation. We could insist upon interdependency rather than top-down formality. We could affirm the need for mutual edification according to apostolic instructions. All these would be good arguments; however, in this paper I want to expound a subject that incorporates all of them in a simple, easily understood theme – that of family.

Everyone understands how a family works because they have been in one and are probably in some form of one still. Even for folk who were raised badly, they still understand what family should be from their negative experiences. Indeed they may be the wiser for seeing how family can be ruined. By affirming that the local church is a family, we can easily tap into the dynamics that make a church function Biblically because we are familiar with them.

The Godhead is a family

This is the crucial starting point. The church is meant to be a testimony to God on Earth, and as such must reflect the Godhead in a Biblical fashion. If the life of God is one thing, but the life of the church is another, then there is no proper testimony.

God is a united community of love relationships. That is the most basic and simple statement about the Trinity. Since this is true, then the life of the church must reflect the life of God in a community expression of love relationships. Surely this is simple to comprehend? An organised, formal, rigid institution is not a testimony of family.

The Trinity is a community of three persons who are united in essence and committed to the same purpose. All these three persons are God and yet each person has their own distinct personality. This also must be reflected in the local church. Each member is equal and no one can lord it over another. There will be differing functions and submission to one another, but the commitment to fulfil God's purpose rests upon all equally. This personal ministry must be done in love working through relationships.

The Trinity is a family; each member has his own special function in relationship to the others. The Father initiates, decrees his purpose, and plans the end result.¹ The Son is beloved of the Father² and accomplishes the Father's will, being sent to Earth to fulfil the plan of salvation.³ The Holy Spirit takes what the Son has accomplished and applies it to fulfil the Father's will in every detail throughout time.⁴ The Father sends the Son and the Son sends the Spirit.⁵ The Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Son submits to the Father,⁶ but all things are placed under the Son.⁷ Everything is through him and for him by the Spirit.⁸ Thus we see a detailed dovetailing of functions that cohere in a united purpose with no jostling for position.

The church is also a family.⁹ There is equality of all members under grace¹⁰ but there are functions of service that require submission in God's order. Thus women are subject to men¹¹ and members to elders.¹² There are varieties of gifts and all members are required to function in order to maintain an effective testimony.¹³ Because we are all one in Christ, we are also to submit to one another,¹⁴ just as the Trinity is one yet there is also submission within it.

It is my contention that nearly all churches do not reflect this character of God. Most churches represent a top-down authority system after the form of human management and secular government; in some cases this is akin to monarchy or even despotism. Such systems cannot bear testimony to the life of God, which functions in a completely different manner.

¹ Eph 1:4-5, 9, 11, 3:11; Isa 14:24-27, 46:10-11

² Matt 3:17, 17:5; Jn 3:35, 5:20

³ Jn 3:34

⁴ Jn 16:14-15

⁵ Jn 15:26

⁶ 1 Cor 15:28; Jn 14:28

⁷ Jn 3:35; Col 1:16

⁸ Col 1:16; 1 Cor 8:6

⁹ Eph 2:19; Gal 3:26, 6:10; Gal 4:28; 1 Jn 3:1

¹⁰ Gal 3:28

¹¹ 1 Cor 11:3; 1 Tim 2:11-12

¹² Heb 13:7, 17, 24; 1 Tim 3:5; 1 Thess 5:12

¹³ 1 Cor 12:4ff

¹⁴ 1 Pt 5:5; Eph 5:21

THE FIRST POINT IS THAT THE LOCAL CHURCH MUST REFLECT THE COMMUNITY OF THE GODHEAD AND IT DOES THIS BY WORKING AS A FAMILY, NOT AN ORGANISATION.

Apostolic instructions

Having understood the greater purpose, that the church must have a testimony in tune with the life of God, we next consider specific instructions commanded by God through his apostles. These commands and principles, authoritative for the church for all time, clearly demonstrate the nature of the church as a family. Mark this well – if God’s commands to us are that we build the local church on family principles, woe betide us if we then ignore these commands and build the church on human principles of organised government. I will give a few examples: -

The apostles instruct us that the church is a family of sons under God as father:

Eph 2:19 Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

Paul instructs us that the church is God’s household. ‘Household’ is the Greek word *oivkei/oj oikeios* meaning: belonging to a house or family, domestic, intimate, related by blood, kindred (Strong’s 3609).

Rm 8:29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

The church is a collection of the brothers of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The church is God’s family. We are thus all part of the same family as new creatures in Christ. Indeed, we are more truly members of God’s, family and of each other, than we are part of our human family in the flesh.

1 Jn 3:2 Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.

The church comprises the children of God, God’s family.

Jn 17:23 I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

As God’s sons we are loved in the same way that God loves the Lord Jesus.

Heb 2:11-14 For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified *are* all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: ‘I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You.’ And again: ‘I will put My trust in Him.’ And again: ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given Me.’ Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same.

Jesus calls us his brothers and the apostle here (as elsewhere) affirms that we are of the same life.

Gal 3:26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

1 Jn 3:1 Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!

We are sons of God, the children of God, the family of God.

The apostles command us to love one another since we are in the same family

Gal 6:10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

We love all, even our enemies, but we especially love those in the church since we are really in the same family.

Rm 12:10 *Be* kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honour giving preference to one another.

1 Thess 4:9 concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another.

1 Pt 3:8 Finally, all *of you be* of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, *be* tender-hearted, *be* courteous.

2 Pt 1:7 to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.

1 Jn 3:16 we also ought to lay down *our* lives for the brethren.

Sometimes virtues are commanded on the basis that we are in the same family, not just in order to please God.

We are to exhibit the attitudes one would find in a family.

1 Timothy 5:1 Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort *him* as a father, younger men as brothers, An older man in the church is to be respected as a father, younger men as brothers. The virtues present in a human family are a guide as to how we approach one another in the church. There is no formalism, no titles (other than 'elder' and 'deacon'; titles descriptive of function), no domineering, but respect as one would have in a family.

A CLEAR SECOND POINT IS THAT APOSTOLIC INSTRUCTIONS ARE LARGELY FOUNDED UPON THE REALITY THAT THE CHURCH IS A FAMILY AND SHOULD FUNCTION ON THE BASIS OF FAMILY LIFE.

Apostolic example

Since apostolic instruction for the church is set within the parameters of family, it is to be expected that the example of the apostles demonstrate these attitudes in their ministry. In addition to specific instructions regarding family life, the apostles modelled family principles in the way that they ministered to the churches they planted and supported.

Paul demonstrated care to the church as if in a family

1 Cor 4:15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet *you do not have* many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

1 Thess 2:11 as you know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one of you, as a father *does* his own children.

Paul acted as a father, not a professional leader. People were exhorted individually. Paul did not rely upon a brief sermon once a week but rather exhorted, admonished, witnessed to, taught, instructed, entreated, comforted, consoled, beseeched, encouraged and disciplined people face to face in their homes in order to perfect them.

Acts 20:31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

1 Thess 2:9 You remember our labour and toil, brothers and sisters; we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.

Paul ministered primarily to individuals and families with tailor made instruction. Thus Paul often taught folk in their homes and ministered night and day to ensure that people were well taught in all the truths of the Gospel.

1 Thess 2:7 But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing *mother* cherishes her own children.

Paul cared so much for his flock that his gentle ministry is likened to a mother nursing her own children. Mothers cherish their children by giving them exactly what they need, when they need it. This is true ministry. The idea that a global message given to all in a formal sermonic manner will be sufficient to teach everyone is hopeless; indeed many great preachers admitted this in their later years. People retain little of a formal speech unless they make notes and follow them up. Few today do this.

Gal 4:19 My little children, for whom I labour in birth again until Christ is formed in you,

Phil 1:8 For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.

1 Thess 2:8 So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.

Paul was frequently beside himself with worry about the churches (2 Cor 11:28) and individuals within the churches, praying for them constantly because he loved them as his own family. The brethren we dear to him, that is dearly beloved. He treated young converts like his own children.

Paul's co-workers operated as another family unit

Phil 2:22 But you know his [Timothy] proven character, that as a son with *his* father he served with me in the gospel.

Phil 2:25 Yet I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker, and fellow soldier,

Phil 4:21 The brethren who are with me greet you.

There is no sense of professionalism in Paul's apostolic teams, no flavour of professional ministry and people merely doing jobs. His teams were all about trusting relationships. Indeed Paul parted company with Barnabus when they could not agree, and family unity was vital to Paul. He trained men like apprentices on the job and loved them so that they spent themselves for the Lord, encouraged by Paul's care and example. Paul's missionary groups were genuine families.

A THIRD POINT IS THAT THE APOSTLES ACTED ACCORDING TO THEIR TEACHING AND EXERCISED THEIR MINISTRY TO THE CHURCH ON THE BASIS OF FAMILY LIFE.

How the local church functions as a family

Since the church is a real family, and since it is commanded to operate as a family in every way it functions, the emphasis in corporate ministry is fellowship or communion (*koinonia*¹⁵) not professionalism. The key emphasis regarding the Sunday meeting of the gathered church is mutual edification. This does not obviate a prepared message, neither does it prohibit more formal instruction in the week or from house to house (indeed it affirms it), but it does mean that room must be made for the participation of individual gifts. Paul spends a whole chapter insisting on this (1 Cor 12).

¹⁵ *koinonia* *koinwni,a* (Strong's 2842) meaning: fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation, intercourse; the share which one has in anything, intimacy; a gift jointly contributed, a collection or contribution as exhibiting an embodiment and proof of fellowship.

We can only touch the surface here on this large issue; a few passages will point the way.

Teaching ministry is frequently in the form of dialogue not sermonic.

There are many words translated as ‘preach’ in the English Bible, and sometimes they are a translation of the word *dialegomai*, which suggests (in this context) debate, reasoned discussion, dialogue.¹⁶ Preaching, in the sense we understand it today as a formal address, is usually in the Biblical context a preaching the Gospel to outsiders, evangelism.¹⁷

Teaching, which is the more usual word for instruction within the church, is mostly the word *dida,skw didasko*, or some form of it, (Strong’s 1321 meaning: to teach, to hold discourse with others in order to instruct them, to impart instruction, to instil doctrine into one)¹⁸ and clearly (like a schoolteacher) involves questions and answers.

This means that instead of an academic lecture every Sunday, teaching should involve the people so that questions can be raised. This is exhibited in the training of the disciples by Jesus and the ministry of Paul to his teams and his churches¹⁹. It is a normal way to train people properly – yet it is universally ignored today.

We have already seen that much of Paul’s teaching took place in homes where he trained people individually, or to husbands, wives and children. Rarely would a human father feel the need to utter a formal address in a family setting, and we must remember that the church is a family. The important matter is to teach effectively. There has probably never been as much preaching as there is today, and yet church members are riddled with more heresy than at any point in history, apart from the superstition of the Dark Ages. Effectiveness not form is the issue.

For teaching to be effective, it must involve discussion. Clearly this is difficult in large meetings, and this in itself is one reason why the NT does not envisage large meetings, but small churches in homes, where family dynamics flourish (Rm 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phm 1:2). There are no large churches in scripture, not one. Indeed, the notion of such is contrary to the whole thrust of apostolic teaching on the church as a family.

Edification is primarily corporate

The key ministry in the gathered church is mutual encouragement. This is outlined for us over and over again, and yet this crucial matter is universally ignored. Let us examine just a few instances:

- Therefore let us pursue the things which *make* for peace and the things by which one may edify another (Rm 14:19).
- Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. (1 Cor 14:26).
- Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, leading to edification. (Rm 15:2)
- Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. (Eph 4:29)

¹⁶ **diale,gomai** *dialegomai* (Strong’s 1256) meaning: 1) to think different things with one’s self, mingle thought with thought to ponder, revolve in mind 2) to converse, discourse with one, argue, discuss. Other words that are translated as ‘preach’ include: ‘proclaim’ (*kerusso*), ‘announce’, ‘declare’ (*kataggello*) and ‘evangelise’ (*euaggelizo*).

¹⁷ Paul, however, also dialogued in his preaching of the Gospel (Acts 17:17, 18:4).

¹⁸ 1 Cor 4:17; 1 Tim 2:12, 3:2, 4:11, 6:2; 2 Tim 2:2, 24; Heb 5:12.

¹⁹ Acts 20:7 ‘preached’ in KJV is *dialegomai*.

- I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets that the church may receive edification. (1 Cor 14:5)
- Let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel. (1 Cor 14:12)
- Love edifies. (1 Cor 8:1)
- Comfort each other and edify one another. (1 Thess 5:11)
- ... speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head - Christ - from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Eph 4:15-16).

The clearest picture of a NT meeting is 1 Corinthians 14 and in this chapter alone the word 'edify' (and its cognates) is mentioned 7 times. Here Paul exhorts believers to share their gifts for the good of all, that everyone may be exhorted, encouraged, edified and comforted (1 Cor 14:3).

A crucial aspect of *koinonia* is that the Holy Spirit sovereignly gives gifts to the church to ensure spiritual development (read 1 Cor 12 carefully). The Spirit gifts individuals in the body using ordinary folk to edify others in the assembly and serve the community: **But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given ... through the Spirit ...** (1 Cor 12:7-8). The expression of the Spirit is not solely given to one man, but to all.

Now note Paul's command in 1 Thess 5:19: **Do not quench the Spirit.** The word 'quench' means, 'to suppress, extinguish, stifle' as in putting out a fire. Just how may we extinguish the Holy Spirit? Surely no man can suppress the actions of God? Now this may be an allusion to the influences of the Spirit in our hearts, which like a heat and light, may be diminished by resistance. If the Spirit prompts us to love and we resist that, we have quenched the Spirit's actions in our hearts. However, the context and other related references show that Paul primarily has the body in mind. The eminent commentary by Jamieson Fausset and Brown concurs with this view.

Clearly Paul has in view the ministry of the Spirit in giving gifts to the church and prompting those gifts in service within the congregation. Paul says this in several places, particularly 1 Cor 12:7, 11: **the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all ... one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.** Furthermore, the next verse in 1 Thess 5:20 also refers to spiritual gifts by amplifying the command to not stifle the Spirit by saying, **Do not despise prophecies.** It is as if Paul says, 'Do not stifle the Spirit, for example by despising prophecies'. There is no doubt that quenching the Spirit is ignoring and stifling the gifts and ministries that he brings in the church. We disobey a clear apostolic command if we do this.

Brethren, this is a key sin in the Reformed world where the gifts and ministries present in the body are continually ignored, and the focus of the church is mostly upon one man. No matter how good this man may be, this whole system is wrong.

As in a family, service to one another is open to all the family and not some appointed official dominating the front of the meeting.

The church cares as a family

Notice the number of times 'brotherly love' is mentioned. If we are really a spiritual family, then we must act on the basis of that and care for one another in sacrificial service.

- 1 Cor 12:25-26 The members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with *it*; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with *it*.
- Eph 4:32 And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.
- Phil 2:3-4 *Let nothing be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.
- 1 Thess 5:13 Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all.
- 1 Pt 3:8 Finally, all *of you be* of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, *be* tender-hearted, *be* courteous.

These are all exhortations based upon family responsibilities. Since we are in the same family, a heavenly family, we must care for one another like human families. This means that all the bitterness, slander, schism, backbiting and such like, that is evidenced over and over again in Reformed and conservative churches, must be banished forever.

There is unity of doctrine

This is one of the curses of the modern church. There has been so much fragmentation that the variety of doctrinal stances within the church is now legion. However, we cannot ignore the fact that Paul insisted that the members of the local church all believed the same thing. It is interesting that Paul's emphasis upon unity of thinking is often closely situated near to passages on caring for one another. Truth is closely related to love.

- 1 Cor 1:10 Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.
- Rm 15:5-6 Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind *and* one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.
- Phil 1:27 Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.
- Phil 2:2 Fulfil my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind.
- Phil 3:16 Nevertheless, to *the degree* that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.

The emphasis upon unified doctrine is based upon shared life. Because we are all in Christ, in one life, in the same family, we should think the same thing. In Phil 1:27 being of one mind is literally, 'one soul'. The soul is the life, the executor of our life. We are not just meant to grudgingly and artificially ascribe to the same formal set of doctrines, but we are to be so united in thought that we all share one life together. By focusing upon the source of that life, the Lord Jesus Christ, we will find it easier to find ourselves thinking the same thing. The focus is a person not a set of rules.²⁰

Sadly, this means that those who hold unbiblical doctrines which divide flocks, and are not open to discussion, must be avoided.

- Rm 16:17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.

²⁰ This is not to deny the benefit of confessions of faith, catechisms and creeds as helpful teaching aids to growing believers.

- 1 Thess 6:3-5 If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness ... From such withdraw yourself.
- 2 Thess 3:6 But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us.
- 2 Thess 3:14 And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.
- 2 Jn 1:10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, [the doctrine of Christ] do not receive him into your house nor greet him.

The purpose of withdrawal is to focus the mind of the offender, so that he may see his error and repent. Discipline is meant to produce beneficial fruit not wrath.

This does not mean that we must separate from those who differ from us in minor issues, or doctrines that do not threaten the flock. We must be tolerant of differences held honourably that are non-threatening. For instance, if a church practices baptism by immersion and pouring according to circumstances, this church should not expel a man who personally believes that baptism is only by immersion. However, if that man starts a rebellion and seeks to persuade and unsettle others by teaching that only immersion is acceptable, then the elders must act accordingly.

Neither must we ever separate from brothers in pique or over a minor offence, even if it is a genuine offence. Personal offences must be borne by love, which covers many sins, and we must be long-suffering and forbearing to one another. In human families siblings frequently rub each other up the wrong way, but it is a tragedy if a family ever splits up over such offences.

There are many other ways in which the church acts as a family, but we do not have time to engage with all these. For instance, the local church cares financially for the poor, feeds the hungry, helps those who are widowed and helpless, alleviates the suffering of folk in affliction, bears one another's burdens etc.

THE POINT IS CLEARLY MADE THAT THE CHURCH IS NOT ONLY A REAL FAMILY UNDER GOD, BUT IT IS EXPECTED TO ACT AS A FAMILY IN EVERY ASPECT OF ITS LIFE.

What this means we are forbidden to do

We cannot itemise everything here, but can point to some key issues. In essence, we must not act like the world, but according to what we really are – a spiritual family in Christ.

We are forbidden to organise churches based on authoritative structures

This means that all the templates of church government that are based on human systems are anathema. Thus any form of one man dominating a church is utterly wrong. Whether this is by regulated authority (as in a formal institution, such as a vicar) or implicit authority (such as where there is an eldership in name only but a senior pastor rules in reality).

Any form of individual authority over multiple churches is worse still. There is no Biblical evidence to support this in the slightest. Thus titles such as 'archbishop', area 'moderator', or 'superintendent' or 'apostle' (in the current Charismatic application) are all heretical in the extreme. If it is bad for one man to dominate a congregation, how much worse is it for one man to dominate a number of congregations? This follows a business model

(Chairman, CEO, managing director) or a secular government model (prime minister, king, president, tyrant, dictator).

We are forbidden to minimise the importance of every member participation

Apart from clear scriptures that encourage ministry from the whole body, the essential dynamic of family life is that every part of the family has a role to play and is essential in the working of the whole unit. No part of the family can be dismissed out-of-hand. All parts should be honoured, especially the weaker parts.

No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honourable, on these we bestow greater honour.

(1 Cor 12:22-23)

We are forbidden to waste money on buildings that only serve to facilitate the organisation of large numbers, thus destroying family principles

There is absolutely no scriptural precedent to waste God's money on dedicated buildings to house the church. The apostles never saw this as a requirement for ministry and no church buildings were hired or erected by the apostles.²¹ Church buildings only arose with the degeneration of the church under the Emperor Constantine when churches were housed in basilicas (municipal structures)²² under imperial sponsorship.

The apostolic precedent is that individual gifts were primarily to be used for the relief of the poor, especially Christians in need. Secondly, gifts were for the support of itinerant (not local) ministers, such as apostles or evangelists. Thirdly, gifts could exceptionally support local ministers who were completely given over to prayer and preaching the word, having no time for labour. With plural eldership this is clearly rarely necessary and indeed Paul sets the precedent that even an apostle and his team workers can support themselves without straining a poor church.

There is no Biblical support for organisations

Organisations, by their very nature, are not families. They are not part of a local church but some national or international structure. Consequently, they cannot implement Biblical principles of ministry or fellowship, and thus we never see any reference to them by the apostles. All church ministry emanates from the local church and functions according to Biblical principles of family.

Worldly principles are always to be avoided

How do corrupt, divisive leaders begin? Paul says that the rot starts by their focus upon worldly, earthly things (Phil 3:18-19). This is true of most problems in the church.

We must absolutely avoid all temptations to set our minds on the earth, and must always focus upon Christ.

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Col 3:1-3)

²¹ When Paul used the Hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus he did so to facilitate evangelism by having a central place for discussion – a common feature of those times. He did this to reach the Gentiles after having opposition from Jews in the local synagogue (Acts 19:9). There were no worship meetings here but the church met in houses (1 Cor 16:19).

²² Basilica: The Latin means literally, 'royal palace'. Originally they were large meeting halls used by the Romans for public business, such as for law courts or public assemblies. They were usually rectangular in shape, with long double colonnades dividing the interior into a central nave flanked by an aisle on each side. The name 'basilica' was later adopted for early Christian churches that imitated this arrangement and the worldly style determined the future architecture of churches.

This is utterly crucial. We have died to our old life and have been raised with Christ. The life in Christ is our real life (Gal 2:20); the family of God our real family; heaven our real home and we are only pilgrims here passing through.

This means that all human, earthly, worldly, fleshly systems must be resisted at all costs. But what do we see around us?

We see a church that rushes to embrace the world in all its forms. Worship has become fleshly entertainment to tickle the emotions. Leadership is professional and salaried. Human structures are applied in myriad forms in very different types of churches. The church has managers, administrators, secretaries, counsellors and many more officers. It has a multiplicity of meetings for every conceivable occasion, none of which has any Biblical sanction. It has dedicated buildings, from small chapel halls to huge warehouses. It has PA systems and rock bands; light shows, drama and just about everything else you can think of. What it very rarely has are true family dynamics emanating from genuine family life; where numbers are small enough for everyone to know and be fully known to everyone else.

The church is a heavenly family in Christ under God. To survive the coming political holocaust it needs to once more discover how the local church meets and lives as a real family. May God give us grace to learn this in time.

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