



## PART II

### THE FOUR FOUNDATIONAL VALUES OF SPIRITUAL GROWTH

BECOMING A RELIABLE MAN



## 5

### KINGDOM IDENTITY: A MEASURE OF OUR PARTICIPATION IN GENUINE CHURCH LIFE

Nikolai was a man with a well-established identity. He was a child of God, a member of the body of Christ, and a citizen of His Kingdom. Everything about his life, talents, work, and family were expressions of his identity in Christ, and a testimony to the incredible durability of his faith. He had grown up in St. Petersburg, Russia under some of the most brutal leaders of the Soviet regime. Until he began attending the university, he and his mother, Anna, both marked as criminals because of their faith, had lived alone in a four-foot by six-foot storage closet at the end of a musty hallway in an old apartment building. They were outcasts, being pressured by the cruel circumstances in which they were forced to live, to recant their faith and embrace Soviet ideals. The severity of their lives was intended to be an exhibit against faith, sufficient to extinguish the good intentions of any observer.

Anna had survived the Stalin purges only to endure evil treatment at the hands of party officials who had selected her to suffer public humiliation instead of death. But the more they tortured and tried to brainwash her, the stronger she became in Christ. She was determined to provide for Nikolai and had turned her harsh cubicle into a warm, cozy nest. She scavenged for necessities and occasionally found favor with neighbors who would secretly leave a piece of bread, a warm slice of cooked meat, or used clothing outside her door.

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Anyone caught helping her would be guilty of treason, so the things she received came at great risk. Eventually, after several years of complete rejection, she was allowed to work, earning a few rubles each week doing the lowest and dirtiest jobs, and she was permitted to plug a tiny hotplate into a hallway light fixture to cook or make hot tea.

Nikolai's education began on his mother's knee as she told him stories from the Bible she had once owned. She explained to him that God had a plan for his life and trained him to embrace the sufferings they endured as a privilege. By the time he was of school age, he was strongly grounded in the Scriptures although he had not read a single line from the Bible. Anna boldly pressed the Soviets to allow her son to attend school. It was unprecedented, but Nikolai showed promise as an academic, so they relented. He excelled in his studies, even though he had to endure oppressive classroom drills designed to undermine his identity in Christ. And he had to attend occasional meetings with the headmaster in which he would be threatened with dismissal if he did not deny his faith. But as he passed each course level, the Lord gave him favor, and he kept studying until he had earned a doctorate in physics.

Anna and Nikolai had always enjoyed wonderful fellowship with Christ. Even during the worst parts of their ordeal they never felt completely alone because they dedicated each day to the Lord, and He was always with them. And from time to time another exile would nod to them in the train station or stop for a brief moment of fellowship at the market. These deeply satisfying contacts with fellow believers sometimes developed into secret meetings that took place on park benches, and in the darkened corners of museums or libraries, where they encouraged one another and shared small scraps of Scripture pulled from one of Stalin's fires. Anna and Nikolai's church life was genuine, and they knew what was real and necessary in their walk with Christ. When Nikolai married, it was to a wonderful young lady who had faced her own struggle for the faith and they established an extended family of powerful believers.

As far back as he could remember, the deepest desires in Nikolai's heart had been to study the Bible and teach. During his childhood there were no opportunities for such things because most of the

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Bibles and cathedrals had either been confiscated or destroyed. Thousands of priests had been murdered by the Soviets during the Stalin era and their activities had primarily been limited to maintaining archives, which were kept by monks and older priests who had survived the purges. But not long after Nikolai had completed his doctoral studies, the Russian Orthodox seminaries had been allowed to reopen and enroll students. He had long hoped that he could be part of a renewal of faith in Russia, and he was willing to sacrifice the comfortable standard of living he had gained through academics, so he enrolled in seminary, eventually becoming a priest and professor. It was at the Seminary that I first met Nikolai.

It was a great blessing to be Nikolai's friend and to enjoy times of fellowship with him at the Seminary or in my office. But my most special memories are my visits with his family at their apartment. Anna was truly a saint, and her daughter-in-law and grandchildren were a tremendous witness to their love and care for one another. A meal with them was a visit to a New Testament church meeting, as they prayed, sang, recited Scriptures and told wonderful stories of faith. It was common for us to be laughing and crying at the same time as someone recounted one of the heart-rending absurdities of Soviet life and how the Lord had routinely baffled their opponents. I always left their home encouraged and revitalized, and my problems always seemed smaller than my faith after spending an evening with these battle-tested brothers and sisters in Christ. It was what I thought church life ought to be like, although I had rarely experienced it since my earliest days in the faith. Like many of my friends, my experiences with the church had been very disappointing, and we had allowed it to extinguish our joy.

One of the things that intrigued me about Nikolai was how he had remained so free and alive in Christ through all of his seminary training and formal ministry. But to my surprise, he shared with me how he was almost as much of an outcast within the institutions of the church as he had been to the Soviets. From his very first day in seminary, they had unsuccessfully tried to turn his faithfulness to Christ into loyalty to their programs. Later he was shunned and isolated from some ministries because he had pointed out

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inconsistencies and corruption among his colleagues. They had even tried to discredit him by producing phony evidence that he was personally unreliable, but his confidence had been established in the fact that he was a citizen of the Kingdom of God, not the Russian Orthodox Church. Because he knew who he was, his life had been one of many living testimonies against the Soviet state, and it had also become a testimony against the bureaucracies of the church. He had withstood the conforming pressures of two of the most powerful institutions in history by clinging to the most fundamental truth. They had not given him his faith and they could not take it away.

*Kingdom identity is a measure of our participation in genuine church life.* God has a plan for every person that includes how, when, and where we fit into the body of Christ for each part of our life. It is a dynamic plan that requires freedom of movement within the Kingdom and active participation by each believer in worship, training, fellowship, and service. God wants us to experience a variety of ministry gifts and relationships that are intended to teach us how to become functioning parts of His family, “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

The basic organizational unit of the Kingdom of God is relationship. It is by the power of our Spirit-born relationship with God through Jesus Christ, that the “called out” (*ekklesia*, #1577) escape a life of sin and death. And as each of us “called out” brothers and sisters “walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7). This is the nature of our relationship with God and one another, and it is not dependent upon any other relationship, power, charter, creed, or institution. When the Soviets demeaned Nikolai and Anna, trying to get them to renounce their faith, they were oppressing God’s “called out.” When the institutional church shunned and ridiculed Nikolai for refusing to conform to their standards, they were oppressing God’s “called out.” When we “walk in the light” alone, as two, or with many, we are the “called out.” It is upon the foundation of this unshakable identity that all other tenets of the faith are built.

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God's "called out" people picked up the nickname *Christians* during the first century. In Acts 11:26 Luke writes that, "for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church (called out, #1557) and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians (followers of Christ, #5546) first at Antioch." For at least ten centuries following Antioch, those people who professed a relationship with God through Jesus Christ were known as the "called out" or simply Christians. Then, because of various changes in language and culture, the word "church" was coined. So each time you see the word "church" in the New Testament, it literally means the "called out" people who profess to have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. When we refer to "church life," we are referring to the kind of life to be lived by the "called out." *When we refer to the "institutional church," we are referring to the man-made religious institutions, which have been used to organize the "called out" people of God.*

And just as language has evolved and sometimes confused our identity, so have the rules and regulations men have tried to invoke in an effort to hold together their particular sect or denomination. It's obvious that in the process of congregating people, developing infrastructures, and figuring out how to manage and finance them, men have sometimes forgotten that "the Lord is God," and that, "we are his people, the sheep of his pasture" (Psalms 100:3). It is necessary to debunk some of those rules and philosophies so that we can be free to serve the Lord both as individuals and as functioning members of the body of Christ. To the many men and their families who have begun their walk with Christ deeply desiring a genuine church life, only to be oppressed or exiled from fellowship because of their inability to conform to a man-made religious system, we offer some practical alternatives.

### **Meet with the Church at Home and in Public**

Over the centuries the word "church" has become synonymous with the buildings in which we meet. In fact, Sunday morning meetings in a church-owned building have become the focal point of church life. What we do when we meet together has changed dramatically from New Testament times, but not just because of

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church buildings. During the period 312-325 A.D. the Roman Emperor, Constantine, created one of the first and most widely-copied institutional churches, with buildings, corporate authority, and a more refined form of public worship with professional ministers. (See Appendix). Since then, the vitality and power of the church have progressively diminished, as impersonal public meetings and religious bureaucracy have slowly replaced a relational church life.

In Acts 20:20 (NAS) the Apostle Paul said, “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house.” There is evidence in both Scripture and history to support the viewpoint that the church met in homes and in public places. But the New Testament pattern for church life was primarily based upon a small-group, participant form of worship and fellowship that took place in homes, not public meetings. It was a lifestyle in which God could set the lonely in families (Psalms 68:6) and the “called out” ministered to one another’s needs. Jesus said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35); and the identity of the church became a loving and caring community. The broad meaning of the Greek word *koinonia* (#2842) is “the share we have or the part we play by participating in community, fellowship, communion, or a gift jointly contributed.” This gives great significance to 1 John 1:7, which says, “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship (*koinonia*) with one another.”

The mutual and reciprocal nature of ministry between the “called out” is highlighted in the term “one another.” It is used in John 13:35 when Jesus said, “If you love one another” and in 1 John 1:7, “we have fellowship with one another.” These words “one another” indicate active participation in ministry as opposed to just being a member of an audience. Then in Hebrews 10:24-25 we are urged to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.” You might be more familiar with a portion of the King James Version of verse 25, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together,” which is widely misquoted to make you afraid to miss Sunday morning services at



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an institutional church. But do those kinds of public services really fulfill God's purposes for ministry to "one another?" Standing together to sing a hymn or greeting your neighbor as you're being seated is usually the closest thing to mutual participation that a public meeting has to offer, unless there is an altar call or prayer circle where the believers pray for one another.

I became a follower of Christ on a Monday night in my brother-in-law's office in a private school. Then on Wednesday night, I attended a meeting at an institutional church. On Saturday night I attended my first home meeting, which was not affiliated with any local church. It was a house-to-house meeting of the "called out" who attended several different institutional churches in town. On Sunday morning I was back in the institutional church. I soon began to realize, as many men have, that there were things about the public services which often left me dulled in my spirit instead of stimulated to "love and good deeds." But I almost never left a home meeting without being encouraged in my faith. Sometimes what I needed to see, hear, say, or experience took place during a meal together, or during our discussions about the Bible, or prayer times, or as we sang and worshiped together. Or it might have been during a lingering conversation in the driveway or as we worked together to help someone in need.

The public meetings primarily helped me to realize that we were only a small part of the Kingdom of God, which caused me to enjoy my meetings with individuals and small groups even more. I did appreciate the corporate sense of praise and worship the public meetings provided, but too often the interests of the pastors were not the same as ours. Their focus wasn't so much on helping us draw near to the Lord as it was on the various projects or programs they were advocating to perpetuate their institution. One thing is certain, there were not many opportunities to participate and grow in faith during the public meetings.

Men have tried and failed to fit into the lifestyle of the institutional church for centuries. They often describe it as dull or monotonous, with dry, sometimes manipulative, sermons that have no relevance to their daily grind. Many are put off by the repeated emphasis on money, building programs, and membership, which

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draw our attention away from the Lord to the institution's purposes. Some leave quietly; while others depart in anger because of inconsistencies that church leaders could not reasonably explain. These men join the many millions who are trapped between their desires for something real and lasting in Christ and their refusal to continue in a religious system that has failed them. The solution to this dilemma includes recognizing three important facts:

First, the institutional church's programs, infrastructure, and Sunday morning meetings have become synonymous with the biblical mandate for God's people to "gather." But neither Scripture, history, nor archeology confirms them as the New Testament model.

Second, home meetings are a priority of church life. They should be a primary activity of the "called out," not an afterthought or a tool for managing church growth as the institutional church has made them.

Third, believers have a legitimate biblical need for meeting both in small groups and in public for worship and fellowship, but they are free in Christ to exercise their creativity about when, where, and how to meet.

There are three questions that, for most believers, have framed the dilemma regarding these facts:

First, if it's true that the public meetings of the typical institutional church do not properly represent the New Testament pattern, why have they remained so unchangeable?

Second, if it's true that home meetings should be a higher priority than public meetings, why has the institutional church's activities always centered on the Sunday morning public meeting?

Third, if everyone is free to choose which public and home meetings they want to attend, including the institutional church, why has the institutional church remained so dominant?

These are troubling questions since there is no record in the New Testament of church-owned buildings, nor professional "pastors" giving lectures each Sunday to a denominationally-segregated section of the body of Christ. Both history and archeology indicate that the church met in small groups, from house to house, and occasionally at some public place where more than one home meeting could gather together. The primary ministry activities were

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non-professional, requiring each person to contribute his or her gift or talent to the success of the meeting and to participate as an active learner and maturing member of the “called out.” So why has the institutional church’s rigid format remained intact and become the most prevalent representative of the church to the world? It is because of the self-preserving nature of religious institutions and their power to entice or condemn their followers into conformance.

An institution is defined as “a significant practice, relationship, or organization in a society or culture.” To institutionalize means, “to incorporate into a structured and often highly formalized system.” As each member of the “called out” is incorporated into the systems of the institutional church, it becomes more difficult to make a distinction between the institution and the people who sustain it. *Thus, when we mention the institutional church we are referring to both the corporate structure and the people who organize and operate its systems.* Every person who has tried to bring change to an institution has learned from experience that institutions don’t reform or change in practical ways very easily, if at all. They usually only make slight adjustments to their doctrines and practices to settle divisions among their membership or to attract the next generation of supporters as the demographics of a society change. Institutions realize that when the marketplace changes, they must develop new marketing techniques to remain viable. But the values that define an institution almost always remain the same.

Religious institutions are unusually resistant to change because of the way their members become emotionally and spiritually entangled in their traditions. Guided by misplaced zeal, their leaders often defend unscriptural practices by quoting false doctrines that may have been misinterpreted and legitimized for generations by people they have been taught to revere. In many cases, they have unwittingly “rejected the law of the Lord and have not kept His statutes; their lies also have led them astray, those after which their fathers walked” (Amos 2:4 NAS). Confronting a religious institution about the error of one of its rules or regulations often arouses powerful emotions that can be intensified by pride, politics, and economics. Institutional leaders may also fear they will open a

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floodgate of unanswerable questions if they admit to a significant error. So they can become a compelling force of rejection to anyone who questions the validity of their institution's policies, especially when it has been presumed that they speak on behalf of God.

A typical conversation with someone about his or her problems with the institutional church usually includes a statement similar to this: "I would like to leave, but I don't know how to solve the problem of not forsaking the assembly." This reference to Hebrews 10:25 demonstrates the power to condemn that a mistakenly-applied Scripture can have, especially when the institutional church has become synonymous with the "called out," or with public meetings. Jesus made a simple but powerful promise to each of us who follow Him. In Matthew 18:20 He said, "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." You can attend an institutional church if you want, but it is not mandated. You are the "called out," the church; and God has a divine purpose for you when you meet with other believers. And His purpose is more likely to be realized in a small group.

My wife and I have a few close friends with whom we often go to dinner or share an evening in some way. Although we usually have a lot of fun together, our evenings are also sprinkled with serious discussions about our work, kids, relationships, and church life. One night as we enjoyed fellowship with a couple at our favorite yogurt shop, we talked seriously about how most of the people we knew were longing for something more than what the institutional church offers. We had spent about three hours together discussing one another's ideas and problems when I thought to ask this question. "Do you believe the spiritual experience we've had tonight is equal to, less than, or greater than what normally takes place in a public meeting of the institutional church?" Everyone answered simultaneously, "greater, much greater."

So I continued to probe: "Do you believe the Lord has met with us and has given us wisdom tonight?" Again they answered, "Yes, of course." "And has our sharing of the Scriptures been as relevant, less relevant, or more relevant to our lives than what takes place in a typical service at the institutional church? Is our knowledge of how to pray for one another more specific, less specific, or equal

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to what we could have learned about each other in the hallway after Sunday services? Are we more likely, less likely, or equally as likely to take these lessons home and actually live them out?” As we answered each of these questions we realized that the best experiences that most public meetings have to offer are only occasionally equal to, and rarely greater than, what takes place in small groups where we can share intimately about our lives with people we trust. It’s not the size or venue of the meeting or its institutional authority that should concern us, but the ministry to “one another” that we must be careful “not to forsake.”

### **Teach and Admonish One Another**

A “disciple” is a “learner” (#3101) and learning is a process “to gain knowledge, understanding, or skill by study, instruction, or experience.” Almost no one would disagree with these definitions even though the primary educational method of the institutional church has been the Sunday morning sermon. A sermon is a Christian speech given by pastors who are separated by a wide variety of personality types and delivery styles, but connected by one common handicap—they are attempting to deliver critical spiritual information by a method that is extremely ineffective. Sermons are usually conveyed without discussion, questions, or any legitimate instructional feedback from the learners. Every educator knows that these fundamentals of interaction are essential for learning to take place and that their consistent absence indicates a failure to seriously consider the objectives of learning.

As do many things that don’t make sense about the institutional church, the practice of gathering into a “church” building to hear a pulpit-delivered sermon from the same man week after week, without educational interaction, dates back to Emperor Constantine. When he made the Christian church an official religion of the state, he was careful to provide for it in a manner equal to the other state-funded religion, which was “sun worship.” The Emperor appointed the church hierarchy and they exercised executive powers over the members of their congregations on his behalf. In return for these simple yet profound compromises, this institutionalized church was provided the comforts and resources of an official state religion,

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with a politically-empowered organizational infrastructure and the guarantee of protection from persecution. (See Appendix.)

The benefit to Constantine's government was a manageable society of cooperative believers. And like any institution, the partisans of the institutional church soon became accustomed to the level of order and control their new authority gave them. Before long they had established "the ministry" as a profession with their own criteria for accepting other men into what by then had become an industry. For the next twelve hundred years there were many developments including an established order of worship and seminary training for those who desired to enter "service." Like all traditions and institutions, each passing generation declared the previous generation's religious advances (or mistakes) as holy and built upon them. By the time Martin Luther came along in 1517, only the priests could read, study, or teach the Bible. (See Appendix.)

Luther, a Roman Catholic priest, became disillusioned by the way his superiors abused their authority and with many of the institutional church's perverted and sometimes occult practices. Everything was for sale, including forgiveness of sins, as men bargained and battled for the title of Bishop just as they would for the authority any political or commercial franchise brings. Although Luther sincerely tried to bring reform, the Roman Catholic Church summarily rejected him. He was excommunicated, along with many disgruntled priests and members who left with him. In short, they then proceeded to establish another institutional church with a modified order of worship and an increased emphasis on Greco-Roman rhetoric, or speech making, which we now call "preaching." Luther was also instrumental in the development of a pastoral "job description" that has evolved into the modern day pastor-teacher-CEO, and for which there is no basis in Scripture. (See Appendix.)

Luther's efforts proved one thing beyond any doubt: Religious institutions do not easily reform. They sometimes achieve measurable change but usually fail to get to the heart of the matter, only further dividing the church. With all of the historical weight theologians have given Luther's effort, there is one revealing fact that defines the level of success of the reform movement. On October 31, 1999, four hundred and eighty-two years after the

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“protestant reform” began, the Roman Catholic Church finally agreed to officially recognize that “salvation is by faith” ([lutheranworld.org](http://lutheranworld.org)). But little, if anything, has changed inside the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, Martin Luther’s work, although significant for its renewal of individual faith in God, primarily resulted in a proliferation of protestant denominations, each with its own institutional distinction. It is from these traditions that the educational methods of the modern institutional church sprang forth.

In Colossians 3:16, the Apostle Paul wrote these instructions about what should take place when the “called out” meet together: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.” Here again is the emphasis on “one another.” Unfortunately, institutionalized people prefer the Constantine and Luther forms of meeting together because they require little or no preparation by believers who want to sit in an audience. But it is the very pressure of being responsible to learn and then teach, first at home, and then when the “called out” meet together, that helps create spiritual growth and maturity. No one learns like someone preparing to teach and be held accountable for what he says. This is why Paul calls for “reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

When you recall some of the examples the institutional church has provided as teachers, it’s easy to see why a man might think twice about trying to teach the Bible even in a small group. If he believes that he is expected to make dynamic Christian speeches like the professional pastors do on Sunday, he has the wrong idea altogether. And for the most part, so do the professional pastors. Too much of what I have seen is akin to theater, not ministry. I was asked to attend a meeting of secular foundation executives a few years ago that took place during one of our “televangelist” scandals. I had been invited specifically because I was a “person of faith” and they wanted to hear my perspective on some of the issues with which they were grappling. Their most riveting question was this one: “How do you know who is real and who is not when you see these

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guys on television.” It was one of those hushed moments when everyone was listening and I knew the Lord did not want me to give them a “know your Bible” answer. So I pondered for a moment until this thought came to me. “Try to imagine Jesus saying and doing the things that you see these people saying and doing on T.V. with all of their affectations and theatrics. If you don’t feel a sense of embarrassment, it’s probably O.K.” They looked stunned, and then very sincerely said, “Thank you, we’ve always wondered.”

A lot of men don’t know whether or not to reject some of the teaching models we have seen, but their common sense tells them they don’t want to copy their styles. They would rightly feel embarrassed, not necessarily by what they say (although it can get pretty strange) but more so by how they say it. Once the ministry became a profession, it naturally produced all kinds of aberrations from the extremely “pious” to the extremely ridiculous. Besides the fact that we are not making a very good impression on the world by letting these guys represent us, they have a tendency to either quench the spirit in most men or drive them away from the church altogether. I wonder how many men have wrongly thought they could not teach or lead because they were unable to feel comfortable strutting in front of a large crowd at a public meeting, or thought they must be slick, eloquent, or highly educated to do the Lord’s work.

Ephesians 4:11 describes some of the ministries the Lord has provided for His work to be accomplished. There are two common interpretations of this passage, depending on the setting in which it is taught. The most prevalent lists five ministries—apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. This view is sometimes advocated by the people who have become aware of the limitations of listening to one man teach every Sunday. It gives them what they believe is a scriptural option to have someone other than their pastor, preferably a “teacher,” do some of the teaching. The second, and I think the more accurate interpretation, lists four ministries—apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. This interpretation, unfortunately, strengthens the argument of the Constantine-Luther followers who think the pastor is “the” teacher. But either way, there are at least two problems with the way this Scripture is applied by the institutional church.



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First, whether you believe Ephesians 4:11 actually describes four or five ministries, one thing is clear: Each of them should fulfill much more than their traditionally understood roles because each performs a teaching function. Evangelists often say important things not directly related to an altar call for the lost. And prophets have a lot more to say than what can be reasonably shouted out during a pause in the worship service. The teaching function of apostles is beyond doubt. What remain are pastors and teachers or pastor-teachers. But all of these ministries have an instructional purpose that is better understood by reading this passage in its context.

It was he [the Lord] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, *to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.*

Ephesians 4:11-13

Second, where are the ministries other than pastor-teacher supposed to fit into God's plan and provide their instruction? If you are a Constantine-Luther institutional church member, you believe they are either away at seminary preparing to fit into the pastor-teacher mold that awaits them, volunteering in the Sunday School or visitation ministry, or have been "sent out" as a missionary or "para-church ministry" to reach the lost and poor. Coincidentally, you also believe that the tithe belongs to the institutional church and that the other three or four ministries are supposed to forage among the body of Christ for whatever "contributions" are available after the tithe has gone to the "local church." Any way you look at it, the institutional church has invested heavily in its pastor-teacher model and has a tight grip on who does ministry.

But what if most of the people who are supposed to fulfill the four teaching or instructional ministries described in Ephesians 4:11 are truck drivers, tradesmen, pharmacists, office workers, teachers,

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salesmen, and managers—just normal people who make their living at a job while they maintain their responsibilities at home? What if God has intended for them to share about their life in a small group, discuss the Scriptures with one another, and teach those who are younger or less experienced? What if the institutional church has emphasized their professional pastor-teacher model so much that they have virtually eliminated the place of these other ministries and their various ways to be supported. The answer might be found in a more literal translation of pastor-teacher, which is “herdsman-teacher” or “shepherd-teacher,” and a more realistic understanding of the scriptural model for learning.

The most common model for teaching described in the New Testament is dialogue or discussion. Although in some verses the Greek word *dialegomai* (#1256) is erroneously translated as “preaching,” it is more accurately translated as “discussing” or “reasoning.” It is not merely a speech, nor is it a conversation without purpose. It often begins with the teacher saying thoroughly what he wants to present followed by a discussion. However, the teacher’s lesson could be interspersed throughout a discussion, with questions, answers, and arguments becoming a part of the learning process. In many respects, it is very similar to what might happen at a family meeting or around a dinner table, with the father giving instructions about how something should be done, moderating a discussion, or settling a dispute. Another more commonly used Greek word is *didasko* (#1321) which is translated as “teach” or literally “to hold discourse with others in order to instruct them.” When you think about it logically, it’s the kind of thing a shepherd-teacher would do.

In Acts 17:17, we are told that Paul “reasoned (#1256) in the synagogue with the Jews and the God fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.” In Acts 19:9, “he took the disciples with him and had discussions (#1256) daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.” And in Acts 5:42, we are told that the disciples continued “day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching (#1321) and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.” A meeting of the “called out” is described in Acts 20:7-11 which clearly shows the interactive shepherd-teacher nature of Paul’s ministry.

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On the first day of the week *we came together to break bread*. Paul *spoke* (#1256) to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight. There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were meeting. Seated in a window was a young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul *talked* (#1256) on and on. When he was sound asleep, he fell to the ground from the third story and was picked up dead. Paul went down, threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “He’s alive!” Then he went upstairs again and *broke bread and ate*. After *talking* (#3656) until daylight, he left.

Acts 20:7-11

There are several things here to be emphasized. For instance, they obviously came together on the first day of the week (vs. 7) to break bread and eat (vs. 7 and 11) and have a discussion or reason together (vs. 7 and 9). This doesn’t sound like anything the typical institutional church would do, even occasionally, for Sunday services. But to get a further idea how the usage of words change and evolve, in verse eleven the Greek word *homileo* (#3656) is translated as “talking.” This is the word which the Constantine-Luther institutional churches and their seminaries have institutionalized into “homiletics” or “preaching.” Essentially, it has become part of the speech-making doctrine of the institutional church even though the original word really means, “to be in company with, to converse, or to commune.” That’s what shepherd-teachers do. They fellowship and teach one-on-one, in small groups, from house to house, and in public. It’s something that a lot of men are capable of doing very well.

In Matthew 16:7, 12 Jesus said to His disciples, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” After some discussion, His disciples understood that “He was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees,” the New Testament equivalent of the institutional church. The challenge for every man is whether he

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will be active or passive in his walk with Christ. If you are actively following Christ, the “teaching” that you will be required to do, at home or in a small group of the “called out,” will come to you very naturally. But if you are passively sitting in an audience absorbing and following the doctrines of the institutional church, you will never learn to teach and lead.

### **Minister the Gifts of the Holy Spirit**

There are many advantages to meeting in a home, not the least of which is the increased willingness of most people to confess their sins or use their spiritual gifts. One of my earliest recollections of Spirit-led ministry was a visit to a man’s home to counsel with him about his intense problem with anger. He was a fairly successful businessman, and otherwise very kind, but he sometimes erupted into a cursing tirade over simple disagreements with his customers. He had become a follower of Christ and was deeply convicted about his behavior. As we sat and prayed with him, we asked the Lord to show us what was hindering his ability to fully repent and be free. When I closed my eyes I could see the head and shoulders of a man dressed in a white Ku Klux Klan hood. It was one of my first experiences in receiving a word of knowledge and I hesitated to mention it to the man. Finally I said, “Do you know anything about the KKK?” The color drained from his face, then he admitted he had been very involved with the KKK prior to his coming to Christ and no one in his family knew about it, not even his wife. The power of secret sin had taken its toll, but was no match for the power of repentance. He was like a new man after he renounced the various aspects of this gripping demonic covenant.

The man who teamed with me to pray that night was a postal worker. Another partner who often prayed with me was a merger-acquisitions analyst for a large company. One night a painting contractor and I prayed for his mother. Another time a schoolteacher and I prayed for his son. A retired military officer was also a regular team member. We came from all walks of life and were all “amateurs.” Whenever we met in home church meetings, the results were stirring as people confessed their sins and were set free from torment. One night a couple brought their son, a drug-addicted

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Navy seaman who had received a weekend pass from a federal drug treatment center. It was a sovereignly arranged meeting as we asked the Lord to lead us to the roots of his addiction. When he gave his heart to the Lord, and renounced his addictive lifestyle, he was wonderfully delivered from drugs. He became a tremendous witness in the Navy and later a missionary. This kind of New Testament ministry was commonplace in our meetings, and people were often miraculously healed and filled with the Holy Spirit.

In a large building with a crowd, the people who are most likely to speak or minister are the extroverts and, of course, important people like “Queen Elizabeth” who showed up in a service I once attended and demanded to be recognized. As with most troubled people who attend the public meetings of the institutional church, the ushers quickly escorted “the Queen” out through a side door. The probability of her receiving any real ministry was virtually nonexistent. In an institutional church setting there are usually very few people who have been “approved” to minister, and then only in limited ways. Even in “Spirit-filled” meetings, the institutional church’s concerns about keeping order and limiting legal liability often restrict the “called out” from providing genuine Spirit-led ministry to those who might need it.

One of the things the institutional church says it is trying to accomplish by putting limits on whom it will allow to minister, is to obey the admonition “to know them which labor among you” given by the Apostle Paul in 1Thessalonians 5:12-13 (KJV). The Greek word here translated as “know” literally means “to perceive, notice, or discover; or with eyes wide open, to discern clearly” (#1492). But keep in mind that this Scripture was not written to an institutionalized church. It was written to the “called out.” I am certain that my prayer partners were better known to me (because of our time together in a home church) than the institutional church typically knows anyone who has filled out a form and attended personal-ministry training. Even pastors who are “under the authority” of a denominational board are rarely as well-known as they should be before they are licensed to minister. The institutional church has a poor record of “keeping the ministry pure,” as evidenced by the number of local and national scandals. Even when they succeed, their process often shuts off ministry by the “called out.”

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Another thing the institutional church emphasizes in its effort to control the ministry activities that take place is its concern that “everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:40). While this Scripture is actually speaking of the orderly use of the gifts of the Spirit, they mistake it to mean that their Constantine-Luther order of worship should be done in an orderly way, with no interruptions except to occasionally say “Amen” during the sermon. Ironically, most of their concerns about order are created by the very nature of their meetings. Since there are rarely any discussions about the sermon or active participation in Spirit-led ministry by the “called out,” they have produced an arena that is ripe for striving by both frustrated members and the strange visitors that sometimes show up. It’s hard to imagine that the institutional church’s vision for ministry is what the Lord had in mind, because of the way it has extinguished ministry by the “called out.” The following are a few scriptural perspectives about how each of us should be ministering the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

Romans 12:4-8

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for

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the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11

<sup>1</sup>Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.

<sup>12</sup>So it is with you. Since you are eager to have spiritual gifts, try to excel in gifts that build up the church.

<sup>26</sup>What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church.

<sup>39</sup>Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.

<sup>40</sup>But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

1 Corinthians 14:1, 12, 26, 39, 40

A reasonable person reading these Scriptures with an open mind can easily see that some of the doctrinal positions various segments of the institutional church have developed are unbiblical. For example, some say that there are no miracles or healing today. Some say that there are neither living prophets nor prophetic utterances. Some admonish us neither to seek nor forbid speaking in tongues and other spiritual gifts. And nearly all tell us to leave the ministry to the professionals. Each such conclusion requires a very twisted

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application of the Scriptures. Equally as difficult to comprehend is how all of the ministry gifts described in these Scriptures could possibly find expression through the institutional church's Constantine-Luther model of the pastor-teacher as he conducts a public meeting on Sunday mornings.

As you sort out all of the modern issues, you can also identify how the institutional church has become so concerned about protecting its assets and income from the lawsuits that might occur as a result of some ministry activities, that in some cases it has virtually shut them down. It's true that an institution that has no solid scriptural basis for its model of ministry, is operated by flashy professional staff with expensive buildings and deep tax-free pockets of income, and has failed to retain the public confidence, is a juicy legal target. But an un-credentialed volunteer, who is not being compensated, is not representing an institutional church, and is invited into a person's home to minister to a family member, is almost free from liability. As you can see, the ministry plan that was used in New Testament times is still relevant today.

When I first began to counsel and pray with men and their families, I was shocked to discover how many "church" people were trapped in tormenting sin. The people I counseled had regularly attended public services (often three times a week) and sometimes attended "approved" fellowship groups, yet without relief. They were completely sincere people who were serving the Lord the way they had been taught. But the institutional church's agenda had left them struggling with life as the confused victims of their own sins in a powerless spiritual environment. I found myself routinely giving counsel or ministry that set people free from sin and at the same time put them at variance with the things they had learned on Sunday mornings from their inexperienced pastor. The irony was that their pastors had usually been "in the ministry" for many years and I was just a young businessman, but I was not intimidated by my lack of credentials. My confidence was in the Scriptures and the personal healing and deliverance I had received from the Lord. I also had many irrefutable experiences in ministering the gifts of the Holy Spirit to others.

One of those life-shaping experiences came on a short mission trip to a Caribbean Island. It was a thoroughly evangelized place



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where the Baptist missionary comes through on Monday, the Presbyterians on Tuesday, the Pentecostals on Wednesday, and then the various witchcraft cults and covens the rest of the week. It was not unusual for people to attend both church and witchcraft services. So almost everyone you met had heard the “gospel” as well as the doctrines of the various witchcraft religions, whose priests attracted many people with their powerful demonstrations and rituals. We held several meetings and spent most of our time praying for the sick and oppressed, helping them discover the pure power of fellowship with God. At the end of one of our more dramatic meetings, a “deacon” from a local church and his wife invited me to their home the next day for lunch and to pray for their daughter. I immediately felt the Lord nudge me to accept their invitation and agreed to visit them.

Their home was nicely kept and a little upscale for the area in which they lived. As I entered the front gate I could hear a lot of noise coming from behind the house and an eerie howling sound, very much like a coyote. There were about ten children playing outside and twenty to thirty adults standing around. When they saw me they all stopped what they were doing and gathered around a small wooden hut behind the house that was about eight feet square. It was built on stilts about three feet above the ground and had no windows, only two double Dutch doors. The tops of both doors were opened but the bottoms were closed and bolted on the outside. As I got closer, I could hear howling, hissing, and thrashing sounds coming from the hut. I knew that it could be a cockfight or some other strange diversion which was common to the islands, so I braced myself and peered carefully through the doorway. There, inside the bare walls and floor of what I then realized was a “cage,” was a little three year old girl literally bouncing off the walls. It was she who was making all the noise.

Her parents turned to me and asked, “Can you help?” I stood there for a moment almost in shock, thinking and praying, wondering what the Lord would have me do. Then I simply replied, “I’ll try.” As soon as I said those words, a godly confidence began to rise inside me. I reached over, unbolted the door, stepped inside the cage, and closed the door behind me in what felt like a single motion. The little girl turned and looked at me with a demonic

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glare that sent chills up my back. Then she went totally wild, running around and around the hut, slamming against the walls, and screaming, “No! No!” in a loud ear-piercing shriek. It was not the voice or the strength of a little girl. The whole hut shook from the force of her pounding. The Lord whispered to me, “Sit down in the middle of the hut.” So I sat down and crossed my legs, pivoting only slightly to the right or left to keep eye contact with her as she circled around me.

As she continued to howl and scream, I very quietly started repeating the name of Jesus. “Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus.” Then very gently, “Jesus is Lord . . . Jesus is Lord.” As I did, the little girl began to focus as though she were listening to me. In about ten minutes she came to a complete stop, sitting in a corner looking directly at me. I kept up the vigil, always looking directly into her eyes, “Jesus . . . Jesus . . . Jesus is Lord.” Then “Jesus loves you . . . Jesus loves you.” She suddenly got up from the corner, walked over to me and sat down in my lap leaning up against my chest. Then I whispered in her ear, “Let her go in Jesus’ name. I rebuke you in the name of Jesus. Let her go, in Jesus’ name.” Her little back and arms stiffened like rods and then she let out a deep, long sigh and slumped into my arms, asleep. She was free.

As I sat there holding her, I silently asked the Lord, “How could a demon have such complete control of a three year old girl?” His response was stunning. “This little girl was conceived during an Obi ritual.” (Obi was a witchcraft religion widely practiced on the island and her mother had an adulterous relationship with one of its priests.) He also said, “Her mother has been afraid to confess her sin to her husband. Tell her to confess and I will forgive her and remove the curses from their family.” I got up and headed for the house, handing the little girl to another lady. The little girl’s mother looked at me as though she knew what was coming. I took her and her husband into the kitchen and privately repeated all that the Lord had shown me. The lady completely repented and asked God (and her husband) to forgive her. Then I left the two of them to talk and pray alone.

I remember the Scripture that was given to me by the evangelist who had invited me to come to the island. It was Acts 10:37-38:

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You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

When I asked him what he wanted me to do on the trip, he encouraged me to do whatever Jesus would have done had He visited the island. No man who has experienced such an event could ever again be satisfied with the limitations of the institutional church. That was God's plan. He had to take me outside of what, for me, were the normal perimeters of church life and ministry to let me see how much more there was to the Kingdom of God than I had experienced before.

### **Practice Generosity and Benevolence**

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to

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visit you?” The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.” They also will answer, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?” He will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.” Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

Matthew 25:31-46

The “called out” have a consistent testimony of wanting to help the poor and extend mercy to a wide variety of social and moral needs. But when you think of the institutional church, generosity and benevolence are not the first things you would associate with its activities. In fact, many of the people who have turned away from the institutional church point to its lack of concern for the poor as one of the foremost reasons they left. The reluctance of pastors to commit significant money to the poor and destitute, or even people with needs within their own congregations is relatively common, although they might regularly preach about it in their sermons. They usually have to be prodded by some fervent soul to spend “the church’s money” on benevolent actions. Ask anyone who has started a “Matthew 25 ministry” and that person will consistently describe how difficult it is to convert the enthusiastic support of the pastor into reliable finances.

Actually, I had some good experiences related to benevolence and ministry to the poor when I served as an associate pastor of an institutional church. With over six thousand people attending each

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Sunday, we had a fairly generous budget for helping the needy, both from our congregation and from the community. Although there was not much flexibility in our procedures, we were able to get real needs met in a timely fashion and without humiliating the recipients in the process. In one instance, I learned that a fellow-member who had asked for help with his rent and electricity was experiencing a downturn in his small construction business. As we talked I discovered that he had a simple two-to-three day project that would provide him with a profit of about four times the money he needed from us. But he no longer had credit from his suppliers so he could not buy the materials to start the job.

While he waited, I went to the church administrator and made a case for investing in the man's life, instead of only being benevolent. I obtained a variance from our procedures so we could write a single check to him personally, instead of separate checks to the electric company and the landlord. With our full knowledge and consent, he could use the money to buy the supplies he needed to start his project. I will never forget the look on his face when I explained that we wanted to express our confidence in him. He received an instant infusion of hope that accomplished much more than benevolence alone ever could have. Of course, it was not a blind investment. I knew him. And the results were fantastic. By the end of the week, he finished his project, paid his bills and had enough cash to finance the next two jobs.

We have also had some heart-breaking disappointments attempting to help people. It's shocking the lies some people are willing to tell in order to get money they know would not be given to them any other way. And no matter how experienced you become, there is some risk that you will give money where you shouldn't, or that you might not handle things as sensitively as you wanted. Plus, there are people who will make you feel used by their lack of appreciation or the attitude of entitlement that is now widespread in society. But all in all, it's very simple. Benevolence is part of the work of the "called out" and we need to remind ourselves that when we do these things we are serving the Lord, Himself. Even with all of our mistakes and frailties, when we give, He receives it. This attitude has made the majority of our contacts with people in need a wonderfully satisfying and rewarding part of our service to Christ.

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People from all walks of life share a natural affinity for acts of generosity especially when children or the elderly are involved. Most of us can recall a time when our family or someone we knew faced a serious financial crisis and the tremendous mental pressures it created. It was just that kind of personal empathy that motivated some friends of ours to start a ministry to “street people.” Gary and Beth did not fit the profile of the typical street ministry leaders. They were white, upper-middle-class entrepreneurs whose only ministry experience was serving as an usher or hostess at various church events. Gary was a “salt-of-the-earth” guy who had built a profitable business brokerage with honesty and hard work. He was quiet, cooperative, and always ready to help a neighbor or friend. The only visible indulgence of his success was his shiny new truck, which he kept filled with the latest fishing tackle. But behind his peaceful exterior was a heart that agonized over the plight of the homeless.

Gary and Beth had made a practice of praying over each business deal and had depended upon the Lord to provide the financing and guide them through every closing. They had prospered greatly and often spent time asking God how they should help others. Their giving had always exceeded a tithe and had been done quietly and without fanfare, although they were known to be generous supporters of the ministries of their church. After one particularly profitable sale, they sat down to figure the tithe and offerings they wanted to give. It came to a healthy sum and to their surprise, when they prayed about what to do with it, they felt reluctant to give it to their church. Since the church was in the middle of a difficult building program and was having trouble meeting its financial goals, they had thought the Lord might have them add the new contributions to their already significant pledge. But God had other plans. He wanted Gary and Beth to start a part-time ministry to the homeless and fund it themselves.

They were absolutely delirious with joy because what God was asking them to do aligned perfectly with the deep motives of their hearts. Before long, several friends from church volunteered to help, and their plans literally began to fall into place, moved along by the sovereignty of the Lord. It was the way they had always thought the

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body of Christ should operate, with someone receiving a vision for service from the Lord and the people and resources being pulled together as the Holy Spirit nudged each person into his or her part of the plan.

When I met with them to discuss their vision, I was immediately struck by the grace of God on their plans, so I was not at all surprised to see their ideas so enthusiastically supported by their friends. But just as they had started to gain momentum, they hit a major roadblock. They had a meeting with their pastor and he had strongly discouraged them from attempting their new ministry. He pointed out that there were other ministries in the city working with the poor and that their lack of experience would limit their success. He also encouraged them to stay focused on the ministries of their church and help them fulfill the vision for the new building. When I next saw them the sparkle was gone from their eyes. They were sincerely confused about how they could have been so wrong about God's purposes and why there had apparently been so much grace on their progress. If they were wrong, why didn't all their friends see it? If they were right, why didn't their pastor support them?

As we sat in their home discussing their dilemma, I was reminded of how many other ministries I had seen the institutional church snuff out in their infancy. I had consulted with many men and their families over the years who had been given almost exactly the same counsel as Gary and Beth from this and other churches around town. Not only that, I knew of one instance where a young entrepreneur, misguided by presumptuous faith and trying to gain favor with his church's leaders, actually paid his pledge to a building program, instead of paying an equal debt to the IRS. The church, knowing what he was doing, accepted the money and stood by quietly as he went bankrupt. The young man and his family moved out of state and had to live out of their car until he could find work. It took him several years to recover from the financial and emotional mess his poorly counseled decision had caused.

Fortunately, Gary and Beth realized the subjective nature of their pastor's counsel and chose to reject it in favor of the consistently positive insights of other close friends and advisors. They believed the Lord could give them wisdom in doing this work of service just like He had always done in their business. Thousands of meals,

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showers, changes of clothing, and changed lives later, we rejoiced with them for God's sustaining grace. We knew with certainty that their obedience to the Lord had reached hundreds of people for Christ whom the institutional church would never have touched.

The institutional church is characteristically unable to be selfless and turn its energy and resources to serving people the way they really need to be served. Its finances are usually tied to its own agenda, which is almost always dominated by buildings, pastoral salaries, and a few programs primarily designed to continue the institution. As it is with any economic entity, the size of the budget "nut" that must be cracked each month has a dramatic effect on its vision. The necessities of the organization come first and what's left is applied to missions, benevolence, and other acts of mercy. This means that a lot of important ministries that are mentioned from the pulpit never get any real attention. Typically, volunteers making special contributions of their time or money do most of the work that touches people's lives. Behind this inconsistency is a centuries-old conflict about how to finance the ministries outlined in Matthew 25. The solution can be found in the answers to two very simple questions.

First, to whom were the mandates of Matthew 25:31-46 directed? Again, it's hard to imagine that the Lord is going to be separating the institutional church's denominations into sheep and goat categories. Nor is it reasonable to think that it's only pastors who will be judged this way. These Scriptures obviously apply to every member of the "called out." There is no provision in Scripture for anyone to abandon his responsibility to perform these acts of mercy or to hire someone to do all of them on his behalf. So each of us must find the Lord's will regarding our giving.

Second, how are these mandates supposed to be financed? Malachi 3:10 says, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house." You often hear pastors stating in a very matter-of-fact tone that this scripture means, "the tithe belongs to the local church." They believe that the institutional churches are "the" branch banks of the Kingdom of God. In fact, they essentially tell us to deposit our tithe with them so that they can do the work of ministry and decide who eats from the storehouse. But



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unfortunately, the money is used primarily to fund their role as a Constantine-Luther pastor-teacher. So their priorities are quite obvious.

Usually, no more than ten to twenty percent of the budget of the institutional church gets applied to activities not associated with supporting Sunday services. In some smaller congregations even less is available after the infrastructure and staff are funded. It's not unusual for the institutional church to spend five to ten times as much to preserve its Constantine-Luther infrastructure as it does to spread the Gospel or minister to the poor. Imagine being able to increase the impact of your tithes and contributions by five hundred to one thousand percent simply by choosing not to support that agenda. Five families could have the same impact in a community as twenty five to fifty families in the institutional church.

The Lord clearly wants the “called out” to support a wider variety of ministries and acts of mercy than those the institutional church has traditionally helped. To do so, the branch banks of the Kingdom of God's storehouse have to be wherever God tells you they are. Contrary to what the institutional church has taught, you are and always have been free to deposit your tithes and offerings in a street ministry, or to a widow down the street, or to someone who is out of work, or to a missionary, or to the single mom who can't pay her rent, or to help with someone's hospital bill, or to the hungry, thirsty, or poorly clothed person the Lord sends across your path, or to anyone, anywhere that the Lord presses on your heart, even to the institutional church. Remember, even if the institutional church were able to efficiently and effectively perform the ministries of Matthew 25, and limit its other expenditures to reasonable infrastructure and salaries (which it rarely does), it still could not relieve you of your individual responsibility to give, nor call itself “the storehouse.” At best, it is only one of many depositories authorized by the Lord.

A very practical place to learn benevolence is in a home church. By keeping your own private ledger of what your tithe should be and setting it aside, ready to be distributed, you can enjoy participating in a wide variety of fulfilling ministry opportunities. When someone knows of a need, you can talk about it together and

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wisely determine what the need is and how it should be met. Then each person or family can decide what part, if any, the Lord wants them to contribute. For everyone who's concerned about his tax deductions, there are a number of simple options for combining funds in one shared account or keeping separate ledgers within one account. You can also keep your tithes in your own checking account until the Lord directs you to give. Just ask the person who does your taxes or a friendly accountant for advice. But even without the tax deduction, when people are free to follow the Lord's prompting, innovate, serve one another, and reach out to the lost, wonderful things can happen.

### **Celebrate Truth and Faithfulness**

One of the foundational principles of the institutional church is loyalty. It is a highly valued attribute that must be clearly demonstrated before full acceptance and participation in organizational life is granted. Passing the loyalty test has become a "rite of passage" not only into leadership but often just to participate in routine acts of service or fellowship. Even when it is not spoken about, loyalty to the pastor, denomination, doctrines, creeds, and policies is expected. If you express an idea or attitude that is perceived as disloyal or non-conforming, it can produce the chill of condemnation or rejection. The organizational and relational expectations for loyalty are so universally accepted that they feel natural to most people, except when they realize they have been forced to ignore or rationalize sin, deny truth, or keep silent about simple facts.

When you think about what loyalty requires, you can't imagine Jesus and His disciples expecting it of one another, especially since all through the Scriptures God is described as faithful, not loyal. I was sharing my thoughts about loyalty at a friend's home one evening and he looked at me in horror, as though I was speaking a heresy. He had been a longtime adherent of the institutional church and I could see that the discussion was making him feel very insecure. So I asked him this question: "Do you think I have been loyal to you?" He stopped for a minute, thinking back about all the ways I had served him, asking nothing in return. We had been friends for

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many years and since he was “in the ministry,” I had helped him with an assortment of business and personal issues. “I have been sure of your loyalty, at least until now,” he said. “I am sorry to disappoint you,” I said, “but I don’t believe in loyalty, because it is based upon fear and control. And I don’t trust relationships that are not mutually accountable. The difference between a loyal slave and a faithful friend is an honest, truthful relationship.”

My friend was a Hebrew scholar and seminary professor so his next thought was to begin checking different Scriptures to see what the Hebrew word really meant. He thought that I might be just splitting hairs over something insignificant, but what I had discovered was much more than that. We got on the computer together and as he rattled off Scripture addresses, I pulled up the original words and definitions from the Bible software. “What about Hosea 6:4-6?” he asked. This is one of the Scriptures most commonly referred to by pastors whose goal is to exhort people to be loyal to the institutional church and its programs. It says:

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? For your *loyalty* (#2617) is like a morning cloud, and like the dew which goes away early. Therefore I have hewn them in pieces by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of My mouth; and the judgments on you are like the light that goes forth. For I delight in *loyalty* (#2617) rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Hosea 6:4-6 NAS

This Scripture can be very misleading and condemning if you believe it requires loyalty because the Lord is apparently thrashing His people via the words of His prophets for their disobedience (just like the pastors frequently do). But the Hebrew word “cheched” (#2617) is interchangeably translated as “mercy, kindness, goodness or faithfulness,” throughout the Old Testament. It is not correct to translate it as loyalty. In Matthew 9:13, and again in Matthew 12:7, Jesus repeats these important words, “I desire *mercy* (#1656), not

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sacrifice.” This Greek word has virtually the same meaning. It is translated as “mercy, kindness, or goodness.” So God was rebuking His people for not being merciful, kind, good, and faithful, not for lacking loyalty. And He obviously desires these attributes more than any sacrifice.

“Checed” is the same word used in Exodus 34:6 (NAS) where God meets with Moses on Mt. Sinai and describes His own nature to him. It says, “The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in *loving kindness* (#2617) and *truth* (#571).” The word translated here as “truth” is also accurately translated as “certainty, trustworthy, reliable, or faithful, as to facts.” This is very important because all through the Scriptures God links mercy, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, and truth together. It is fair to say that there are two fundamental aspects to the faithfulness of God, and all dependable relationships. One is to be kind and merciful, and the other is to be true to the facts. This is the intent of the exhortation in Hosea 6, and the real mandate for every follower of Christ.

So how has the concept of loyalty worked its way so thoroughly into the fabric of the institutional church? Again, we can look back to Constantine to get an idea. When he established his institutional church, he appointed himself as the primary authority. He also placed icons of himself and the twelve original apostles in the first church building, thus elevating his spiritual stature. Then he appointed bishops to exercise a top-down style of authority that mirrored the power of the emperor. The final authority on all issues of church life, including the order of worship and finances rested with the bishop. (See Appendix.) It is this framework of authority to which Luther later attached his pastoral job description and which has evolved into the modern pastor-teacher-CEO. In the process, truth, mercy, and mutual accountability were stripped away and what’s left is loyalty.

After searching through several translations of the Bible and discovering that every location where the word loyal or loyalty is used was actually “checed” or some other equivalent of mercy or truth, my friend was prepared to accept the fact that loyalty is not a legitimate Kingdom concept. Instead what the Bible consistently

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requires of men is truth, faithfulness, and the reasonable accountability that relationships enable. No one is exempt, not pastors or bishops or popes, or any member of the “called out.” We must be willing to absorb the pain of confrontation in order to help a friend find truth or to receive it from him. Zechariah 7:9 tells us to “administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another.” Proverbs 27:6 (NAS) says “the wounds of a friend” are “faithful” (like a parent or nurse who is supportive, #539).

Just like being a parent, the responsibilities that accompany truth and faithfulness in our relationships are not always pleasant. But they are worth the effort, even when they require long hours of late night discussions or intense debates about the facts. Anyone who has caught one of their children in an act of disobedience, only to see them stand defiantly and deny their guilt, knows how frustrating it can be to explain to someone who is entangled in sin, that the accountability you represent is an extension of God’s love to them. That’s why most men want to avoid the work involved in correcting mistakes or misunderstandings, especially in the institutional church. But when we do not love people enough to correct them, they only go on to greater sins.

That was certainly the case with Mr. J. T. Park. Even though he had been in the institutional church since before I was born, he didn’t quite fit my concept of a church elder. He was in his sixties and had been very successful in business and politics. But he often sounded evasive when he answered a question and rarely had much to say that reflected any spiritual depth. He almost never looked at you when he spoke, always shifting his glance away or seeming to be somehow preoccupied. There was something about him that made me feel uncomfortable, even though he acted like a harmless older man busy with church life. Mr. Park was chairman of the building committee, which met regularly with the pastor to discuss the plans for our future as a congregation. Together, they had developed an impressive master plan for our expansion, which had been presented to the church as “God’s vision,” and was widely supported.

When rumors began to surface that Mr. Park might be connected to some kind of illegal business deal, the pastor quickly dismissed

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them as “politics.” “After all,” he said, “Mr. Park was essential to our building program. He was regularly in negotiations with city and county officials and we should expect the devil to be attacking us, trying to undermine his credibility and sidetrack our plans.” The men who best knew Mr. Park and had done business with him strongly agreed with the pastor. But I had an uneasy feeling so I asked the pastor what, if anything, had been done to check out the rumors. His face turned blood red. He was obviously angry; but before he could respond, some of the men in the room came to his defense, arguing that we needed to trust these things to his leadership. The meeting broke into confusion and ended with several men speaking at once, arguing for or against the reasonableness of my question.

I had become increasingly troubled at how many times I was finding myself “out of step” with the elders of the church, and I knew that this incident would bring with it more of the cool relations that came with expressing any kind of disunity. A few nights later, as I was putting down newspaper to train our new puppy, my eyes fell on an interesting headline tucked away in a back section of the paper, “Local Businessman on Trial in Atlanta Federal Court for Money Laundering.” I knew instantly that it somehow involved Mr. Park, and sure enough, the article mentioned his name as having given testimony. I decided to do my own research and find out what one of our elders could possibly have to do with this case, which involved another prominent citizen accused of laundering money from drug trafficking. I contacted the clerk of the court and ordered a copy of his testimony.

Several months later, I found myself sitting across the table from Mr. Park at a local restaurant, with a manila envelope at my side containing his testimony. I thanked him for meeting with me and then proceeded to ask him some very specific questions to which he very calmly and convincingly responded with lies. Finally, he boldly asked me if I was satisfied with his answers, or did I have any others to ask. I answered very directly, as I laid the envelope on the table, “No, Mr. Park, I am not satisfied, because all the things that you have told me today are in direct conflict with this transcript of the testimony that you gave under oath.” He exploded with rage. The

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calm assurance he had projected disappeared as he launched into a vulgar, cursing tirade. “Who the (expletive deleted) do you think you are talking to me like that? No one in the church has talked to me like that in fifty years. You have no authority to be involved in this.”

I had all of the authority I needed. I was his brother in Christ and a fellow-elder, either of which carried with it both the authority and responsibility to get to the truth. But the most revealing part of this exchange was that apparently no one had ever taken the time to research the facts and question him about this or who knows what else that had happened over fifty years. He had learned from experience that if you busy yourself in church business and are loyal to the leadership, it’s unlikely that anyone will seriously check out your story. I leaned across the table and looked straight into his tormented face. “I apologize to you Mr. Park, on behalf of the church, because we have obviously failed you to allow you to have gotten this far off course and not know it.”

When we think and speak truthfully from our heart, and expect truth to be the minimum requirement in our relationships, we are building a strong spiritual foundation. And just as importantly, we must test the reliability of any important fact or perception. It is every man’s right and responsibility to become “morally persuaded of the truth.” In fact that is the definition of “faith” (#4102). When there’s a question about the facts, we should take the time to sift through them until we are fully persuaded. In a practical sense, the man who has not made truth and the pursuit of reliable facts his first priority is destined to a life of disappointment and confusion. Why? Because our family, friends, colleagues, and customers will suffer the consequences of our unnecessary mistakes.

If Mr. Park had continued to be a faithful truth-seeker, he would have never entered into an even potentially-illegal arrangement. Or if he had been faithfully participating in a home church, his inconsistent life would probably have been discovered and challenged long before it became so bizarre. But like a lot of men in the institutional church, his concerns about integrity had probably been diminished by the many years he had participated in church politics. With all the pressure to be loyal, I can also understand how easy it

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was for my colleagues to rationalize the rumors about him or to push them aside as someone else's responsibility. The institutional church does not celebrate truth and faithfulness. But if I had ignored my convictions, and shirked my duty to seek the truth, I not only would have been disobeying the Lord, I could have been placed in the very embarrassing position that eventually confronted some of my fellow elders. More importantly though, the episode strengthened my faith about the significance of following my conscience. As King David said:

I have chosen the way of truth; I have set my heart on your laws. I hold fast to your statutes, O Lord; do not let me be put to shame. I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free. Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.

Psalm 119:30-37