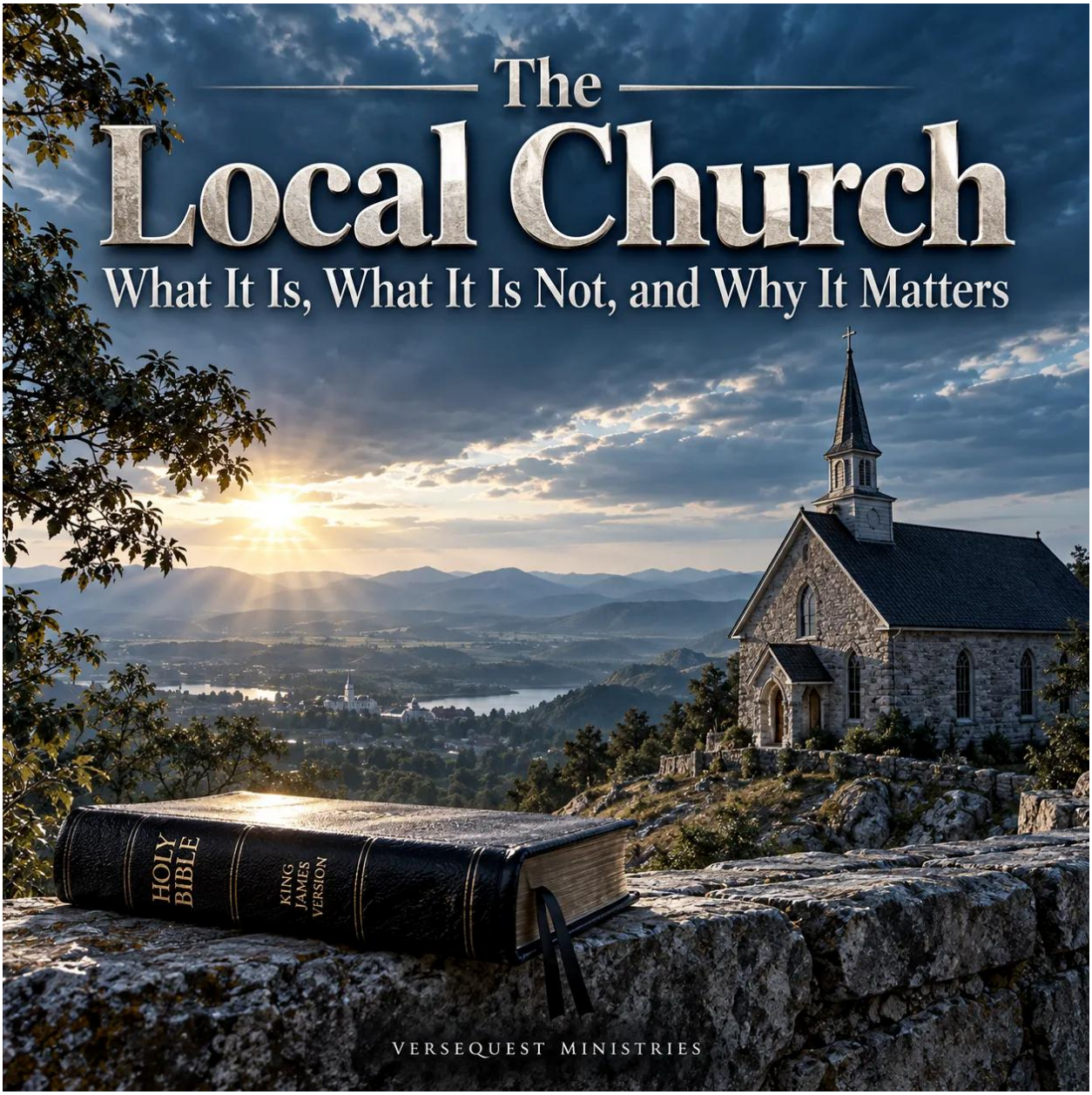
The Local Church

What It Is, What It Is Not, and Why It Matters

Series 1-10

By Paul Tackett

VerseQuest Ministries




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**The Local Church**
*What It Is, What It Is Not, and Why It Matters*

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**Published by VerseQuest Ministries**
First Edition — 2026

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The accompanying Bible study chart is included as an educational resource to reinforce the scriptural subjects examined throughout this ten-part series.

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*Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*

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**The Local Church**

*What It Is, What It Is Not, and Why It Matters*

**Introduction**

There is probably no institution in modern Christianity that has been more romanticized, commercialized, institutionalized, idolized, and misunderstood than the local church. Some people treat it as the very doorway into heaven, while others regard it as an unnecessary religious inconvenience that can be replaced with a King James Bible, a comfortable recliner, and a dependable internet connection. One crowd worships the building, another worships the preacher, another worships the denomination, and another has become so impressed with its own spiritual independence that it no longer believes the brethren have anything meaningful to contribute. Meanwhile, the New Testament stands open, plainly describing an assembly of redeemed sinners gathered under the authority of Jesus Christ, instructed by the word of God, and responsible for worship, fellowship, service, evangelism, and mutual accountability. The confusion is not because God failed to explain what a church ought to be. It is because men have spent centuries attempting to improve upon what God already established. Paul declared, "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11). That settles the foundation before the first brick is laid, the first offering is collected, or the first preacher climbs behind the pulpit. **A church may possess a magnificent steeple, a million-dollar sound system, and enough religious programs to exhaust an entire congregation, but if Jesus Christ is no longer the foundation, all that remains is an expensive religious circus operating beneath a Christian sign.**

The first order of business is to understand what the local church actually is, because religious confusion begins when men start calling different things by the same name and pretending the distinctions do not matter. The spiritual body of Christ is not identical to one particular congregation. The nation of Israel is not the Church wearing a different uniform. A building is not made holy because somebody fastened a cross above the entrance, and a denomination does not acquire divine authority merely because its history stretches backward through several centuries of religious politics. First Corinthians 12:13 declares that believers are baptized by one Spirit into one body, while 1 Corinthians 10:32 distinguishes Jews, Gentiles, and the church of God. Those distinctions are there for a reason. Yet Scripture also identifies actual local assemblies, including "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2), where believers gathered, learned, worshipped, corrected wrongdoing, and served together. Jesus Christ is the Head of His Church, and Acts 20:28 identifies the congregation as belonging to God, purchased with His own blood. That ownership cannot be transferred to a pope, bishop, pastor, denominational

convention, wealthy contributor, or religious committee. **The church is not a spiritual real estate investment, a denominational franchise, or a private kingdom established for the convenience of religious professionals. Christ purchased the flock, and no earthly shepherd has the authority to change the name on the title deed.**

Church membership itself has become a monument to theological confusion. Entire generations have been taught to trust baptismal certificates, confirmation records, membership cards, sacramental participation, and years of faithful attendance as though heaven maintained its records according to the church secretary's filing cabinet. Yet Ephesians 2:8–9 declares, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Salvation belongs to Jesus Christ, not to an institution that claims to administer it. Acts 2:41 records that those who gladly received the word were baptized and added to the believers, while the following verse describes their continuing steadfastly in apostolic doctrine and fellowship. The order matters. The gospel comes first, and the responsibilities of Christian fellowship follow. But another error has developed among Christians who correctly reject salvation through church membership and then incorrectly conclude that congregational participation is unnecessary. They can explain eternal security, debate dispensational distinctions, and identify false teaching from three continents away, but ask them to help a struggling brother, and their spiritual availability suddenly disappears. **A name on the church roll cannot place a sinner in heaven, but a name written in heaven ought to mean something among the brethren down here. Salvation is free, but faithful Christian living was never advertised as a lifetime exemption from responsibility.**

Then there is the question of leadership, where the situation can become downright ridiculous if it were not so spiritually serious. The New Testament pastor is commanded to feed the flock, not fleece it, frighten it, flatter it, or turn it into a personal financial enterprise. First Peter 5:2–3 commands elders to exercise oversight willingly, without filthy lucre, and without behaving as lords over God's heritage. The qualifications established in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 emphasize character, doctrinal soundness, self-control, and responsible conduct rather than popularity, impressive titles, or fundraising ability. Nevertheless, some religious leaders have managed to turn pastoral oversight into a miniature monarchy, complete with unquestioning subjects, privileged financial arrangements, and severe penalties for anyone who dares examine the Scriptures. Others have abandoned biblical authority altogether, becoming hired entertainers who adjust their preaching whenever the congregation threatens to withhold applause or offerings. Both extremes disgrace the office. The preacher is not a pope in a smaller building, and the congregation is not a committee authorized to edit the King James Bible according to popular demand. Second Timothy 4:2 commands, "Preach the word; be instant in season,

out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." **The pulpit was never intended to be a throne for religious dictators or a stage for professional entertainers. It is a place where the word of God ought to be proclaimed without apology, manipulation, or compromise.**

Worship has suffered its own remarkable transformation. Modern Christianity has developed extraordinary technical abilities for manufacturing atmosphere while frequently neglecting the biblical substance that makes worship meaningful. Churches can coordinate lighting, musical arrangements, theatrical smoke, dramatic pauses, and emotional crescendos with astonishing precision, yet sometimes struggle to explain why any of those activities should be considered worship in the first place. The Lord Jesus Christ declared, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24). Not merely in excitement, not merely in tradition, and certainly not according to the technical capabilities of an audio department. Colossians 3:16 connects congregational singing with the word of Christ dwelling richly among believers, while 1 Corinthians 14 emphasizes understanding, edification, and orderly conduct. Genuine worship may involve singing, joy, thanksgiving, reverence, tears, and sincere emotion, but emotional reactions do not establish spiritual truth. Neither does reverence require a congregation to behave as though salvation were a tragedy and every expression of joy constituted a violation of church regulations. **One congregation tries to manufacture the Holy Spirit with a smoke machine, while another has apparently buried every evidence of Christian joy beneath a hundred years of religious furniture. The answer to both is the same: open the Bible, honor Jesus Christ, and remember who was supposed to be worshipped in the first place.**

The ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper reveal another dividing line between biblical instruction and religious tradition. Water baptism identifies the believer with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but water cannot wash away the guilt of sin. Acts 8:36–38 records the Ethiopian confessing faith in Christ before being baptized, and 1 Corinthians 1:17 distinguishes Paul's commission to preach the gospel from the act of baptism itself. Likewise, the Lord's supper commemorates Christ's sacrifice and proclaims His death until He comes, as 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 establishes. It does not repeat Calvary, transform ordinary bread into another physical sacrifice, or give a religious institution control over the believer's eternal standing. Hebrews 10:14 declares, "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." One offering. Not an endless succession of ceremonies designed to complete what the Son of God supposedly left unfinished. Yet rejecting sacramental salvation does not excuse Christians from obeying the ordinances Christ established. The symbols matter precisely because of the Saviour they represent. **The baptistry is not the fountain of eternal life, the communion table is**

**not another Calvary, and the preacher is not a priestly middleman controlling access to redemption. Water can make a sinner wet, bread can satisfy physical hunger, but only Jesus Christ can save a soul.**

Then we come to the responsibilities that modern Christians often find considerably less entertaining than theological debates: fellowship, correction, accountability, and bearing one another's burdens. Hebrews 10:24–25 instructs believers to consider one another and avoid forsaking their assembling together, while Galatians 6:2 commands, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." These are practical instructions requiring more than a weekly religious appearance or an enthusiastic response beneath somebody's social-media post. A sick believer may need visitation. A struggling family may need assistance. A grieving brother may need encouragement. A Christian overtaken in a fault may need restoration rather than public humiliation. The congregation must exercise biblical discipline when serious wrongdoing threatens its fellowship, as 1 Corinthians 5 demonstrates, while remembering the importance of meekness, forgiveness, and restoration established in Galatians 6:1 and 2 Corinthians 2:6–8. Neither institutional tyranny nor uncontrolled independence satisfies Scripture. A church that never corrects sin eventually teaches its members that holiness is negotiable, while a church that never extends mercy has forgotten the grace upon which its own salvation depends. **It is astonishing how many Christians can spend an entire evening arguing about biblical love while remaining unwilling to spend fifteen minutes demonstrating it. The Lord did not command believers merely to admire one another's doctrinal knowledge. He commanded them to love one another.**

Evangelism must also be restored to its rightful place, because the local church was never commissioned to become a religious marketing company competing for the largest audience. The risen Christ declared, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19), while Romans 10:17 explains, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The gospel is not a sales presentation, and conversion is not a statistical achievement produced by clever promotional methods. First Corinthians 15:3–4 establishes the message: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. A congregation may possess a magnificent auditorium, professional musicians, sophisticated advertising, and an impressive digital audience without producing meaningful biblical discipleship. Conversely, a modest assembly with limited resources may faithfully proclaim Christ and accomplish work of eternal significance that never appears in a denominational report. Gospel literature, missionary support, personal witnessing, biblical publishing, and digital teaching can all serve legitimate purposes, but none should be confused with the entire responsibility of a local assembly. **A church that attracts a thousand spectators but**

**cannot explain the new birth has mastered promotion while neglecting its commission. The Great Commission was not an invitation to sell tickets to a religious performance; it was a command to proclaim Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world.**

Throughout this examination, one distinction must remain immovable: the local church is neither the Saviour nor a substitute for the Saviour. It cannot confer regeneration, complete redemption, preserve eternal life, or improve upon the finished work of Jesus Christ. Neither does its inability to save make its biblical responsibilities unnecessary. Christians are not commanded to worship institutions, blindly obey abusive leaders, defend corrupt congregations, or remain beneath false doctrine merely to maintain an appearance of loyalty. They are commanded to follow Christ, search the Scriptures, receive sound teaching, exercise discernment, and love the brethren. No congregation is composed of perfect people, and no preacher possesses the authority of an infallible monarch. The answer to corruption is not institutional idolatry, and the answer to religious disappointment is not permanent spiritual isolation. **The local church matters because Christ matters, His word matters, His people matter, and the responsibilities He established do not disappear merely because human beings sometimes make a miserable mess of carrying them out.** Over these ten essays, we will examine the foundation, membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, fellowship, ordinances, discipline, evangelism, and accountability of the local church according to the King James Bible. We will challenge religious tradition where it contradicts Scripture, expose spiritual pride where it masquerades as independence, and insist upon keeping Jesus Christ in His rightful place as the Head of His Church. **The building is not the Saviour. The pastor is not the Saviour. The denomination is not the Saviour. The congregation is not the Saviour. Jesus Christ alone saves sinners, but the same Lord who saves them also commands them to love, encourage, correct, strengthen, and serve one another. A Christian does not need a church to become saved, but being saved is no excuse for pretending he does not need the brethren. Saved sheep need more than a sermon. They need a Shepherd, His word, and a flock.**

**1 of 10 — The Local Church — Built on the Rock, Not the Religious Circus**

Key Passage: "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11)

**Introduction**

A church can have a magnificent building, a polished choir, a comfortable nursery, a preacher with three degrees, and a congregation large enough to fill a football stadium, and still be standing on the wrong foundation. That is not an exaggeration. That is the very danger the Apostle Paul addressed when he wrote, "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11). Paul was not writing to a gathering of atheists who had never heard the gospel. He was writing to the church at Corinth, where believers had become divided over personalities, preachers, and religious loyalties. Some claimed Paul, others Apollos, and others Cephas, as though Christianity were a competition between ministerial celebrities. Two thousand years later, the names on the church signs have changed, the buildings have become more expensive, and the religious machinery has grown considerably more sophisticated, but the disease remains the same. Men are still trying to build something impressive around Jesus Christ while quietly pushing Him out of the center. When a church becomes more interested in displaying its achievements than declaring its Saviour, the foundation has already begun disappearing beneath the furniture.

The New Testament local church is neither a religious corporation nor a spiritual amusement park. It is an assembly of believers gathered under the authority of Jesus Christ, instructed by the word of God, united in fellowship, and responsible for carrying out the work entrusted to the congregation. The building is not the church. The denomination is not the church. The preacher is not the church. The church treasury, the membership directory, the musical instruments, and the elaborate calendar of activities do not become the church merely because somebody places a cross above the entrance. Scripture makes distinctions that modern religion repeatedly ignores. There is the spiritual body of Christ, into which believers are placed by the Holy Spirit. There are local assemblies of Christians meeting in identifiable congregations. There is the nation of Israel, possessing particular covenant promises that have not been transferred to a Gentile denomination. And there are man-made religious institutions that may contain genuine believers without possessing independent authority over the Scriptures. Confusing these categories produces a theological mess that no amount of stained glass can conceal.

The local church matters because God did not design the Christian life to function as a collection of disconnected individuals who occasionally listen to the same sermon. Believers need biblical teaching, fellowship, encouragement, correction, prayer, service, and responsible spiritual leadership. Yet none of those responsibilities gives a congregation permission to replace Jesus Christ with institutional authority. The same Bible that commands Christians not to forsake assembling together also warns against false teachers, spiritual corruption, and leaders who make merchandise of God's people. We must therefore reject two equally foolish extremes: the religious establishment that

expects unconditional loyalty because it owns a building, and the independent believer who imagines that a Bible, a reclining chair, and an internet connection have eliminated every responsibility to the brethren. The question is not whether an institution can manufacture impressive religious activity. The question is whether an assembly is actually functioning according to the Scriptures. Before examining membership, leadership, worship, ordinances, discipline, and evangelism, we must first establish the foundation. A church built upon anything other than Jesus Christ may grow larger, richer, and louder, but it cannot grow more biblical by becoming more impressive.

**1. The Rock Beneath the Church Is Not a Man in Religious Clothing**

The first recorded declaration concerning Christ building His church appears in Matthew 16, where the Lord questioned His disciples concerning His identity. After hearing the conflicting opinions circulating among the people, Peter answered, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16). That confession stands at the center of the passage. Peter was not announcing the establishment of a religious dynasty, nor was he presenting himself as the future monarch of Christianity. He was identifying Jesus as the promised Christ and the Son of the living God. The Lord answered that flesh and blood had not revealed this truth unto Peter, but His Father in heaven. Then came the declaration: "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18). Notice the ownership in that statement. Christ said, "my church." He did not announce Peter's church, Caesar's church, Rome's church, or the headquarters of some future religious corporation. The foundation of Christianity is not a man who needs forgiveness, but the Christ who provides it.

Some religious systems have constructed elaborate claims of institutional supremacy upon this passage, treating Peter as the beginning of an uninterrupted earthly monarchy supposedly possessing authority over every Christian conscience. But the larger testimony of Scripture identifies Jesus Christ as the foundation and the chief corner stone. Paul leaves no uncertainty in 1 Corinthians 3:11, while Peter himself describes Christ as "a chief corner stone, elect, precious" (1 Peter 2:6). Ephesians 2:20 presents the household of God as "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone." The apostles supplied foundational testimony concerning Christ; they did not replace Him. Their authority was derived from the Lord and expressed through His revealed truth. A religious institution cannot transform that testimony into permission to manufacture doctrines contrary to Scripture. Peter needed correction, suffered personal failure, and depended upon the same redeeming Lord as every other sinner. Turning a fallible apostle into the supreme foundation of Christianity is rather like appointing the scaffolding to own the building after the Master Builder has finished the work.

Christ's declaration that the gates of hell would not prevail against His church is a tremendous promise, but it must not be twisted into a guarantee that every congregation bearing His name will remain faithful. Individual churches can become corrupt, abandon sound doctrine, and face judgment for their unfaithfulness. The Lord's promise concerns the ultimate triumph of His work, not the permanent approval of every organization claiming to represent Him. Matthew 7:24–27 provides a vivid illustration of the necessity of a sound foundation. The wise man built upon a rock, while the foolish man built upon sand, and the difference became unmistakable when the storm arrived. In that passage, Christ emphasized hearing and doing His sayings, not the performance of religious ceremonies. The application to church life is plain. A congregation cannot substitute popularity for obedience and expect spiritual stability. The storm does not ask whether the building has a denominational certificate hanging in the hallway. It reveals what the building is standing upon.

**2. The Only Foundation That Heaven Recognizes**

When Paul declared that no other foundation could be laid than Jesus Christ, he spoke within a passage addressing the responsibility of those laboring in God's work. He wrote, "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:9). The following verse describes Paul's responsibility as a wise masterbuilder who had laid the foundation, while others built upon it. This was not an invitation for future ministers to invent new foundations whenever religious fashions changed. It was a warning that those laboring among God's people must take heed how they build. A pastor may possess tremendous preaching ability and still construct a ministry around personal admiration. A congregation may achieve extraordinary numerical growth while gradually exchanging biblical conviction for public approval. Some assemblies measure success by seating capacity, parking availability, and financial reserves, as though the Lord intends to examine their annual reports instead of their faithfulness. A crowded sanctuary is not necessarily a sound church, and an empty parking space is not necessarily evidence of spiritual failure.

Paul continued by describing the materials used in building upon the foundation: "gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble" (1 Corinthians 3:12). The contrast is deliberate. Some work possesses lasting value; other work cannot endure the testing of fire. In verses 13–15, Paul explains that the day will reveal every man's work and that reward or loss will follow according to what remains. This concerns the testing of Christian labor, not the purchasing of salvation through religious accomplishments. Indeed, verse 15 declares concerning the man whose work is burned, "he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire." Salvation rests upon Jesus Christ, while the believer's labor is subject to examination. That

distinction destroys the notion that religious busyness automatically produces divine approval. A preacher may spend decades building a personal empire only to discover that heaven was never impressed with the advertising. The Judgment Seat of Christ will not be a denominational awards banquet. God knows the difference between faithful service and impressive religious machinery.

The danger becomes even clearer when we consider the Lord's message to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:1–7. Here was an identifiable congregation with genuine works, labor, patience, and opposition to false apostles. Nevertheless, Christ declared, "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." (Revelation 2:4). He commanded repentance and warned that its candlestick could be removed. This is a sobering reminder that an assembly can possess admirable outward qualities while suffering serious spiritual deterioration. The Lord Jesus Christ walks among the churches, examines their condition, and possesses authority to rebuke them. He is not impressed merely because a congregation has maintained its traditions or preserved a respected public reputation. A local church must continually measure its teaching, priorities, and conduct against the Scriptures. Religious machinery has a peculiar tendency to keep running long after the spiritual purpose has been forgotten. The greatest danger facing a church is not always the enemy standing outside its doors, but the possibility that Christ has been pushed aside while everybody inside continues conducting business in His name.

**3. A Church Is an Assembly of People, Not a Piece of Real Estate**

The New Testament repeatedly identifies churches by the believers composing them rather than the architecture surrounding them. Paul referred to "the church that is in their house" (Romans 16:5), and a similar expression appears in Philemon 1:2. These were genuine congregations without the elaborate facilities many Christians now associate with proper church life. Their spiritual legitimacy did not depend upon a dedicated auditorium, a polished pulpit, or a professionally designed sign beside the road. In 1 Corinthians 14:23, Paul speaks of "the whole church" coming "together into one place," demonstrating that the assembly consists of people who gather rather than the location where they happen to meet. Buildings can be useful, and there is nothing inherently wrong with purchasing property or providing suitable facilities. The mistake begins when the property becomes the definition of the church itself. If the building burns down tomorrow, the believers do not cease being believers, nor does their responsibility to assemble disappear. You can destroy a church building with a wrecking ball, but you cannot demolish the body of Christ with construction equipment.

Consider how deeply religious architecture influences modern thinking. People speak of entering God's house as though the Almighty has taken up permanent residence in a particular arrangement of lumber, carpet, lighting fixtures, and heating equipment. Yet Stephen declared, "Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (Acts 7:48). Paul made the same essential point in Acts 17:24 while addressing the Athenians. Those statements do not deny the historical importance of Israel's tabernacle and temple, which occupied their proper places within God's dealings with that nation. They demonstrate that the living God cannot be confined to human construction. Under the present dispensation, believers themselves are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, as taught in 1 Corinthians 6:19. The church building may provide shelter from rain, comfortable seating, classrooms, and a place for orderly gatherings, but none of those conveniences makes the building sacred by nature. A congregation with expensive chandeliers and no biblical understanding is simply meeting beneath expensive chandeliers.

Acts 2:41–47 provides one of the earliest pictures of believers functioning together as an identifiable assembly. The passage records that those who gladly received Peter's word were baptized and added unto the believers. It then states, "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." (Acts 2:42). Notice what the Holy Spirit emphasizes: the reception of the message, baptism, fellowship, doctrine, prayer, and shared life. Jerusalem was the historical setting, and the events occurred during the opening period of the apostolic witness. We must not turn every circumstance of that unique period into a universal command concerning property ownership or communal finances. Nevertheless, the passage establishes a recognizable pattern of gathered believers participating in spiritual responsibilities. They were not merely spectators who occasionally appeared to enjoy a performance. They were a continuing fellowship of people learning, worshipping, and serving together. The early church possessed none of our modern conveniences, yet it had the essential ingredients of genuine assembly life. We have churches today with better sound systems than the apostles ever imagined, and sometimes considerably less willingness to hear what the apostles actually taught.

**4. One Spiritual Body Does Not Eliminate Local Congregations**

The King James Bible describes the Church as the spiritual body of Christ while also referring to individual congregations existing in particular locations. Confusing these realities leads to serious doctrinal mistakes. Paul wrote, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13). This is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit placing believers into Christ's body. It is not accomplished by signing

a membership form, entering a baptistry, or obtaining the approval of a religious official. Ephesians 1:22–23 identifies Christ as the head over all things to the church, "Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all." Every genuinely saved person belongs to Christ through salvation by grace. No local congregation possesses the authority to manufacture that relationship, and no denomination maintains an exclusive heavenly membership register. The Holy Spirit does not need assistance from a church secretary to know who belongs to Jesus Christ.

Yet the existence of one spiritual body does not erase the reality of local congregations. Paul addressed "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Galatians 1:2 refers to "the churches of Galatia," while Revelation 1:11 identifies seven distinct churches in Asia. These were recognizable assemblies possessing particular responsibilities, difficulties, and spiritual conditions. The congregation at Corinth had disorders requiring correction. The Galatian churches faced doctrinal corruption involving the gospel of grace. The churches addressed in Revelation received individual messages suited to their circumstances. If the local assembly were unnecessary, these passages would make little practical sense. The Lord could simply have addressed an indistinguishable collection of believers without reference to their congregational relationships. Instead, Scripture reveals churches assembling, receiving instruction, exercising discipline, maintaining fellowship, and participating in the work of the gospel. The spiritual unity of all believers in Christ is a glorious truth, but it does not relieve individual Christians of their earthly responsibilities toward other believers. Belonging to the body of Christ is not a biblical excuse for pretending that the other members have nothing to do with you.

This distinction is especially important in an age when digital communication has made religious instruction available almost everywhere. A Christian can listen to sound preaching across continents, study Scripture online, and communicate with believers who live thousands of miles away. These opportunities can be tremendous blessings, particularly for those facing illness, disability, geographic isolation, persecution, or a genuine absence of sound churches. But we must not confuse access to teaching with the entire substance of Christian fellowship. Hebrews 10:24–25 instructs believers to consider one another and not forsake assembling together. The emphasis includes mutual encouragement and provoking one another unto love and good works. A sermon recording cannot visit a hospitalized brother, assist a struggling family, or personally reconcile an offense between members. Christians can certainly use technology to accomplish good, but technology does not cancel the commands of Scripture. A believer who refuses all meaningful fellowship merely because it requires patience or inconvenience has misunderstood the practical obligations of the Christian life. A sheep may hear the

shepherd's voice through a speaker, but that does not mean the entire flock has become unnecessary.

**5. Israel Is Israel, and the Church Is Not Israel Wearing a Different Uniform**

One of the most persistent sources of theological confusion involves the failure to distinguish the nation of Israel from the Church. Paul provided a clear threefold distinction when he wrote, "Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God:" (1 Corinthians 10:32). The categories are not meaningless decorations in the sentence. Israel possesses a particular national history, covenant relationship, and prophetic future. Gentiles constitute the nations outside that national identity. The Church is the spiritual body formed in Christ, composed of saved Jews and Gentiles united through the Holy Spirit. When men collapse these distinctions, they begin transferring Israel's earthly promises to religious institutions and claiming authority never granted to them. A denomination does not inherit Jerusalem because its leaders have decided to call themselves spiritual Israel. Neither does the church building become a replacement temple merely because somebody enjoys Old Testament ceremonial language. God did not lose Israel's address and decide to forward all her covenant promises to the nearest denominational headquarters.

Ephesians 2:11–16 explains that Gentiles who were formerly strangers from the covenants of promise have been brought nigh by the blood of Christ. Through His sacrifice, the dividing wall has been broken down, and believing Jews and Gentiles are reconciled unto God in one body. Verse 15 describes the making of "one new man," not the transformation of Gentile Christians into the political nation of Israel. Ephesians 3:4–6 further explains the mystery concerning Gentiles becoming fellowheirs and partakers of God's promise in Christ by the gospel. This is a magnificent revelation of spiritual unity through Jesus Christ. It does not require abolishing the national promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants. Romans 11:25–29 warns concerning Israel's present blindness in part and points forward to God's continuing purposes for that people. The gifts and calling of God are without repentance. The Church enjoys spiritual blessings in Christ, but those blessings do not authorize the confiscation of Israel's prophetic inheritance. Rightly dividing the word of truth protects both doctrines from religious confusion.

This distinction becomes especially important when studying Acts 2, where Peter addressed a Jewish audience in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. The apostle proclaimed Jesus as the crucified and risen Christ, confronting the nation with its rejection of the promised Messiah. Acts 2:22 begins with the words, "Ye men of Israel, hear these words." We must recognize that audience and historical setting before attempting to turn every statement into a universal formula governing the entire Church Age. The chapter records

remarkable events associated with the opening apostolic witness, including the addition of thousands of believers and unusual circumstances surrounding their shared possessions. Those events must be understood in their scriptural setting rather than mechanically imposed upon every modern congregation. Acts subsequently records the gospel spreading beyond Jerusalem and reaching the Gentiles, with Acts 15 addressing questions concerning their relationship to the law of Moses. The New Testament reveals progressive historical developments without changing the finished basis of salvation in Jesus Christ. A Bible student who cannot distinguish Israel from the Church will eventually make the local congregation responsible for promises God never made to it.

**6. The Apostles' Doctrine, Not the Denomination's Decorations**

Acts 2:42 states that the believers "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine." Those words should settle a great deal of modern religious foolishness. The early church was not organized around motivational entertainment, cultural popularity, or the personal preferences of whichever religious personality happened to possess the loudest voice. Its spiritual life was anchored in the authoritative teaching delivered through the apostles of Jesus Christ. Their testimony concerning the Lord, His resurrection, His commands, and the developing revelation of the New Testament provided the doctrinal foundation for the churches. Today, that authority is preserved for us in the inspired Scriptures, not in modern individuals claiming new apostolic titles and demanding unquestioning obedience. Second Timothy 3:16 declares, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." Doctrine is not a secondary activity that churches may abandon when attendance becomes inconvenient. It is essential to the spiritual health of the assembly. A church without sound doctrine is like a hospital without medicine: the building may be impressive, but the essential purpose has been neglected.

The central doctrine that must never be compromised is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul summarized that message in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, declaring that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith, apart from human works. Ephesians 1:13–14 declares that believers, after hearing and believing the gospel, were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, the earnest of their inheritance. These truths form the foundation of biblical assurance and Christian fellowship. A congregation that replaces salvation by grace with baptismal regeneration, sacramental dependence, religious performance, or the notion that eternal life must be maintained through personal merit has departed from the gospel it claims to proclaim. Galatians 1:8–9 delivers a solemn warning concerning those who preach another gospel. The church cannot purchase unity

by compromising salvation. A preacher who refuses to explain the new birth because somebody might become uncomfortable is not protecting the congregation. He is withholding the very truth sinners desperately need.

The denomination, therefore, must never become the final authority over doctrine. A statement of faith may be useful, and orderly cooperation among sound churches can accomplish legitimate work, but neither possesses authority to overrule the Bible. The Bereans were commended because they searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether the things preached were so (Acts 17:11). They did not accept teaching merely because the speaker had a recognized ministry or an impressive reputation. Every congregation should cultivate that same scriptural seriousness. Pastors must teach faithfully, members must listen attentively, and all must submit to the authority of God's word. Second Timothy 2:15 commands the believer to study and rightly divide the word of truth. That responsibility cannot be delegated entirely to a denominational committee or theological institution. Religious traditions must be examined, false teaching must be confronted, and biblical truth must be preserved even when doing so is unpopular. The moment a church begins defending its traditions against the Scriptures, it has exchanged the authority of God for the opinions of men wearing religious clothing.

**7. Christ Purchased a Flock, Not an Audience for Religious Performances**

Acts 20:28 contains one of the strongest statements concerning the nature and value of the local church. Addressing the elders associated with the church at Ephesus, Paul commanded them to take heed unto themselves and to the flock, "over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." Consider the weight of those words. The congregation belongs to God, its spiritual leadership carries solemn responsibility, and the purchase price is identified with the blood of Christ. No pastor can honestly read that passage and imagine that the flock exists for his personal enrichment or reputation. The command is to feed, not to exploit. First Peter 5:2–3 likewise instructs elders to feed the flock willingly, avoiding filthy lucre and refusing to behave as lords over God's heritage. Biblical pastoral authority involves genuine oversight, sound teaching, personal example, and accountability before the Chief Shepherd. A pastor who treats the congregation as personal property has misunderstood his assignment. The sheep were purchased with Christ's blood, not the preacher's business card.

The same principle applies to the congregation itself. Members are not passive customers purchasing weekly religious services in exchange for an offering. They possess responsibilities toward one another and must participate in the spiritual life of the assembly. Galatians 6:2 commands, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law

of Christ." Romans 12:10 instructs believers to demonstrate brotherly love and prefer one another in honor. First Corinthians 12:25–26 emphasizes mutual care within the body, teaching that members should have the same care one for another. These responsibilities require more than appearing for a sermon and disappearing before anyone can ask for assistance. Christians must learn to encourage the weak, restore the overtaken, comfort the grieving, receive instruction, and practice forgiveness. The New Testament also establishes principles of necessary correction and discipline, as seen in 1 Corinthians 5, because fellowship cannot remain healthy when persistent wrongdoing is deliberately ignored. Neither personal independence nor authoritarian leadership is acceptable. A congregation where nobody knows anyone's burdens may have mastered attendance, but it has not mastered fellowship.

The local church also possesses responsibilities beyond its own gatherings. Acts 13:1–3 records the assembly at Antioch participating in the separation and sending of Barnabas and Saul for missionary labor. The book of Acts repeatedly demonstrates believers preaching, teaching, supporting gospel work, and establishing congregations. The church is not intended to become a comfortable religious waiting room where Christians remain entertained until the Rapture. It should function as a center of biblical instruction, spiritual growth, evangelistic activity, missionary concern, and practical service. Financial resources must be handled responsibly, and the congregation must never confuse lavish institutional spending with obedience to the Great Commission. A beautiful auditorium means very little if the assembly has forgotten the lost world outside its doors. At the same time, genuine evangelistic zeal does not eliminate the responsibility to disciple believers already gathered within the congregation. The church must preach the gospel to sinners and teach the word of God to saints. An assembly that only entertains its members will eventually produce spectators; an assembly that faithfully teaches and serves will help produce laborers.

**Conclusion**

The local church is not difficult to identify when we allow the King James Bible to define it. It is an assembly of believers gathered beneath the authority of Jesus Christ, grounded in apostolic doctrine, participating in fellowship, prayer, worship, spiritual oversight, and the work of the gospel. Its identity is not determined by architecture, denominational prestige, financial resources, or the popularity of its leadership. Its foundation is Jesus Christ, and its responsibilities are established by the Scriptures. The spiritual body of Christ is not identical to one particular congregation, and the promises belonging to Israel must not be reassigned to a modern religious institution. Likewise, the genuine authority of a local assembly must never become an excuse for elevating a preacher above the Bible. Every

element must remain in its proper place. The Lord owns the church. His word governs its doctrine. His people constitute its fellowship. His gospel supplies its message. His glory must remain its ultimate purpose. When those truths are reversed, religion begins building a monument to itself while continuing to borrow the name of Jesus Christ for public identification.

We must also resist the growing temptation to dismiss the local assembly because of the failures of particular churches. There are corrupt congregations, dishonest preachers, manipulative leaders, unscriptural traditions, and religious establishments that have earned serious criticism. Scripture does not require believers to remain beneath false teaching or tolerate spiritual abuse in the name of loyalty. But the existence of counterfeit money does not make genuine currency worthless, and the existence of corrupt churches does not cancel the biblical pattern of faithful assembly. Christians should seek sound doctrine, honorable leadership, meaningful fellowship, and opportunities for service. They should exercise discernment rather than surrendering judgment to religious personalities. They should recognize that no congregation is composed of perfect people, including the congregation they themselves attend. Biblical fellowship requires patience, charity, humility, and a willingness to bear responsibilities that cannot always be fulfilled from a distance. There is no spiritual medal awarded for abandoning every imperfect assembly while proclaiming personal independence. The answer to a counterfeit church is not the abolition of the local church; it is a return to the biblical church.

The final question is not whether the modern religious establishment can continue constructing larger buildings, producing more sophisticated programs, or attracting greater public attention. The question is whether Christians are willing to submit to the simple, authoritative pattern God has already provided. Jesus Christ did not die to establish an entertainment industry, a denominational empire, or a congregation of religious consumers. He purchased His people with His blood, united believers in His body, and provided for their growth through the ministry of His word and the fellowship of the saints. The local church must never become an idol, but neither should it become an inconvenience that Christians discard whenever obedience demands sacrifice. The building may crumble, the treasury may become empty, and the preacher may be forgotten, but the foundation remains Jesus Christ. Every congregation should therefore examine what it is building, whom it is honoring, and whether its practices agree with the Scriptures. Christ does not need a steeple to establish His authority, a denomination to validate His word, or a celebrity preacher to advertise His power. He is the foundation, the Head, and the Chief Shepherd. And when saved sheep treat the flock as unnecessary, they have forgotten that the same Lord who saved them also commanded them to love one another.

**2 of 10 — The Local Church — A Name on the Roll Is Not a Name in Heaven**

Key Passage: "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls." (Acts 2:41)

**Introduction**

"Then they that gladly received his word were baptized" (Acts 2:41). There is enough Bible in that one statement to demolish a considerable amount of religious foolishness. Notice the order. They received the word before they were baptized, and they were baptized before they were added to the visible company of believers. Peter did not stand in Jerusalem selling membership certificates, recruiting customers for a religious corporation, or promising eternal life to whoever agreed to have his name entered into an ecclesiastical ledger. He preached the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and approximately three thousand souls responded to that message. Yet somewhere between the apostolic preaching of Acts 2 and the religious machinery of modern Christianity, men developed the peculiar notion that a church membership card might serve as identification at the gates of heaven. Millions have been taught to trust baptismal records, confirmation ceremonies, denominational affiliations, and their names upon church rolls. They can tell you when they joined the church, who baptized them, and which preacher signed their certificate, but ask them when they trusted Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour, and suddenly the answers become remarkably uncertain. A name entered by a church secretary cannot accomplish what only the blood of Jesus Christ can do.

The opposite error is just as dangerous, although it wears a different uniform and congratulates itself for being independent. There are professing Christians who have correctly rejected salvation through church membership but have incorrectly concluded that membership, fellowship, accountability, and participation in a local assembly are therefore worthless. They will quote Ephesians 2:8–9 concerning salvation by grace, and rightly so, but become strangely forgetful when Hebrews 10:25 addresses the responsibility of assembling together. Some have attended enough corrupt churches to become suspicious of every congregation, while others simply prefer a Christianity that never interferes with their calendar, challenges their conduct, or requires them to help anybody else. They can download sermons, debate dispensational truth, identify false teachers, and explain the King James Bible while remaining permanently unavailable whenever another Christian needs encouragement. Their theological library may be impressive, but their practical fellowship resembles a deserted railroad station. Being saved without church membership is entirely possible; using salvation as an excuse to avoid every responsibility toward the brethren is another matter altogether. The Bible condemns religious bondage without endorsing spiritual isolation.

The local church must therefore be examined from two directions. First, what actually makes a sinner a child of God, a member of Christ's spiritual body, and a possessor of eternal life? Second, what responsibilities belong to that believer concerning an identifiable congregation of Christians? These questions must not be confused. Salvation is a supernatural work of God received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Local church membership is an earthly relationship involving recognition, fellowship, doctrinal agreement, and practical responsibility among believers. One concerns the believer's eternal standing in Christ; the other concerns participation in the visible assembly. The distinction is essential because religious institutions have repeatedly claimed authority over salvation that the Scriptures never granted them, while independent Christians have sometimes treated the absence of saving power in church membership as proof that congregational responsibility is unnecessary. Neither conclusion will survive careful examination. The local church does not possess the keys to eternal life, but the Lord who gives eternal life has plainly instructed His people concerning their relationships with one another. Heaven does not recognize salvation by paperwork, and Scripture does not recognize selfishness as a spiritual gift.

**1. The Word Came First — God Did Not Start With a Membership Application**

Acts 2 records Peter preaching to Jews gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. This historical setting is important because careless interpretation can turn a transitional passage in Acts into an excuse for teaching doctrines contrary to the fuller revelation concerning salvation in the present dispensation. Peter identified Jesus of Nazareth as the One approved of God, crucified by wicked hands, and raised from the dead. He declared, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." (Acts 2:36). The audience was confronted with its rejection of the promised Messiah. When the people were pricked in their hearts, they asked what they should do. Peter answered them in Acts 2:38, and the subsequent narrative describes those who gladly received his word being baptized and added. We must recognize the Jewish audience, the Pentecostal setting, and the unfolding events recorded in Acts rather than flattening every historical distinction. Nevertheless, the central sequence in verse 41 is unmistakable: the people responded to the preached word before being publicly identified with the believers. The gospel produces the believer; a membership application merely records a human judgment about that profession.

The significance of receiving the word cannot be overstated. Romans 10:17 declares, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." A sinner is not converted because he admires the church building, enjoys the congregation's music, or finds the preacher entertaining. The gospel must be heard and believed. Paul defines the saving

message in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, declaring that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. That is the foundation of salvation, not denominational enrollment or religious performance. Romans 10:9–10 connects believing in the heart with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, while Ephesians 1:13 describes believers as sealed with the Holy Spirit after hearing and believing the gospel of their salvation. A local church should therefore be deeply concerned with whether prospective members understand the gospel, not merely whether they agree to participate in the organization's activities. A preacher who can explain the annual budget but cannot explain the new birth has mistaken the business meeting for the Great Commission. The first necessity is not increasing the membership total. It is proclaiming Christ.

Acts 2:42 continues by describing what followed: "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." The word "continued" deserves attention because the passage does not present salvation as the conclusion of all Christian responsibility. These believers entered a recognizable fellowship characterized by instruction, spiritual activity, and mutual participation. Acts 2:47 further states, "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." Notice who performed the adding in that statement. The Lord was working among those who were being saved. The visible congregation could recognize believers and receive them into its fellowship, but the congregation itself did not manufacture eternal life. The distinction may appear simple, but centuries of religious confusion have demonstrated how quickly men can reverse it. Salvation comes through Christ, and the saved are then called to fellowship and service. The early believers did not purchase their place among the redeemed by joining a religious organization. They received the message of Christ and became participants in the assembly. When a church puts enrollment ahead of conversion, it may increase its membership while filling its pews with people who have never been born again.

**2. Born Into Christ — Not Voted Into Heaven**

The Lord Jesus Christ told Nicodemus, "Ye must be born again." (John 3:7). He did not tell him that membership in Israel's religious establishment would guarantee entrance into the kingdom, even though Nicodemus was already a recognized teacher among the Jews. His religious knowledge, position, and association could not substitute for the new birth. The conversation occurred during Christ's earthly ministry to Israel, and its immediate setting must be respected; nevertheless, the necessity of spiritual life from God is consistent with the New Testament revelation concerning salvation. Titus 3:5 declares, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." Regeneration is God's work, not the

congregation's administrative achievement. No membership committee can vote a dead sinner into spiritual life. No pastor can confer eternal salvation through a ceremony. No denomination can guarantee heaven by stamping its institutional approval upon a human being. A church can recognize a profession of salvation, but it cannot manufacture the salvation being professed.

Paul supplies the doctrinal distinction in 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." This is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit placing the believer into the body of Christ. The verse does not describe a preacher lowering someone into a baptistry or a congregation voting to receive a candidate for membership. It describes the divine work by which believers, regardless of their former national or social distinctions, become members of Christ's spiritual body. Ephesians 5:30 further declares, "For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones." This union is established through Christ, not through denominational registration. A genuinely saved Christian can move from one city to another, join a different sound congregation, or temporarily find himself without access to an assembly without being removed from Christ's body. His eternal relationship with the Saviour does not rise and fall with the accuracy of a church membership directory. The Holy Spirit does not consult the church office before deciding whether a redeemed sinner belongs to Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 2:8–9 settles the question concerning the basis of salvation: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." If salvation is the gift of God, then church membership cannot become its purchase price. If salvation is not of works, then religious attendance, baptism, tithing, service, and denominational loyalty cannot complete what Christ accomplished at Calvary. Ephesians 2:10 immediately explains that believers are created in Christ Jesus unto good works, establishing the proper order. Good works follow salvation; they do not produce it. Christian fellowship and congregational service belong among the responsibilities of redeemed people, not among the conditions for becoming redeemed. Eternal security rests upon the Lord's faithfulness, not the believer's success at maintaining institutional favor. Ephesians 1:13–14 describes believers as sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, and John 10:28 records Christ's promise that His sheep shall never perish. A church may remove someone from its earthly membership for legitimate disciplinary reasons, but no congregation can overturn the saving work of God. The blood of Christ does not require a denominational endorsement to remain sufficient.

**3. The Baptistry Is Not a Washing Machine for Unregenerate Souls**

Believers' baptism is a biblical ordinance, but baptismal regeneration is a dangerous confusion of a commanded outward testimony with the saving work of Jesus Christ. Acts 8 provides an instructive example when Philip encountered the Ethiopian eunuch and preached unto him Jesus. The eunuch saw water and asked what hindered him from being baptized. Philip answered, "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." (Acts 8:37). The eunuch then confessed, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." The following verse records his baptism. Notice the distinction between the confession and the ordinance. Philip did not attempt to create faith by applying water. The man confessed his belief before entering the water. This passage exposes the absurdity of treating baptism as an automatic instrument of regeneration. An unbeliever can be immersed beneath the water and emerge just as spiritually dead as he entered. Water can remove dirt from the skin, but it cannot remove guilt from the soul; that requires the blood of Jesus Christ.

Romans 6:3–4 describes believers as identified with Christ in His death and resurrection, and the passage must be interpreted carefully rather than used as a convenient slogan for baptismal salvation. Paul's argument concerns the believer's union with Christ and the resulting obligation to walk in newness of life. The outward ordinance of water baptism provides a visible testimony of that identification, but the ceremony itself does not create spiritual union with Christ. Likewise, 1 Peter 3:21 speaks of baptism while expressly distinguishing its significance from "the putting away of the filth of the flesh" and connecting it with "the answer of a good conscience toward God" by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. These passages must be understood in their proper contexts without forcing water to perform the saving work accomplished by the Lord. The believer is not trusting the minister's hands, the temperature of the water, or the accuracy of the baptismal formula to accomplish redemption. Christ is the Saviour. Baptism is an act of obedience and identification. The baptistry is a place for testimony, not a substitute for Calvary.

A sound local church should therefore seek credible evidence of personal faith before administering baptism and receiving someone into its fellowship. This does not require pretending that pastors can examine the invisible condition of another person's heart with divine accuracy. They cannot. It does require the congregation to distinguish an intelligible profession of faith from mere religious familiarity. An individual who believes that baptism itself saves him needs biblical instruction concerning the gospel, not an immediate invitation to repeat the ceremony under a different denominational label. A child who wishes to be baptized should understand the gospel according to the child's ability rather than being rushed into a public performance to satisfy adults. An elderly churchgoer who has trusted infant baptism for decades needs the same Saviour as the young man hearing the gospel for the first time. The church must not confuse a respectable religious history with regeneration. Faithful ministry does not measure its success by how quickly it fills the

baptistry, but by whether it proclaims Christ clearly and calls believers to obey Him. A thousand baptisms cannot compensate for one gospel that has been preached incorrectly.

**4. The Church Roll Is Not the Lamb's Book of Life**

There is a dangerous form of religious confidence that grows naturally among people who have spent decades attending church without ever examining the foundation of their salvation. They remember joining the congregation, being baptized, shaking the preacher's hand, and receiving their certificate. They can identify their Sunday school teacher from forty years ago and recall every building campaign the church ever conducted. Yet when asked whether they have personally trusted the finished work of Jesus Christ, they retreat into the history of their religious involvement. Second Timothy 2:19 declares, "The Lord knoweth them that are his." That statement should put an end to the notion that the congregation's records possess heavenly authority. Churches maintain earthly lists using human judgment, and human judgment is limited. Some members may be genuinely saved; others may be trusting religious works. Some genuine believers may never have appeared on that particular congregation's roll. God knows His sheep without needing the membership committee to introduce them.

Revelation 20:11–15 presents the solemn judgment before the great white throne. The dead stand before God, the books are opened, and the book of life is consulted. Verse 15 declares, "And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." This is not the Judgment Seat of Christ, where the works of saved believers are examined for reward or loss. It is the final judgment described in Revelation 20. Its seriousness exposes the folly of substituting religious records for genuine salvation. Nothing in the passage suggests that denominational certificates, baptismal registers, or years of faithful attendance can secure deliverance from judgment. The sinner needs the righteousness and redemption provided through Jesus Christ. Philippians 4:3 refers to fellowlabourers "whose names are in the book of life," connecting the language of that heavenly record with God's people rather than with institutional enrollment. A church clerk can misspell your name, lose your paperwork, or accidentally remove your record; none of those clerical mistakes can alter the saving power of Christ.

The Lord's warning in Matthew 7:21–23 deserves particular attention because it exposes religious profession without genuine relationship to Him. In that passage, Christ speaks within His kingdom teaching and warns concerning those who claim remarkable religious accomplishments while remaining unknown to Him. Many will appeal to their activities, but the Lord declares, "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity." (Matthew 7:23). The warning is not that genuinely saved believers become lost because they failed to perform enough religious works. The issue is false profession, and the Lord's words are

devastating to anyone trusting spiritual activity instead of the Saviour. Modern churches can manufacture an entire religious identity around attendance, positions, donations, and public recognition while neglecting the necessity of personal salvation. A person may be respected by every member of the congregation and remain a stranger to the new birth. The most frightening words a lifelong church member could ever hear would not be that the congregation forgot his name, but that Christ never knew him.

**5. Receiving Members Without Turning the Church Into a Religious Country Club**

The New Testament provides evidence that local assemblies recognized believers and exercised judgment concerning fellowship, although it does not prescribe one universal modern membership form or administrative procedure. Acts 9:26 records that Saul, after his conversion, attempted to join himself to the disciples at Jerusalem, but they feared him because they did not believe he was a disciple. Their caution was understandable. Saul had previously persecuted believers, and his reputation was hardly that of a harmless Sunday school visitor. Barnabas intervened and explained what had happened to Saul, helping the brethren understand the reality of his conversion and subsequent preaching. The incident demonstrates that receiving someone into fellowship involves more than blindly accepting a name and announcing another increase in attendance. Churches should exercise biblical discernment while remembering that genuine conversion can transform people with disgraceful histories. A church that welcomes every wolf without examination is foolish, but a church that refuses every converted sinner with a past has forgotten what grace accomplishes.

Romans 15:7 commands, "Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God." The command must govern the spirit in which believers welcome one another. Receiving Christians into fellowship should not become an examination in personal popularity, financial status, family background, or loyalty to a preacher's private preferences. Sound doctrine matters, and assemblies have responsibilities concerning public conduct and false teaching. Nevertheless, the congregation must distinguish biblical standards from manufactured traditions. A saved person should not be rejected because he lacks respectable clothing, possesses little money, or cannot explain every difficult passage in Scripture. Nor should a congregation require agreement with speculative opinions that the Bible does not establish as conditions of fellowship. The purpose of receiving members is not to create a spiritual aristocracy with preferred seating and privileged access to the preacher. It is to recognize believers who desire to participate responsibly in the life of the assembly. When a congregation becomes more interested in a person's social standing than his standing in Christ, it has exchanged Christian fellowship for religious snobbery.

Receiving believers also requires recognizing that fellowship carries responsibilities and boundaries. First Corinthians 5 addresses serious, openly tolerated immorality within the Corinthian assembly and instructs the believers to deal with the matter rather than boast about their tolerance. Paul distinguishes the church's responsibility concerning those within its fellowship from its relationship to the unbelieving world outside. The passage does not authorize leaders to punish people for asking legitimate questions or disagreeing with personal opinions. It addresses genuine misconduct requiring biblical action. Galatians 6:1 balances correction with the responsibility to restore one overtaken in a fault in the spirit of meekness, while 2 Corinthians 2:6–8 demonstrates the necessity of forgiveness and comfort following sufficient correction. A church must neither ignore sin nor treat repentant people as permanent outcasts. Membership involves identifiable relationships in which doctrine, conduct, forgiveness, and accountability possess practical meaning. A congregation that refuses to address wickedness has abandoned responsibility; one that refuses to forgive repentance has forgotten mercy.

**6. Saved Sheep Were Never Commanded to Become Permanent Lone Rangers**

Hebrews 10:24–25 confronts the growing idea that Christian fellowship is unnecessary whenever personal convenience suggests otherwise. The passage commands believers to consider one another, provoke unto love and good works, and avoid "forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is." The wording establishes more than a requirement to occupy a particular chair at a designated hour. Believers are to participate in mutual encouragement and spiritual edification. The assembling serves a purpose because Christians need instruction, correction, companionship, and opportunities to serve others. The context also anticipates the approaching day, giving urgency to perseverance rather than indifference. Some modern Christians possess strong opinions concerning prophecy but remarkably little interest in obeying this elementary instruction. They can describe the Rapture, distinguish the Tribulation from the Millennium, and explain the prophetic calendar while remaining completely detached from other believers. It is a strange kind of readiness for Christ's coming that spends every evening studying His return while refusing to fellowship with the people He purchased.

The local assembly provides opportunities for responsibilities that cannot be fulfilled through religious spectatorship alone. Galatians 6:2 commands believers to bear one another's burdens. First Thessalonians 5:14 instructs Christians to warn the unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, and be patient toward all men. Romans 12:10 commands brotherly affection and mutual honor. These instructions assume recognizable relationships involving actual people, including individuals who may test our patience or require considerable personal sacrifice. A Christian cannot consistently

practice the ministry of encouragement while refusing to know anyone who needs encouragement. Nor can he exercise meaningful hospitality while maintaining an absolute policy against inconvenience. Fellowship requires more than agreeing with someone else's doctrinal statements on a computer screen. It involves bearing burdens that do not always arrive at convenient hours. The Christian life was never designed as a private religious subscription in which the customer receives all the benefits while accepting none of the responsibilities.

There are legitimate reasons why faithful believers may be unable to attend a local congregation regularly. Serious illness, disability, advanced age, geographic isolation, persecution, and the absence of a sound assembly can create genuine obstacles. Online preaching, recorded teaching, biblical correspondence, and digital fellowship can provide substantial spiritual assistance under such circumstances. Nor should Christians be pressured to remain under false doctrine, abusive leadership, or deliberate corruption merely because somebody has misused Hebrews 10:25. The responsibility to assemble does not require surrendering biblical discernment. Nevertheless, genuine obstacles must not become excuses for believers who possess reasonable opportunities but simply dislike accountability or sacrifice. The question is whether a Christian desires fellowship and seeks it where possible, or whether he has decided that every congregation must accommodate his preferences before he will participate. There is a considerable difference between a sheep separated from the flock by circumstances and a sheep that has decided the entire flock is beneath its dignity.

**7. Membership Means Responsibility, Not a Lifetime Reservation on a Padded Pew**

First Corinthians 12 presents the spiritual body of Christ as possessing many members with different functions. Paul declares, "But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him." (1 Corinthians 12:18). His argument concerns spiritual unity, diversity, and mutual dependence rather than the modern procedure for joining a particular congregation. Nevertheless, the principles possess obvious practical application within local assemblies. Every believer has responsibilities that extend beyond receiving religious instruction. Ephesians 4:11–16 describes the Lord's provision for the edification of His people, including the work of ministry and the growth of the body. Church membership should therefore involve a willingness to learn, serve, encourage, and participate according to one's abilities and opportunities. Not everybody is called to preach, teach publicly, or lead a congregation, but every saved person should recognize the value of faithful service. A church full of spectators may produce an impressive attendance report, but a church full of servants can accomplish work that attendance statistics will never measure.

Biblical leadership also involves mutual responsibility. Hebrews 13:17 instructs believers concerning obedience and submission to those who have spiritual oversight, explaining that such leaders watch for souls as those who must give account. That last expression should cause every pastor to examine his own conduct before using the verse as a club against the congregation. Spiritual authority is not unrestricted personal ownership. First Peter 5:2–3 commands elders to feed the flock while refusing to behave as lords over God's heritage. Church members should respect legitimate biblical leadership, while pastors must remain accountable to the word of God. Members should also practice financial integrity and willing generosity. Second Corinthians 9:7 teaches that giving must not arise from grudging compulsion, because "God loveth a cheerful giver." The congregation should not become a financial marketplace where prominent donors purchase influence or struggling families are treated as inferior Christians. The shepherd is supposed to feed the sheep, not auction their obedience to the highest bidder.

Finally, meaningful membership requires loyalty to Christ above loyalty to personalities. First Corinthians 1:12–13 exposes the destructive tendency of believers to organize themselves around favored ministers. Paul asked, "Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" The questions strike directly at religious personality worship. A local church may have a faithful pastor, respected teachers, and longstanding traditions, but none deserves the devotion belonging exclusively to Jesus Christ. Members should support sound leadership without surrendering their responsibility to examine the Scriptures. They should also refuse to turn minor personal disagreements into endless congregational warfare. Some church members would rather organize a rebellion over the color of the carpet than spend an afternoon helping someone understand salvation. Others treat the pastor as though he must personally approve every ordinary decision in their lives. Both attitudes reveal spiritual immaturity. Faithful membership means standing together beneath the authority of Christ, not building a private kingdom around the preferences of men.

**Conclusion**

The distinction between salvation and local church membership must remain absolutely clear. A sinner is saved by the grace of God through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, not by joining a congregation, submitting to religious ceremonies, or obtaining denominational approval. Ephesians 2:8–9 leaves no room for boasting in human accomplishments. First Corinthians 12:13 identifies the Holy Spirit's work in placing believers into Christ's body. Acts 2:41 demonstrates a visible company of people receiving the preached word, being baptized, and entering fellowship. These truths complement one another when kept in their proper biblical settings, but confusion follows whenever

religious institutions attempt to make themselves necessary instruments of eternal salvation. A church membership roll can identify those who have professed faith and accepted congregational responsibilities. It cannot establish who possesses eternal life. The eternal standing of the believer rests upon Jesus Christ. Church membership is a testimony of earthly fellowship, not a passport into heaven. The Lamb of God did not shed His blood merely to create a larger membership directory.

Yet the rejection of salvation through church membership must never become an argument for rejecting the local church itself. The New Testament repeatedly presents believers gathering, learning, praying, serving, encouraging, giving, correcting, and supporting one another. These activities are not meaningless additions to Christian life. They reflect the practical responsibilities of people who belong to the Lord and have been commanded to love the brethren. A Christian should seek sound fellowship where possible, recognize legitimate spiritual leadership, and contribute according to the opportunities God provides. He should also exercise discernment, refusing false teaching and religious manipulation rather than confusing submission with unquestioning obedience. No congregation is perfect, because its members are redeemed sinners still learning to walk faithfully. Nevertheless, the imperfections of believers do not abolish the instructions of Scripture. The Christian who boasts that he needs no other believers has managed to turn spiritual independence into a doctrine the apostles never taught. Salvation removes the sinner's condemnation; it does not remove his responsibility to love and serve his brethren.

And now the question must come home to every person reading these words. If your confidence concerning eternity rests upon the day you joined a church, the water in which you were baptized, the denomination in which you were raised, or the number of years you have occupied a pew, you need to examine the gospel of Jesus Christ. Religious membership cannot save your soul. But if you have genuinely trusted Christ and now treat every responsibility toward a local assembly as an intolerable inconvenience, you need to examine your obedience to the Scriptures. Neither religious bondage nor selfish independence represents faithful New Testament Christianity. The Lord saves sinners by grace, places believers into His spiritual body, and calls His people to meaningful fellowship and service. A church secretary may record your name, a congregation may welcome you into membership, and a pastor may recognize your testimony, but none can accomplish what Christ alone accomplishes through salvation. Make certain that your confidence is in the Saviour rather than the church roll, and then live like a saved person who understands that the brethren matter. A name on the roll is not a name in heaven, but a name in heaven ought to mean something down here among the people of God.

**3 of 10 — The Local Church — Shepherds Are Not Caesars, and Sheep Are Not Merchandise**

Key Passage: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." (Acts 20:28)

**Introduction**

"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock" (Acts 20:28). There is a command that ought to make every man who occupies a pulpit examine his heart before he opens his mouth. The Apostle Paul was addressing the elders of the church at Ephesus, men entrusted with the spiritual oversight of believers purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. He did not instruct them to build personal kingdoms, cultivate celebrity reputations, establish religious dynasties, or turn the congregation into a financial enterprise bearing their names. He commanded them to take heed, watch over the flock, and feed the church of God. Yet the religious landscape is littered with self-appointed spiritual emperors who have confused pastoral responsibility with personal sovereignty. Some possess magnificent auditoriums, expensive automobiles, television ministries, and impressive titles, while treating ordinary believers as though they were employees in a privately owned corporation. Others wield guilt, intimidation, and selective Bible verses like a prison guard swinging a ring of keys. The pastor is supposed to stand between the sheep and the wolves, not become the largest wolf in the pasture.

The opposite extreme is equally unscriptural. There are church members who have developed such contempt for authority that they regard every pastoral correction as persecution, every biblical standard as legalism, and every request for faithful participation as an infringement upon their personal independence. They want a preacher who will bury their dead, marry their children, visit them in the hospital, pray over their troubles, and provide spiritual counsel whenever requested, but heaven help him if he opens the King James Bible and exposes something they would rather leave undisturbed. They want the benefits of pastoral care without the inconvenience of pastoral instruction. Scripture provides no endorsement for such rebellion. Hebrews 13:17 commands believers to obey those who have the rule over them and submit themselves, recognizing the solemn responsibility of leaders who watch for souls. But that same Bible condemns religious tyranny, dishonest gain, false doctrine, and men who lord themselves over God's heritage. Genuine spiritual authority must be respected precisely because it is biblical authority, not because a man has promoted himself into a position where nobody dares question him. The pulpit is neither a throne for the preacher nor a whipping post supplied by the congregation.

The New Testament establishes an unmistakable pattern for leadership within the local assembly. Pastors must possess scriptural qualifications, demonstrate personal integrity, teach sound doctrine, guard the flock against error, and serve as examples of Christian conduct. Deacons have their own biblical qualifications and responsibilities, distinct from the oversight entrusted to elders. Church members must recognize faithful leadership, participate in the life of the congregation, and refuse the childish assumption that every disagreement constitutes spiritual oppression. Above them all stands Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church and the Chief Shepherd before whom every earthly shepherd must eventually give account. The subject demands careful distinctions because Satan can corrupt a congregation through an arrogant preacher just as effectively as through rebellious members. One man may attempt to control everybody from the pulpit, while another faction attempts to control the preacher from the pews. Both have forgotten who owns the flock. Christ did not purchase a congregation so that one man could crown himself Caesar, nor did He appoint shepherds so the sheep could vote the Bible out of existence.

**1. The Flock Has One Owner, and His Name Is Jesus Christ**

Acts 20:28 contains three expressions that settle the fundamental question of pastoral ownership. Paul identifies the believers as "the flock," declares that the Holy Ghost has made the elders "overseers," and describes the assembly as "the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." The setting is Paul's meeting with the Ephesian elders at Miletus, recorded in Acts 20:17–38. He is preparing them for the difficulties that will follow his departure, and his instructions concern their existing responsibilities toward an identifiable congregation. The flock belongs to God because the purchase price was paid by God. The overseers possess responsibility because the Holy Ghost entrusted them with oversight. These statements leave no legitimate place for the idea that a pastor owns the believers under his care. His responsibility is real, but his ownership is nonexistent. He may possess authority to teach, correct, lead, and protect, but he has no authority to replace the Lord whose blood purchased them. The preacher may hold the shepherd's staff, but Christ holds the title deed.

Notice also the order of Paul's warning. Before the elders are commanded to watch the flock, they are told, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves." That is where spiritual oversight must begin. A man who cannot govern his own conduct has no business pretending that he possesses divine authority to govern everybody else's. He must examine his doctrine, motives, financial dealings, personal relationships, and example before demanding accountability from the congregation. Paul understood that corruption within leadership could become more destructive than opposition from outside. He subsequently warned

that grievous wolves would enter among the believers and that men would arise from within, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29–30). The danger was not merely a false teacher standing outside the church doors. It included ambitious religious personalities developing inside the assembly. A preacher who continually reminds the congregation of his authority while rarely acknowledging his own accountability has misunderstood the opening words of this passage. A man who cannot take heed unto himself has no business demanding that everybody else take heed unto him.

Ephesians 1:22–23 identifies Jesus Christ as the Head over all things to the Church, which is His body. Colossians 1:18 likewise declares, "And he is the head of the body, the church." These are not ceremonial titles displayed on a doctrinal statement while somebody else exercises unrestricted control. They establish the supreme authority of the risen Saviour over His people. Pastoral authority is subordinate, delegated, and governed by Scripture. The pastor does not become a replacement head whenever the congregation assembles, nor does the church become his private possession because he founded it, financed its building, or preached there for forty years. Longevity may deserve respect, but it does not create divine ownership. A faithful congregation should appreciate years of biblical service without confusing gratitude with surrender of conscience. Religious leaders sometimes speak as though questioning their decisions amounts to questioning God Himself. That confusion is convenient for the leader and dangerous for everybody else. When a man begins treating disagreement with himself as rebellion against Christ, he has promoted his own opinions into an authority the Bible never granted him.

**2. God Gave Qualifications, Not a Popularity Contest**

Paul begins his instructions concerning pastoral qualifications with the statement, "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." (1 Timothy 3:1). Notice the expression "good work." The office is not presented as an opportunity for personal glory, a shortcut to financial prosperity, or a position from which to command admiration. It involves labor, responsibility, and accountability. The following verses demand that a bishop be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, and apt to teach. These qualifications describe character and capability rather than charisma and marketing ability. The preacher's ability to attract a crowd cannot excuse dishonesty, immorality, arrogance, or drunkenness. Neither does an impressive collection of theological certificates automatically establish fitness for oversight. Education can be useful, but the Scriptures do not permit academic achievement to replace godly character. A man may know enough religious vocabulary to impress a

seminary committee and still lack the qualifications to shepherd a dozen believers faithfully.

First Timothy 3:3 continues by requiring that the bishop be "Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous." Here the Holy Spirit eliminates several modern ministerial ambitions with remarkable efficiency. The preacher is not supposed to be violent, quarrelsome, greedy, or governed by the pursuit of money. Titus 1:7 similarly describes a bishop as the steward of God and requires that he be neither selfwilled nor soon angry. A steward manages what belongs to another; he does not become the proprietor. That single word ought to cure a considerable amount of pastoral arrogance. The man who regards himself as untouchable, refuses correction, explodes whenever challenged, and treats church offerings as unrestricted personal income has qualifications that resemble a dictator more closely than a New Testament bishop. The Scriptures do not require a pastor to be timid or unwilling to confront error, but courage and uncontrolled anger are not the same thing. A preacher who cannot distinguish righteous boldness from a personal temper tantrum needs to study the qualifications before demanding another title.

The qualifications also reach directly into the preacher's household and public reputation. First Timothy 3:4–5 requires that he rule his own house well and explains the relationship between faithfulness at home and responsibility within the church. Verse 7 demands a good report of those without, while Titus 1:9 requires him to hold fast the faithful word and possess the ability to exhort and convince gainsayers by sound doctrine. The pastoral office therefore involves the whole man, not merely his performance behind a pulpit. A preacher who produces thunderous sermons while neglecting his family cannot dismiss that contradiction as somebody else's concern. Nor should the congregation expect sinless perfection from its leadership; the qualifications establish a serious pattern of character, not the impossible claim that any pastor has ceased needing God's grace. The church must exercise discernment without inventing standards that Scripture has not supplied. A pulpit does not transform an unqualified man into a qualified shepherd any more than wearing a doctor's coat makes a butcher competent to perform surgery.

**3. Bishops, Elders, and Pastors — Three Descriptions, Not Three Thrones**

The New Testament uses the language of bishops, elders, and pastoral shepherding in closely related descriptions of spiritual oversight. Acts 20:17 records Paul calling the elders of the church at Ephesus, while verse 28 identifies those same men as overseers commanded to feed the flock. First Peter 5:1–3 likewise addresses elders and instructs them to feed the flock of God while taking the oversight thereof. Ephesians 4:11 identifies pastors among the gifts Christ provided for the edification of His people. These passages

do not establish three competing monarchies, each demanding a separate throne and a more impressive title. They describe the responsibilities of mature spiritual leadership: oversight, instruction, pastoral care, and faithful service. Philippians 1:1 addresses bishops and deacons within the congregation, demonstrating an identifiable distinction in church responsibilities. The church does not need three religious crowns for three descriptions of shepherding. It needs qualified men who understand whom they serve.

Unfortunately, modern religion has developed an extraordinary appetite for titles that sound more impressive than the responsibilities actually being performed. Some men are no longer satisfied with being pastors, teachers, or evangelists. They must become chief apostles, presiding archbishops, global prophets, and whatever other grand distinction can be embroidered upon their stationery. Yet Ephesians 2:20 identifies the apostles and prophets in connection with the foundation upon which God's household was built, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone. Second Corinthians 12:12 refers to the signs of an apostle, while Revelation 2:2 commends the testing of those claiming apostolic authority falsely. The original apostolic ministry possessed foundational authority that cannot be recreated merely by adopting its terminology. A modern preacher may faithfully preach apostolic doctrine without possessing the office or authority of the foundational apostles. A man does not become an apostle by printing the title before his name any more than he becomes Moses by purchasing a walking stick.

The genuine pastor must therefore resist the temptation to seek importance through religious rank. First Peter 5:3 expressly warns against behaving "as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock." The contrast is deliberate. One approach demands obedience through personal domination; the other demonstrates faithful leadership through godly example. A pastor should preach with conviction, correct error, organize legitimate church responsibilities, and guide believers through difficult circumstances. None of that requires pretending he possesses infallibility. His authority is ministerial and scriptural, not absolute and personal. The congregation should recognize the office without worshipping its occupant. Equally, members must not mistake a humble pastoral manner for weakness. A man who refuses unnecessary titles may possess more genuine spiritual authority than one who requires everybody to address him with a paragraph of religious honors. When a preacher needs an increasingly elaborate title to establish his importance, the title may be compensating for something his doctrine and character have failed to demonstrate.

**4. Feed the Sheep the Word of God, Not Religious Cotton Candy**

The central pastoral responsibility is unmistakable: feed the flock. After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ repeatedly directed Peter toward the care of His sheep, declaring,

"Feed my lambs" (John 21:15) and "Feed my sheep" (John 21:16–17). The conversation concerned Peter's restoration and commission, but its emphasis upon caring for Christ's people harmonizes with the later instructions given to church elders. Feeding requires spiritual nourishment, and that nourishment comes from the word of God. Paul charged Timothy, "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." (2 Timothy 4:2). Notice that the command involves doctrine, correction, patience, and actual preaching. It does not instruct the minister to entertain the congregation until everybody feels sufficiently cheerful to survive another week. A shepherd who feeds his sheep nothing but religious cotton candy should not be surprised when the flock possesses plenty of enthusiasm and very little spiritual strength.

Sound pastoral teaching requires more than announcing a subject, repeating a familiar illustration, and closing with an emotional appeal. First Timothy 4:13 commands attention to reading, exhortation, and doctrine. Verse 16 instructs Timothy to take heed unto himself and unto the doctrine, continuing in those things. Second Timothy 2:15 commands the workman to study and rightly divide the word of truth. Such responsibilities demand disciplined preparation, biblical understanding, and a willingness to confront error even when the congregation would prefer an easier message. A preacher must distinguish Israel from the Church, law from grace, and the believer's eternal standing in Christ from the practical responsibilities of Christian living. He must proclaim salvation through the finished work of Jesus Christ rather than replacing the gospel with religious performance. A preacher who can spend forty minutes discussing current events but cannot explain justification by faith has mastered conversation while neglecting his commission.

The shepherd must also resist the temptation to reshape his message according to the congregation's appetite. Second Timothy 4:3 warns that the time will come when men "will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears." That warning exposes responsibility on both sides of the pulpit. Some preachers compromise because they desire popularity, while some congregations demand compromise because they dislike correction. The faithful minister is not a hired entertainer whose message can be adjusted whenever a committee becomes uncomfortable. Yet neither may he use doctrinal conviction as permission to become cruel, careless, or unnecessarily quarrelsome. Paul specifically commanded preaching with longsuffering and doctrine. Strong preaching does not require abandoning biblical charity, and patience does not require surrendering biblical truth. The pastor must deliver the Scriptures faithfully whether the audience applauds, complains, or quietly examines what has been taught. A congregation that hires a preacher to tell it only what it wants to hear has not called a shepherd; it has purchased a religious echo.

**5. Submission Is Biblical, but Spiritual Dictatorship Is Not**

Hebrews 13:17 commands, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account." That is a serious instruction, and Christians should not dismiss it merely because authority occasionally proves inconvenient. Faithful pastors deserve respect, cooperation, prayer, and a willingness to receive biblical instruction. First Thessalonians 5:12–13 likewise speaks of recognizing those who labor among believers and admonish them, esteeming them highly in love for their work's sake. The respect is attached to spiritual labor and responsibility, not personal celebrity. A congregation filled with members who constantly undermine faithful leadership will struggle to accomplish its biblical responsibilities. The preacher cannot spend every hour settling arguments about matters Scripture has already made plain. Some church members want a shepherd until the shepherd starts leading; then they suddenly discover an overwhelming passion for independent government.

Nevertheless, Hebrews 13:17 does not establish unlimited pastoral authority. The leaders themselves must give account, and Scripture never authorizes them to override God's word. When the apostles were commanded by religious authorities to stop preaching Christ, Peter and the other apostles answered, "We ought to obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29). The immediate historical setting involved opposition to their apostolic witness, but the principle of God's superior authority remains plain. Paul likewise declared, "Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand." (2 Corinthians 1:24). A pastor may teach biblical standards concerning conduct, marriage, doctrine, and fellowship without possessing unrestricted control over personal finances, household decisions, or matters of conscience where Scripture has not spoken. A spiritual shepherd points believers toward obedience to Christ; a religious dictator demands that obedience to himself be treated as obedience to Christ.

This distinction becomes especially important when leaders employ intimidation to silence legitimate concerns. A member who respectfully questions financial irregularities, unsupported doctrines, or serious misconduct is not automatically guilty of rebellion. Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans for searching the Scriptures daily to examine what they heard. If apostolic preaching could be examined against the Scriptures, modern pastoral claims certainly cannot demand exemption. At the same time, questions should be raised honestly rather than through gossip, malicious accusations, or factional campaigns. Biblical accountability is not a license for congregational warfare. The solution is neither unquestioning submission nor perpetual suspicion, but faithful adherence to Scripture. A church should maintain responsible procedures for addressing concerns while refusing to conceal serious wrongdoing beneath religious language. Any preacher who insists that

examining his teaching is an attack upon God's authority has confused the examination of Scripture with the preservation of his own reputation.

**6. Deacons Are Servants, Not a Board of Religious Shareholders**

The New Testament distinguishes the responsibilities of bishops and deacons without turning the church into a corporate battlefield. Philippians 1:1 addresses the saints at Philippi together with their bishops and deacons, while 1 Timothy 3:8–13 establishes qualifications specifically concerning deacons. Those qualifications include gravity, honesty, freedom from greed, faithfulness, and soundness concerning the faith. Verse 10 requires that they first be proved and then serve, being found blameless. The emphasis once again falls upon character rather than popularity. Deacons are not appointed because they possess impressive financial portfolios, influential relatives, or enough business experience to intimidate the pastor. Their service should strengthen the congregation and assist in its practical responsibilities. A deacon who thinks his office makes him a corporate shareholder has misunderstood both the church and the meaning of service.

Acts 6:1–7 records a practical problem involving the neglect of certain widows in the daily ministration. The apostles directed the believers to select qualified men to oversee the matter, allowing the apostles to continue giving themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. The passage does not explicitly identify these seven men with the later title of deacon, but it illustrates an important principle of orderly service and responsible distribution of duties. Practical needs must not be neglected, and spiritual leaders should not be buried beneath every administrative detail while the teaching of Scripture suffers. Neither should practical service be treated as spiritually insignificant. Helping widows, organizing legitimate assistance, maintaining accountability, and meeting congregational needs are honorable responsibilities when performed faithfully. A local church requires cooperation rather than rival centers of power. The apostles did not establish a committee so it could seize the pulpit, and they did not ignore the widows because the work was beneath their dignity.

The relationship between pastors, deacons, and congregation members should therefore be governed by the Scriptures rather than personal ambition. Qualified deacons should serve with integrity, support legitimate church responsibilities, and resist the temptation to turn their office into an instrument of political influence. Pastors should respect the service of others rather than treating every ministry as an extension of their personal importance. Congregations should recognize faithful labor without manufacturing an aristocracy of preferred families and influential donors. First Corinthians 12 emphasizes that the members of Christ's body possess differing functions while remaining mutually dependent. Although that passage concerns the spiritual body, its principles have obvious application

to local cooperation. The pastor cannot perform every task, the deacons do not own the congregation, and ordinary members are not spectators without responsibility. When everybody wants authority and nobody wants to serve, the church has stopped resembling a flock and started resembling a committee meeting in which the furniture has more patience than the participants.

**7. Wolves in the Pulpit, Wolves in the Pew, and the Chief Shepherd's Reckoning**

Paul's warning in Acts 20:29–30 is chilling because it identifies dangers from both outside and within the congregation. He declared that grievous wolves would enter among the believers, not sparing the flock, and that men would arise from among themselves speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them. The central issue was not simply doctrinal disagreement over insignificant matters. It involved corruption capable of damaging believers and redirecting their loyalty away from the truth. Titus 1:9–11 establishes the responsibility of qualified leaders to hold fast the faithful word, exhort by sound doctrine, and silence those who subvert whole houses by teaching things they ought not for dishonest gain. Second Peter 2:3 warns of false teachers who "through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you." That expression ought to be engraved above the doors of every ministry where financial exploitation has become an accepted business model. When a preacher discovers that frightening sheep produces larger offerings than feeding them, he has abandoned the shepherd's work for the wolf's appetite.

Financial corruption and misconduct among leaders must be addressed according to Scripture rather than concealed to preserve appearances. First Timothy 5:19–21 establishes the need for responsible evidence when accusations are made against an elder and requires impartiality in handling wrongdoing. Verse 20 declares, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." The passage rejects both reckless accusations and privileged immunity for religious officials. Pastors should receive proper financial support for legitimate ministry, as taught in 1 Timothy 5:17–18 and 1 Corinthians 9:14, but support is not permission for covetousness. Responsible financial records, transparent handling of offerings, and meaningful accountability protect both the congregation and honest ministers. Allegations of abuse or criminal misconduct must not be buried beneath internal religious procedures or withheld from appropriate civil authorities. Protecting vulnerable people takes precedence over preserving a ministry's reputation. A church that protects a dishonest preacher while punishing those who expose his wrongdoing has confused the reputation of its institution with the honor of Jesus Christ.

Finally, every pastor must remember that his ministry will be examined by someone considerably more authoritative than a membership committee. First Peter 5:4 declares,

"And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away." That promise follows the instruction to feed the flock willingly, without filthy gain, and without lording over God's heritage. The reward is associated with faithful service beneath the Chief Shepherd, not the construction of a religious empire. James 3:1 likewise warns concerning the greater accountability of teachers. Such passages should humble every man entrusted with preaching and spiritual oversight. Congregations must remember that their leaders are accountable to Christ, while leaders must remember that the flock belongs to Christ. Neither position permits arrogance. The faithful shepherd may never become famous, wealthy, or celebrated, but his labor is not forgotten by the Lord. The unfaithful shepherd may possess every earthly honor religion can manufacture, but heaven will not mistake a crown purchased with church offerings for a crown earned through faithful service.

**Conclusion**

The New Testament pastor is not a religious Caesar, a denominational monarch, or a corporate executive who happens to own a collection of Bibles. He is a servant entrusted with the spiritual oversight of believers purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. His qualifications are established in Scripture, his responsibilities involve feeding and protecting the flock, and his authority remains subordinate to the Lord whose people he serves. First Timothy 3 and Titus 1 demand godly character. Acts 20 demands vigilance against danger from without and within. First Peter 5 demands willing service without greed or domination. Hebrews 13 establishes the responsibility of believers to respect legitimate spiritual oversight. These passages are not contradictory. Together they establish a biblical pattern in which leadership and accountability operate under the supreme authority of Jesus Christ. The pastor who remembers that the flock belongs to Christ will be careful how he treats the sheep; the congregation that remembers Christ appointed shepherds will be careful how it treats faithful leadership.

There is no biblical justification for a preacher who demands unquestioning personal loyalty, conceals misconduct, manipulates finances, or treats the congregation as merchandise. Neither is there justification for church members who despise sound doctrine, undermine legitimate leadership, and insist that every biblical correction amounts to persecution. Both errors spring from the same fundamental problem: the elevation of human will above the authority of God's word. The local assembly must resist the modern tendency to measure successful leadership by personality, wealth, attendance figures, or promotional ability. A faithful pastor may shepherd a modest congregation without ever appearing on television or receiving public recognition. He may spend years teaching the Scriptures, visiting the sick, strengthening struggling believers, and protecting

the flock from false doctrine. Such labor cannot be measured by the size of his audience or the cost of his automobile. The worth of a shepherd is not determined by how many sheep admire him, but by how faithfully he cares for those entrusted to him.

And now every preacher and every church member must face the same final authority. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, the purchaser of the flock, and the Chief Shepherd before whom earthly shepherds must give account. No pastor should imagine himself beyond correction, and no congregation should imagine itself free to reject scriptural oversight merely because obedience requires humility. Qualified leaders must preach the word, defend sound doctrine, demonstrate personal integrity, and serve without covetousness. Believers must examine the Scriptures, respect faithful leadership, reject spiritual tyranny, and participate responsibly in congregational life. The local church does not belong to the loudest preacher, the wealthiest donor, the most influential family, or the committee possessing the largest collection of keys. It belongs to Jesus Christ. A shepherd who feeds the flock serves the Lord. A shepherd who fleeces the flock serves himself. A sheep that follows sound biblical leadership honors Christ, but a sheep that worships its shepherd has forgotten the One who purchased it. The pulpit is not a throne, the offering plate is not a personal treasury, and the congregation is not merchandise. The blood of Jesus Christ settled the question of ownership long before any man ever climbed behind a pulpit.

**4 of 10 — The Local Church — When the Pulpit Loses the Bible, the Church Loses Its Backbone**

Key Passage: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." (2 Timothy 4:2)

**Introduction**

"Preach the word." Three words from the Apostle Paul that ought to settle the matter before the first committee meets, the first opinion is gathered, or the first preacher begins worrying about whether somebody might become offended. Yet modern Christianity has developed an astonishing collection of substitutes for the very thing God commanded. We have motivational speeches masquerading as sermons, psychological theories dressed in religious vocabulary, political commentary occupying the pulpit, and emotional storytelling that can carry an audience through forty-five minutes without explaining forty-five seconds of Scripture. Some congregations have become so thoroughly accustomed to spiritual entertainment that an actual Bible exposition would probably be considered an

interruption of the regularly scheduled program. The preacher has become a master of presentation, the congregation has become an audience, and doctrine has been moved into a back room where it cannot disturb the offerings. A church can survive without a choir, a coffee bar, or a television camera, but when the Bible disappears from the pulpit, the congregation has lost the very authority that gives it a reason to exist.

Paul's command in 2 Timothy 4:2 was not an isolated suggestion concerning public speaking. It appeared within a solemn charge delivered to Timothy before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom. The following verses warn that men will eventually refuse sound doctrine and accumulate teachers who satisfy their own appetites. This is not simply a warning against dishonest preachers; it exposes congregations that deliberately seek dishonest comfort. Some people want sermons that promise prosperity without responsibility, assurance without the gospel, worship without truth, and Christian living without correction. They want enough religion to decorate their lives but not enough Scripture to govern them. Unfortunately, there will always be a preacher willing to provide precisely that arrangement if the compensation is sufficient. When a congregation demands preaching that never corrects anybody, it has not discovered a higher form of Christian love. It has hired a religious anesthesiologist to keep everybody comfortable while the disease spreads.

The New Testament church was not established upon inspirational entertainment, denominational traditions, or the latest cultural obsession. Acts 2:42 declares that the earliest believers "continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." Doctrine was not an embarrassing appendix to the Christian life. It was among the defining activities of the assembly. The word of God established what believers were to believe, how they were to conduct themselves, how they were to worship, and what they were to proclaim to a lost world. Without sound doctrine, fellowship becomes little more than social companionship, worship becomes an exercise in religious atmosphere, and evangelism becomes an invitation to join an organization rather than receive Jesus Christ. This essay will confront the replacement of biblical preaching with religious substitutes, establish the authority of the King James Bible, defend the necessity of rightly dividing Scripture, and expose the consequences of abandoning sound doctrine. A church that loses its Bible may keep its building, its bank account, and its membership directory, but it has surrendered its backbone to the very world it was supposed to confront.

**1. The First Church Continued in Doctrine, Not Religious Entertainment**

Acts 2:42 deserves careful attention because its historical setting and exact wording expose much of the confusion surrounding modern church life. Peter had preached to Jews

gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, declaring the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and identifying Him as both Lord and Christ. Acts 2:41 records that those who gladly received his word were baptized and added unto the believers. The following verse then describes their continuing activities. They remained steadfast in the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. This was the opening period of the apostolic witness, and the Jewish setting must not be ignored or flattened into a collection of indiscriminate Church Age formulas. Nevertheless, the passage reveals unmistakable priorities. The believers were being instructed in revealed truth rather than gathered around a professional entertainment program. The early church did not possess sophisticated lighting, expensive advertising, or a coffee shop in the entrance, but it possessed something many modern congregations desperately need: a serious appetite for what God had actually said.

Notice the expression "continued stedfastly." It does not describe an occasional interest in doctrine whenever the congregation had exhausted its supply of more entertaining activities. These believers persevered in the teaching delivered through the apostles. Their fellowship was anchored in truth, not merely in their ability to enjoy one another's company. The apostles were eyewitnesses of the risen Christ, entrusted with a foundational ministry and the authoritative proclamation of His revelation. Ephesians 2:20 identifies the household of God as built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone. That foundational authority is not transferred to every modern preacher who decides to advertise himself as an apostle. Today's congregations are directed to the apostolic teaching preserved in the Scriptures. A preacher does not receive authority to manufacture new doctrines merely because he occupies a pulpit. The preacher's responsibility is to deliver God's message faithfully, not to improve upon it because the original makes somebody uncomfortable.

This emphasis upon doctrine also explains why the early believers' fellowship possessed genuine spiritual substance. Their unity was not manufactured by avoiding every subject capable of producing disagreement. They shared an identifiable message concerning Jesus Christ, His resurrection, and the revelation entrusted to His apostles. Sound fellowship requires a foundation of truth, because unity without doctrine eventually becomes cooperation around whatever happens to be popular. First Corinthians 1:10 calls believers to speak the same thing and reject divisions, while Ephesians 4:14 warns against spiritual instability produced by every wind of doctrine. The local assembly must therefore teach believers enough Scripture to recognize truth and error. A congregation that deliberately keeps its members ignorant may enjoy fewer doctrinal questions, but it will also produce Christians easily deceived by religious personalities. Ignorance can manufacture the appearance of unity, but it cannot produce biblical maturity. A room full of people who

know nothing about doctrine may agree with one another perfectly, and still be perfectly wrong.

**2. The King James Bible Must Govern the Pulpit, Not Decorate It**

Second Timothy 3:16 declares, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." Paul was writing to Timothy concerning the authority and sufficiency of Scripture for the work entrusted to him. The statement does not describe the Bible as an interesting religious resource to be consulted whenever the preacher runs short of illustrations. Scripture is God-given and profitable for the very responsibilities that many modern congregations attempt to avoid. Doctrine establishes truth. Reproof exposes error. Correction addresses what is wrong. Instruction in righteousness directs the believer toward proper conduct. Remove these responsibilities, and what remains of the preaching ministry? A polished speaker discussing personal improvement while carefully avoiding anything that might require repentance or obedience. The King James Bible is not intended to be carried ceremonially into a pulpit, opened for the reading of a convenient verse, and then abandoned while the preacher delivers his personal philosophy. A Bible used only as a sermon decoration has become little more than a leather-bound stage prop.

Paul continues in 2 Timothy 3:17, "That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." Notice that the Scriptures provide the equipment necessary for faithful Christian service. The preacher does not need to correct God's word with speculative theories, fashionable scholarship, or philosophical systems borrowed from an unbelieving world. He needs to study it, understand its proper divisions, proclaim its teachings, and apply its instructions. For the Bible-believing Christian, the King James Bible is the authoritative written standard by which doctrine and preaching are examined. Its words must be respected rather than manipulated to protect a favored religious tradition. A preacher who claims to honor Scripture while constantly explaining why its statements cannot be trusted has created an extraordinary contradiction. He stands before the congregation announcing divine authority and then spends his sermon undermining the very words upon which that authority depends. If the preacher cannot trust the Bible he is holding, the congregation has every reason to question why it should trust the preacher holding it.

The Bereans provide a striking example of proper scriptural discernment. Acts 17:11 declares that they received the word with readiness of mind and searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether those things were so. They were examining the apostolic message against the written revelation available to them, and Scripture commends their conduct. Modern Christians should demonstrate that same seriousness rather than

accepting every religious claim because it comes from a popular personality. A faithful congregation should encourage members to open their Bibles, examine passages in context, and recognize when a preacher has wandered beyond what God has actually revealed. This does not authorize arrogant members to interrupt every sermon with their personal theories, but it does establish that no minister stands above biblical examination. The preacher's authority derives from the Scripture he faithfully teaches, not from his ability to silence questions. A congregation that fears an open Bible more than a dishonest preacher has already reversed the proper order of spiritual authority.

**3. Rightly Dividing the Word Keeps Doctrine From Becoming a Religious Junk Drawer**

Second Timothy 2:15 commands, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." The command is particularly important because a preacher can quote genuine Scripture and still produce false doctrine by ignoring its audience, covenant setting, historical circumstances, or prophetic application. Every verse in the King James Bible is true, but every verse is not addressed doctrinally to the same people under identical circumstances. Genesis records God's dealings before the law. Exodus introduces Israel's national covenant responsibilities. The earthly ministry of Jesus Christ occurs within Israel's promised messianic setting. Acts records significant historical transitions. Paul's epistles provide direct doctrinal instruction concerning the Church under grace, while prophecy distinguishes future events involving Israel, the Tribulation, Christ's return, and His kingdom. A preacher who throws every passage into one theological bucket and stirs vigorously has not rightly divided Scripture. He has simply manufactured confusion with a Bible in his hands.

Consider the distinction between Israel and the Church. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:32, "Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God." Those categories matter. God made particular covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants, including national and territorial promises that cannot simply be transferred to a Gentile religious institution. Romans 11:25–29 confirms that God's purposes concerning Israel have not been permanently cancelled. At the same time, Ephesians 2:11–16 reveals believing Jews and Gentiles reconciled through Christ in one body. The Church is not Israel wearing a different denominational uniform, nor does a church building become a replacement temple because somebody enjoys borrowing Old Testament language. Failure to maintain these distinctions produces replacement theology, confusion concerning prophecy, and the misuse of passages belonging to particular dispensational settings. When a preacher steals Israel's promises and hands

them to his denomination, he has not discovered hidden revelation. He has simply forgotten whose name was on the original covenant.

Right division also protects the believer from confusion concerning salvation and Christian responsibility. Romans 4:5 declares, "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith, not works. James 2 addresses the relationship between professed faith and works in its own argument and setting, but it must not be used to overthrow the explicit teaching that justification before God is not purchased by human merit. Likewise, kingdom passages, Jewish ordinances, apostolic signs, and future prophetic judgments must be considered according to their proper contexts. Careless preaching can turn a believer's assurance into terror by importing conditions from passages addressing entirely different circumstances. A sound pastor must explain distinctions rather than conceal them beneath impressive religious vocabulary. A Bible that is rightly divided becomes a source of clarity; a Bible that is carelessly mixed becomes a weapon in the hands of religious confusion.

**4. A Gospel That Depends Upon Human Performance Is Another Gospel**

The central doctrine of the local church must always be the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. That is not merely the opening lesson of Christianity before the believer graduates into supposedly more impressive subjects. It is the foundation upon which every other doctrine concerning salvation must rest. Ephesians 2:8–9 declares that salvation is by grace through faith, not of works, lest any man should boast. Religious institutions have repeatedly complicated this simplicity by attaching baptism, sacramental participation, denominational membership, personal merit, and various forms of religious obedience to the finished work of Christ. The result is a message that sounds Christian while quietly transferring confidence from the Saviour to the sinner. If Jesus Christ paid the debt completely, the preacher who demands an additional payment has not improved the gospel. He has insulted the sufficiency of the payment.

Eternal security must likewise be taught according to the Scriptures rather than surrendered to religious intimidation. Ephesians 1:13–14 declares that believers who heard and believed the gospel were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the earnest of their inheritance. Ephesians 4:30 identifies the sealing as continuing "unto the day of redemption." Romans 8:38–39 declares that neither death, life, angels, principalities, powers, things present, things to come, nor any other creature can separate believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The believer's eternal standing rests upon God's saving

work, not the imagined ability of a sinful human being to preserve himself by flawless performance. This does not excuse disobedience, eliminate chastening, or remove accountability at the Judgment Seat of Christ. It establishes the distinction between salvation and service. A preacher who threatens genuinely saved believers with the loss of eternal life every time they stumble has confused the Father's chastening with the destruction of His children.

Galatians 1:8 delivers a severe warning concerning anyone preaching another gospel, even if the messenger claims extraordinary spiritual credentials. Paul was confronting efforts to corrupt the gospel of grace, and his warning remains essential to doctrinal discernment. A congregation may possess beautiful facilities, impressive musical performances, and a preacher capable of moving audiences to tears, but none of those achievements compensates for a corrupted gospel. Salvation is not obtained through joining a church, turning over a new leaf, surrendering every personal ambition, or promising enough obedience to qualify for heaven. The sinner must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, trusting His finished work. Acts 16:31 declares, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." A faithful pulpit must explain salvation clearly and distinguish the believer's standing from his daily walk. When the preacher makes salvation depend upon the sinner's performance, he has taken a finished work and turned it into a never-ending religious construction project.

**5. The Whole Counsel of God Includes Truth That Makes People Uncomfortable**

Paul declared to the Ephesian elders, "For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God." (Acts 20:27). That statement deserves a permanent place in the conscience of every preacher. Paul did not claim that he had selected the least controversial passages, avoided subjects capable of producing criticism, or adjusted his teaching to protect the congregation's financial contributions. He had delivered the truth entrusted to him. The context of Acts 20 reveals a minister concerned with the spiritual health of believers and the approaching danger of false teachers. The whole counsel of God requires the faithful exposition of Scripture rather than the selective use of verses convenient to a preacher's reputation. A congregation needs teaching concerning salvation, sanctification, spiritual gifts, Christian conduct, prayer, fellowship, judgment, prophecy, and the responsibilities of believers. A preacher who serves only the pleasant portions of Scripture is like a physician who treats every disease with candy because his patients dislike medicine.

Sound doctrine must also address the practical conduct of believers. Titus 2:1 commands, "But speak thou the things which become sound doctrine." The chapter then applies biblical instruction to various relationships and responsibilities. Doctrine is not an abstract

collection of theological terminology designed to impress religious scholars. It establishes how saved people should live. Romans 12 addresses conduct, service, humility, and relationships among believers. Ephesians 4 commands Christians to put away lying, corrupt communication, bitterness, wrath, and malice. First Thessalonians 4:3 declares, "For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication." These are not optional suggestions that disappear whenever modern culture changes its standards. A church that teaches correct terminology while tolerating deliberate wickedness has failed to connect biblical truth with Christian responsibility. It is possible to memorize the vocabulary of holiness while living as though the commandments of God were written for somebody else's congregation.

The preacher must also address prophecy, doctrinal error, and biblical distinctions without allowing those subjects to become substitutes for the rest of Scripture. Some congregations never teach prophecy because it makes people uncomfortable. Others discuss prophecy so constantly that they neglect the ordinary responsibilities of Christian living. Some preachers specialize in exposing false doctrine while rarely explaining the positive truths that establish spiritual maturity. Others avoid controversy so completely that their members cannot distinguish the gospel from a counterfeit. Balance does not mean compromising conviction. It means faithfully teaching the whole counsel of God according to the passages before us. Second Timothy 3:16 establishes doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction as profitable functions of Scripture. Remove any of them, and spiritual instruction becomes deficient. The Bible is not a buffet where the preacher selects whatever tastes pleasant and leaves the rest beneath the warming lamps. God's people need the whole meal, including the portions that require chewing.

**6. Itching Ears Will Eventually Hire the Preacher They Deserve**

Second Timothy 4:3–4 describes a remarkable reversal of spiritual priorities: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables." Notice that the passage does not merely condemn teachers who abandon the truth. It exposes hearers who refuse to endure it. The demand creates the supply. When congregations insist upon entertainment instead of exposition, flattering speeches instead of correction, and religious excitement instead of biblical understanding, they will eventually find ministers willing to accommodate them. The marketplace is never short of men prepared to adjust their convictions when the salary is sufficiently attractive. An itching ear is not looking for a cure. It is looking for somebody willing to scratch it, preferably without mentioning the infection underneath.

The transformation often begins gradually. A preacher discovers that certain subjects produce complaints, so he avoids them. Then he notices that motivational messages generate larger crowds, so exposition becomes less frequent. Soon the congregation is receiving religious performances containing just enough Scripture to preserve the appearance of Christianity. Doctrine becomes an occasional specialty, while entertainment becomes the weekly necessity. Eventually the church possesses an audience that can identify every member of the worship team but cannot explain justification, regeneration, or the distinction between Israel and the Church. The preacher may celebrate record attendance, but numerical growth cannot establish doctrinal faithfulness. Jeremiah 5:31 describes a sobering situation in Judah where religious corruption was welcomed by the people: "and my people love to have it so." That passage concerns Israel's historical circumstances, but the warning against delighting in corrupt religious leadership remains instructive. When the congregation applauds the abandonment of truth, the preacher and the people have entered a partnership in spiritual bankruptcy.

False doctrine must therefore be confronted deliberately rather than politely ignored until it becomes respectable. Titus 1:9 requires a qualified elder to hold fast the faithful word so that he may exhort through sound doctrine and convince gainsayers. The following verses warn concerning unruly and vain talkers who subvert whole houses. First Timothy 4:1 likewise warns about departure from the faith through seducing spirits and doctrines of devils. The local church must not treat every religious claim as equally acceptable merely because its advocates speak warmly about Jesus. Different gospels, sacramental salvation, denial of Christ's deity, and deliberate corruption of biblical teaching cannot be embraced in the name of unity. At the same time, legitimate doctrinal correction requires accurately representing the teaching being opposed. False accusations are not made righteous merely because they are delivered loudly. The preacher who refuses to identify wolves is negligent, but the preacher who calls every questioning sheep a wolf is dangerous in a different direction.

**7. Biblical Conviction Is Not Permission to Become an Ignorant Brawler**

The responsibility to defend doctrine does not authorize the preacher to confuse spiritual authority with personal arrogance. Second Timothy 2:24–25 declares, "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves." This instruction does not contradict Paul's command to reprove and rebuke. It explains the manner in which a servant of God should exercise correction. Strong biblical conviction and patient instruction belong together. A preacher may expose false doctrine forcefully without inventing accusations, insulting

every person who disagrees, or treating personal irritation as the leading of the Holy Spirit. The objective is truth, not victory in a contest of personalities. Some men can raise their voices for an hour without demonstrating that they understand the passage being discussed. Volume is not a substitute for exposition, and sarcasm without Scripture is simply a temper wearing a preacher's necktie.

Christians must also learn the difference between essential doctrine and unnecessary controversy. Romans 14 addresses matters of conscience among believers, including disputes involving food and the observing of days. Paul did not instruct Christians to turn every difference into a test of salvation. First Corinthians 8 likewise addresses knowledge, liberty, and concern for weaker brethren. These passages do not eliminate clear commandments or permit compromise concerning the gospel, but they demonstrate that biblical maturity requires discernment in applying truth. Second Timothy 2:23 warns against foolish and unlearned questions that produce strife. A church can become so consumed with endless arguments that it neglects prayer, evangelism, service, and the actual teaching of Scripture. Some Christians appear capable of detecting a doctrinal problem in every sentence except their own. A man who can identify fifty theological errors before breakfast but cannot demonstrate ordinary Christian charity has learned how to sharpen a sword without learning where to point it.

The faithful pulpit must therefore combine biblical authority with honest exposition, courage, patience, and spiritual accountability. First Peter 5:2–3 instructs elders to feed the flock willingly and not behave as lords over God's heritage, but as examples to the flock. A pastor should teach members to examine Scripture carefully rather than demanding unquestioning loyalty to his personal interpretations. He should welcome sincere biblical questions, correct genuine error, and distinguish plainly revealed doctrine from conclusions that require careful examination. Members likewise have a responsibility to receive instruction rather than treating every correction as an attack upon their independence. Ephesians 4:15 speaks of "speaking the truth in love," connecting doctrinal faithfulness with the growth of Christ's body. Love does not require concealing truth, and truth does not require abandoning love. A preacher who refuses to correct error has neglected the sheep; one who enjoys humiliating the sheep has misunderstood the Shepherd.

**Conclusion**

The local church cannot remain spiritually healthy when the pulpit abandons the Bible. Programs may continue, offerings may increase, attendance may flourish, and the congregation may congratulate itself upon its influence, but none of those measurements establishes faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Acts 2:42 reveals believers continuing steadfastly

in apostolic doctrine. Second Timothy 3:16–17 establishes the inspiration and sufficiency of Scripture for doctrine, correction, and instruction. Second Timothy 4:1–4 commands the preaching of the word and warns that hearers will eventually demand teachers who satisfy their own appetites. These passages provide a clear standard by which every congregation should examine its priorities. The Bible must govern the message, establish the doctrine, correct the errors, and direct the practical conduct of God's people. The preacher is not authorized to replace revelation with personal opinions, and the congregation is not authorized to reject revelation because it interferes with comfortable living. The church does not possess authority to improve upon God's word. Its responsibility is to believe it, teach it, defend it, and obey it.

Every pastor should therefore examine what actually comes from his pulpit. Does the congregation receive substantial exposition of the King James Bible, or merely a collection of religious opinions decorated with occasional verses? Are believers being taught the gospel of grace, eternal security, rightly divided Scripture, and the practical responsibilities of Christian living? Can members recognize false teaching, explain the foundation of their salvation, and distinguish biblical doctrine from denominational tradition? Are difficult passages addressed faithfully, or quietly avoided because they might interfere with attendance and finances? These questions concern the spiritual condition of the assembly, not the preacher's public reputation. Congregations must also examine their own appetites. Do they want the word of God, or merely sermons that confirm what they already believe? Are they willing to receive correction, or do they reward ministers who never disturb their conscience? A preacher who sells truth for popularity is guilty of spiritual compromise, but a congregation that demands the bargain cannot pretend it had nothing to do with the transaction.

The final issue is authority. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, and the Scriptures reveal the doctrine by which His people must be instructed. No denomination, religious personality, financial contributor, or committee possesses authority to replace that revelation. The local church exists to glorify Christ, proclaim His gospel, strengthen believers, and maintain faithful testimony in a world increasingly hostile to biblical truth. That work requires pastors who will study diligently, rightly divide Scripture, and preach with conviction even when the message becomes unpopular. It requires congregations that will receive sound doctrine rather than demand religious entertainment. It requires believers who value biblical truth above personal comfort and who understand that doctrinal faithfulness is not an optional preference for unusually serious Christians. When the pulpit loses the Bible, the church loses its backbone. When the preacher abandons doctrine, the congregation becomes vulnerable to every religious wind that blows through the building. And when Christians trade the authority of God's word for the applause of

men, they have exchanged the sword of the Spirit for a rubber knife that cannot cut through anything. Give the church back its Bible, give the pulpit back its authority under Scripture, and give the congregation something worth standing upon.

**5 of 10 — The Local Church — Smoke Machines, Goosebumps, and the God Nobody Came to Worship**

Key Passage: "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24)

**Introduction**

"God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24). There stands the Lord Jesus Christ's declaration concerning worship, and it demolishes a considerable portion of what passes for spiritual activity in modern Christianity. Notice that Christ did not say God must be worshipped according to atmosphere, musical preference, emotional temperature, theatrical presentation, or the ability of a congregation to manufacture excitement. He said "in spirit and in truth." Yet somewhere along the road, religious organizations discovered that dim lighting, artificial fog, carefully timed musical crescendos, and a preacher skilled in emotional manipulation could produce an extraordinary sensation of spiritual importance without requiring much actual biblical understanding. The congregation enters expecting an experience, the musicians begin building the atmosphere, the audience starts responding, and somebody eventually announces that the presence of God has arrived. Apparently, according to this arrangement, the Almighty was waiting backstage until the sound technician found the proper setting. When a church needs machinery to manufacture the presence of God, somebody has confused the power of the Holy Spirit with the controls on an entertainment console.

But the problem is larger than smoke machines and professional musicians. There are congregations where religious excitement has replaced spiritual understanding, where worship has become another word for musical performance, and where the success of a service is measured by how intensely the audience reacted rather than whether the Scriptures were faithfully taught. People describe a tremendous move of God because they cried, trembled, raised their hands, or experienced goosebumps during a song. Those reactions may accompany sincere worship, but none proves that worship was biblical. The human body can respond emotionally to patriotic music, a dramatic motion picture, or a beautifully performed secular song without any supernatural activity whatsoever. Emotion

is not inherently wicked, but neither is it inherently holy. Meanwhile, some traditional congregations have traveled to the opposite extreme, confusing reverence with lifeless ceremony and imagining that spiritual maturity requires everybody to behave as though joy had been prohibited by church policy. One congregation tries to generate the Holy Spirit with a volume knob, while another seems determined to keep Him from disturbing the furniture. Neither approach establishes biblical worship.

The local church must return to the Scriptures rather than choosing between religious entertainment and ceremonial paralysis. Genuine worship includes singing, prayer, thanksgiving, reverence, scriptural teaching, mutual edification, and the conscious honoring of Jesus Christ. It must be sincere without becoming disorderly, joyful without becoming fleshly, reverent without becoming lifeless, and doctrinally sound without becoming a sterile exercise in religious formality. Colossians 3:16 connects singing with the word of Christ dwelling richly among believers, while 1 Corinthians 14 repeatedly emphasizes understanding, edification, and orderly conduct within the assembly. These passages establish a standard far more substantial than whether a service produced a memorable emotional experience. Christians must distinguish spiritual worship from entertainment, human excitement from divine truth, and scriptural liberty from religious confusion. The church did not assemble to admire its musicians, applaud its preacher, or congratulate itself upon another successful production. It assembled to honor the living God. If everybody leaves talking about the performance and nobody remembers the truth, the service may have been spectacular, but something essential was missing.

**1. The Samaritan Woman, the Living Water, and the Worship Nobody Could Manufacture**

John 4:24 must first be understood in its actual biblical setting. The Lord Jesus Christ was speaking with a Samaritan woman beside Jacob's well, and their conversation concerned living water, sin, the identity of the Messiah, and the proper worship of God. When Christ exposed the circumstances of her personal life, she recognized that He was a prophet and raised a longstanding religious controversy. The Samaritans worshipped in connection with their mountain, while the Jews maintained Jerusalem as the divinely appointed center of worship. The woman declared, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." (John 4:20). Christ did not answer by congratulating both religious systems upon their sincerity. He identified the limitations of her understanding and declared, "Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews." (John 4:22). Sincerity does not transform religious error into truth, and geographical enthusiasm cannot compensate for ignorance concerning the God being worshipped.

The Lord then announced a coming change concerning the character of acceptable worship. He declared, "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him." (John 4:23). The historical setting remains important. Christ was speaking during His earthly ministry, before His crucifixion, resurrection, and the full revelation of the Church under grace. He did not deny God's historical dealings with Israel or transfer Israel's national covenant promises to an imaginary spiritual replacement. Jerusalem's significance under the law was real, and the Samaritan religious controversy could not be settled by pretending that God had never established particular instructions concerning worship. Nevertheless, Christ was revealing that acceptable worship would not remain dependent upon a geographical center. The worshipper's relationship to God and response to divine truth would be fundamental. The woman wanted to know which mountain was correct; Christ directed her attention toward the One whom men were supposed to worship upon it.

The expression "in spirit and in truth" establishes two inseparable requirements. Worship cannot be reduced to outward ceremony, because the inward condition of the worshipper matters. Neither can sincerity excuse false doctrine, because worship must correspond to what God has revealed concerning Himself. A person may become emotionally overwhelmed while singing words that contradict Scripture, but the intensity of the experience cannot sanctify the error. Another person may possess accurate doctrinal information while participating mechanically, without genuine thanksgiving or reverence. Both conditions fall short of the principle Christ established. The passage concerns worship of the Father, and believers under the present dispensation approach God through the Lord Jesus Christ, as Ephesians 2:18 explains: "For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father." Acceptable worship is neither manufactured by religious technique nor purchased through emotional exertion. You cannot worship God properly while disregarding what He has said about Himself, and you cannot substitute accurate religious vocabulary for a heart that actually honors Him.

**2. When the Music Becomes the Message, the Congregation Becomes an Audience**

Colossians 3:16 provides one of the clearest New Testament instructions concerning singing among believers: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." Notice what comes first. The word of Christ must dwell richly among believers. The singing is connected with teaching, admonition, wisdom, grace, and the Lord Himself. That is considerably different from the modern assumption that worship begins when the musicians walk onto the platform and ends when they leave it. Biblical singing communicates truth. It instructs the congregation concerning God's character,

Christ's finished work, the believer's responsibilities, and the promises revealed in Scripture. A song may possess an attractive melody and still communicate very little doctrine. Music can carry truth into the heart, but when truth is removed, the melody becomes a beautifully decorated delivery truck carrying an empty box.

Ephesians 5:18–20 likewise connects spiritual living with psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, melody in the heart, and thanksgiving to God. The passage contrasts drunkenness with being filled with the Spirit and then describes conduct flowing from that command. It does not establish that a particular musical rhythm, instrument, volume, or emotional response automatically proves the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Nor does it condemn musical skill or thoughtful preparation. David employed musicians in Israel's worship, and the Psalms repeatedly connect instruments with praise in their proper biblical setting. The Church must not mechanically import every feature of Israel's temple worship as a present command, but neither should it invent prohibitions where Scripture has established none. The essential questions concern biblical content, reverent purpose, appropriate conduct, and congregational edification. A musician is not more spiritual because he is talented, and he is not less spiritual because he knows how to play his instrument. The issue is whether the music serves the truth or the truth has become an excuse to showcase the music.

The danger appears when congregational singing is replaced by professional performance. The audience watches, the musicians perform, and the people are encouraged to admire the emotional intensity of what is happening onstage. Sometimes the volume becomes so overwhelming that ordinary believers cannot even hear themselves sing, much less understand the words being presented. Repetition is extended far beyond meaningful instruction, not because the passage requires it, but because the atmosphere must be maintained until the desired reaction appears. A musical team may rehearse elaborate transitions while the congregation remains unable to explain basic doctrines concerning salvation, justification, or the new birth. That is an extraordinary arrangement for an institution supposedly established to teach the word of God. First Corinthians 14:15 declares, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also." When the congregation cannot understand the words, cannot participate meaningfully, and remembers only the performance, the musicians have succeeded at entertaining an audience while failing to lead the assembly in intelligible praise.

**3. Goosebumps Are Not the Holy Spirit, and Tears Are Not a Doctrinal Test**

The human capacity for emotion is part of ordinary life, and Scripture never commands believers to become cold, mechanical creatures incapable of joy, sorrow, gratitude, or reverence. Psalm 100:2 declares, "Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his

presence with singing." David's expressions of praise and thanksgiving demonstrate that heartfelt worship need not be embarrassed by genuine feeling. Yet the Psalms belong to Israel's scriptural history and must be understood before making appropriate applications to Christian conduct. Under the present dispensation, believers are likewise instructed to rejoice in the Lord, give thanks, and sing with grace in their hearts. Philippians 4:4 commands, "Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice." The issue is not whether worship may involve emotion. It certainly may. The issue is whether emotion becomes the authority by which worship is judged. A Christian can weep because the truth has pierced his heart, but the tears do not make the truth true. God's word possessed its authority before the first tear ever fell.

Modern religious manipulation frequently reverses that relationship. Instead of allowing Scripture to inform the believer's response, the atmosphere is engineered to generate a response that can then be advertised as evidence of divine activity. Lighting changes, musical repetition intensifies, dramatic pauses multiply, and the congregation is told that something extraordinary is taking place. The preacher may then interpret ordinary emotional reactions as supernatural confirmation of his message, even when the message has received little biblical examination. First Thessalonians 5:21 commands, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good." First John 4:1 likewise instructs believers not to believe every spirit but to try the spirits because false prophets have entered the world. These passages do not encourage hostility toward genuine spiritual experience. They require discernment rather than unquestioning acceptance of extraordinary claims. A goosebump cannot distinguish sound doctrine from false doctrine, and a trembling hand is a very poor substitute for an open King James Bible.

Consider how easily religious excitement can become detached from biblical understanding. A congregation may respond enthusiastically to a speaker who promises extraordinary prosperity, personal greatness, or guaranteed deliverance from every earthly difficulty. The room becomes electrified, people begin shouting, and the preacher interprets the excitement as proof that God has endorsed his message. Yet no amount of applause can transform an unscriptural promise into divine revelation. Galatians 1:8 warns concerning the preaching of another gospel, regardless of the claimed authority of the messenger. The Corinthians also needed correction concerning their fascination with impressive spiritual manifestations, demonstrating that excitement and spiritual maturity are not identical. Worship must be examined by what God has said, not by the physical sensations experienced while somebody speaks or sings. When the emotional temperature of a room becomes the test of truth, the congregation has replaced the authority of Scripture with a spiritual thermometer that anybody skilled in performance can manipulate.

**4. Prayer, Scripture, and Preaching — The Worship That Needs No Stage Effects**

First Timothy 4:13 commands, "Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." That instruction establishes activities essential to the public ministry of the word of God. The reading of Scripture is not an embarrassing preliminary exercise to be hurried through before the entertaining portion of the service begins. God's people need to hear His words, understand their meaning, and recognize their authority. Second Timothy 4:2 commands the preacher to reprove, rebuke, and exhort with longsuffering and doctrine. Genuine worship therefore includes receiving God's revelation rather than merely expressing religious enthusiasm toward Him. A congregation that can sing for an hour but cannot tolerate thirty minutes of careful biblical exposition has revealed something about its priorities. The preacher must not use the pulpit as a platform for personal opinions, political entertainment, or religious storytelling that never reaches the passage. When the Bible becomes the interruption rather than the foundation of the service, the church has mistaken the appetizer for the meal and thrown away the bread of life.

Prayer is equally fundamental to congregational worship. First Timothy 2:1 instructs believers concerning supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks for all men. The following verses include prayers for kings and those in authority, demonstrating that biblical prayer reaches beyond the immediate preferences of the congregation. Acts 2:42 identifies prayer among the continuing practices of the early believers, while Philippians 4:6 connects prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. Prayer is not a musical transition, a ceremonial announcement, or an opportunity for a religious personality to display impressive vocabulary. It is the believer's approach to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew 6:5–8, spoken within Christ's earthly instruction, exposes hypocritical public prayer and vain repetition, principles that remain instructive concerning sincerity. A congregation should pray intelligently, reverently, and according to Scripture, remembering its spiritual responsibilities and the needs of others. A five-minute prayer offered sincerely before God possesses more spiritual substance than a theatrical performance designed to persuade the congregation that the speaker has special access to heaven.

Thanksgiving also belongs within genuine worship, but it must be grounded in truth rather than superficial excitement. Hebrews 13:15 instructs believers to offer praise to God through Christ, identifying that praise with the fruit of lips giving thanks to His name. Colossians 3:17 commands Christians to do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by Him. Such passages direct attention toward the actual grounds of Christian gratitude: salvation, reconciliation, mercy, the Scriptures, fellowship, and the promises secured through Jesus Christ. Thanksgiving does not require pretending that every earthly circumstance is pleasant, nor does it permit believers to ignore suffering

among the brethren. A church can rejoice in God's faithfulness while simultaneously praying for the sick, assisting the poor, and comforting the grieving. Genuine worship does not escape reality through religious excitement; it responds to reality under the authority of Scripture. The congregation that thanks God for His mercy while showing none to struggling members has learned the vocabulary of gratitude without understanding its obligations.

**5. God Is Not the Author of Confusion, Regardless of How Exciting It Looks**

First Corinthians 14 provides some of the New Testament's most detailed instructions concerning conduct within the gathered assembly. The chapter addresses the exercise of spiritual gifts, particularly the relationship between tongues, prophecy, intelligibility, and congregational edification during the apostolic period. Verse 26 declares, "Let all things be done unto edifying." That statement governs the discussion. Paul was not instructing the Corinthians to conduct a religious competition in which everyone attempted to demonstrate greater spiritual importance than his neighbor. He was correcting disorder and insisting that activities within the assembly serve an understandable, constructive purpose. The Corinthians were experiencing problems precisely because impressive manifestations had become detached from the needs of the congregation. Paul insisted that understanding mattered more than religious spectacle. A church service is not spiritually superior because more people are making noise; a room full of confusion remains confused even when everybody insists the Holy Spirit is responsible.

The apostle's instructions concerning tongues illustrate the importance of intelligibility. First Corinthians 14:9 asks how speech without understandable words can communicate what is spoken. Verse 19 declares Paul's preference for five understandable words capable of teaching others over ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. Later, verses 27–28 establish restrictions concerning the exercise of tongues in the assembly, including interpretation and orderly participation. These instructions belong to the historical setting in which the apostolic gifts were being exercised, and the passage must not be carelessly transformed into permission for modern religious confusion. Whatever claims are made concerning extraordinary manifestations today, they cannot overturn the explicit biblical concern for understanding, edification, and order. The Corinthians were not congratulated for their disorder. They were corrected for it. If a man claims that the Spirit has commanded him to disregard the Spirit's written instructions, the problem is not a shortage of spiritual liberty. It is a shortage of biblical submission.

Paul concludes this portion of instruction with two particularly important statements. First Corinthians 14:33 declares, "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints." Verse 40 commands, "Let all things be done decently and in order." The chapter also includes instructions concerning participation, silence, and the

recognition of apostolic authority, all of which must be read in their proper context rather than selectively discarded. These requirements do not mean that worship must become mechanical or that every spontaneous expression of sincere gratitude is forbidden. They establish that public worship must remain governed by the revelation of God instead of the impulses of individuals. Disorder is not evidence of superior spirituality, and confusion does not become holy merely because it occurs inside a church building. If nobody can hear the Scriptures, nobody can understand the preaching, and nobody knows what is happening, the congregation has not necessarily experienced a mighty movement of God. It may simply have experienced a complete failure to obey 1 Corinthians 14.

**6. Reverence Is Not a Funeral, and Joy Is Not a Religious Carnival**

Hebrews 12:28 declares, "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." The passage continues by declaring that our God is a consuming fire. This is a solemn statement concerning the majesty and holiness of the Lord, and it deserves serious consideration whenever believers assemble for worship. Reverence involves recognizing whom we are addressing, whose word we are hearing, and whose glory ought to govern the gathering. It is not produced automatically by expensive clothing, traditional architecture, subdued lighting, or an unusually solemn musical arrangement. A person can sit motionless beneath stained glass while his mind wanders through a dozen worldly concerns. Another believer may express heartfelt gratitude with considerable enthusiasm while remaining deeply conscious of God's holiness. Reverence is not measured by how quietly a congregation sits, but neither is irreverence excused because somebody has learned to call it spiritual freedom.

The Scriptures provide ample evidence that joy and worship belong together. Philippians 4:4 commands believers to rejoice in the Lord, while Colossians 3:16 connects spiritual singing with grace in the heart. First Thessalonians 5:16–18 instructs believers to rejoice, pray, and give thanks. These are not commands to manufacture emotional excitement on demand, but they certainly do not describe Christianity as a permanent funeral procession. Some congregations appear so suspicious of visible happiness that a sincere smile during worship might require explanation at the next business meeting. Their understanding of reverence has become a collection of restrictive customs rather than a biblical appreciation of God's character. Yet the opposite extreme treats every gathering as an opportunity for uncontrolled exhibition. Both errors replace Scripture with human preferences. The Christian may rejoice without becoming theatrical and remain reverent without becoming miserable. A congregation does not honor God by behaving as though

salvation were bad news, and it does not glorify Him by turning every service into a religious carnival.

Biblical liberty must also be distinguished from the reckless use of personal freedom. First Corinthians 10:31 commands, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." The surrounding context concerns Christian conduct, conscience, and the effect of personal choices upon others, but the principle speaks directly to the purpose of worship. The congregation should ask whether its practices glorify God, communicate truth, and strengthen believers, not merely whether they satisfy individual preferences. Romans 14 likewise demonstrates that matters of conscience require responsible discernment rather than arrogant condemnation. Musical instrumentation, service schedules, architectural arrangements, and other practical details should not automatically become tests of salvation or spirituality. At the same time, liberty cannot excuse doctrinal corruption, deliberate irreverence, or behavior contrary to clear biblical instructions. The church must never confuse its traditions with divine commandments, but neither may it use liberty as a crowbar to pry obedience away from the Scriptures.

**7. The Church Came to Worship Christ, Not Admire Its Own Performance**

One of the clearest tests of congregational worship is whether Jesus Christ remains central when the music stops and the emotional excitement subsides. Colossians 1:18 identifies Him as the Head of the body, the Church, and declares that in all things He might have the preeminence. That word settles the question of spiritual priority. The congregation does not exist to elevate its musical director, advertise its preacher, celebrate its religious brand, or provide spectators with a weekly emotional experience. Every legitimate activity should serve the glory of the Lord and the edification of His people. The sermon should direct attention to His revealed word. The singing should communicate biblical truth. The prayers should approach God through Him. The fellowship should reflect the responsibilities of believers who belong to His body. When the musicians become celebrities, the preacher becomes the attraction, and the congregation becomes an audience, Jesus Christ is in danger of receiving little more than a ceremonial acknowledgment at His own gathering.

Genuine worship should also bear fruit beyond the meeting itself. Romans 12:1 urges believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable unto God, describing this as reasonable service. Paul writes to Christians concerning the practical consequences of belonging to Christ, not concerning a method of earning salvation. Worship cannot be confined to a carefully arranged hour while the remainder of the week is surrendered to conduct that contradicts Scripture. A believer who sings enthusiastically about forgiveness while refusing to forgive his brother has disconnected his religious expression from his biblical responsibility. A congregation that celebrates generosity while

neglecting struggling members has confused the appearance of compassion with its practice. James 1:22 commands, "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves." A worship service that produces excitement without obedience has generated religious activity, but the activity has failed to accomplish something essential.

Finally, the gospel itself must remain inseparable from genuine worship. The Samaritan woman in John 4 was not ultimately directed toward a more impressive religious ceremony. She encountered the promised Christ, the One who revealed the truth concerning her condition and identified Himself as the Messiah. Under the present dispensation, believers proclaim salvation by grace through faith in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, as established in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 and Ephesians 2:8–9. A church that can produce extraordinary musical experiences but cannot clearly explain the new birth has forgotten the foundation upon which Christian fellowship rests. Worship does not save sinners, and emotional excitement cannot substitute for believing the gospel. Saved believers worship because of the Lord's redemptive work, not to purchase His acceptance. A congregation may perform music beautiful enough to move a thousand people to tears, but if the gospel remains unclear, it has polished the windows while leaving the door to salvation unexplained.

**Conclusion**

The Lord Jesus Christ established the standard of acceptable worship when He declared that true worshippers must worship the Father in spirit and in truth. That principle exposes both the entertainment-driven assembly and the frozen religious establishment. One attempts to manufacture spiritual power through atmosphere, emotional excitement, and impressive performances. The other may confuse solemnity with holiness and traditional procedure with genuine devotion. Neither possesses authority to redefine worship according to personal preference. The King James Bible directs believers toward intelligible singing, sound doctrine, prayer, thanksgiving, reverence, edification, and orderly conduct. Colossians 3:16 places the word of Christ at the center of congregational singing. First Corinthians 14 insists upon understanding and order. Hebrews 12:28 establishes reverence and godly fear, while Philippians 4:4 commands rejoicing in the Lord. These truths belong together. Biblical worship is not a contest between excitement and silence. It is the honoring of God according to His word, with hearts that recognize His greatness and lives that acknowledge His authority.

Every congregation should therefore examine what it is actually accomplishing when believers assemble. Are the Scriptures read, explained, and applied, or merely mentioned between performances? Does the singing communicate biblical doctrine, or has musical

excellence become an end in itself? Are prayers offered sincerely, or used as convenient transitions between activities? Does the congregation understand what is being taught, or is understanding treated as less important than emotional participation? Are the weak strengthened, the ignorant instructed, the grieving comforted, and the saved encouraged toward faithful living? Does the preacher exalt Jesus Christ, or has his personality become the attraction around which the entire service revolves? These are questions of biblical substance rather than stylistic preference. The church should not be judged by how successfully it entertains people who entered the building, but by how faithfully it honors Christ and instructs the people who belong to Him. An impressive performance cannot compensate for spiritual starvation, and a traditional ceremony cannot excuse the absence of genuine devotion.

And now the matter comes down to the simplest question of all: Who is receiving the glory? If the congregation leaves praising the musicians, admiring the lighting, discussing the dramatic atmosphere, and congratulating the preacher upon another outstanding presentation, but has heard little of the word of God, the gathering has drifted dangerously from its purpose. If the church insists upon solemn procedures while suppressing sincere thanksgiving, meaningful participation, and the joy of salvation, it has likewise allowed human customs to govern what Scripture should direct. The answer is not to destroy every musical instrument, forbid visible emotion, eliminate thoughtful preparation, or demand that every gathering resemble a lifeless religious ceremony. The answer is to restore the authority of God's word, the preeminence of Jesus Christ, and the spiritual substance of biblical worship. God does not need a smoke machine to demonstrate His presence, a musical crescendo to establish His authority, or a standing ovation to confirm His glory. The empty tomb has already settled the question of His power. The inspired Scriptures have already revealed His truth. And the blood of Jesus Christ has already accomplished what no religious performance could ever achieve. When the music stops, the lights come on, and the congregation walks out the doors, genuine worship must leave behind more than goosebumps. It must leave believers strengthened by truth, humbled before God, and determined to honor the Saviour who was supposed to be the reason they assembled in the first place.

**6 of 10 — The Local Church — You Cannot Bear One Another’s Burdens Through a Computer Screen Alone**

Key Passage: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

**Introduction**

"Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2). There is a command that ought to make an entire generation of electronic Christians examine whether they have confused receiving biblical information with practicing biblical Christianity. The Apostle Paul did not tell believers merely to acknowledge one another's burdens, discuss them in a comment section, or respond with a convenient religious expression before returning to their entertainment. He commanded them to bear those burdens. That involves responsibility, sacrifice, patience, and occasionally getting one's hands dirty in somebody else's difficulty. Yet we have reached an extraordinary point in modern Christianity where a man can spend six hours arguing about the proper interpretation of a Bible verse with strangers on the other side of the world while remaining completely unaware that a struggling brother lives three houses down the street. He can identify fifty false teachers before breakfast, quote dispensational distinctions throughout the afternoon, and debate prophecy until midnight, but ask him to visit a sick believer, and suddenly his schedule becomes more complicated than the seventy weeks of Daniel. A computer can deliver a sermon across an ocean, but it cannot carry a casserole across the street unless somebody gets out of the chair.

There is nothing inherently wrong with digital ministry. The printing press extended biblical teaching beyond the physical reach of individual preachers, radio carried gospel preaching into homes that would never have heard it otherwise, and modern communication allows sound doctrine to reach believers scattered across continents. The King James Bible can be studied, taught, distributed, and defended through electronic means, and those opportunities should not be despised merely because they involve technology. A bedridden Christian may receive tremendous encouragement from an online sermon. A believer living in an isolated region may find serious biblical instruction otherwise unavailable. Missionaries, elderly saints, disabled believers, and Christians facing persecution may depend upon remote fellowship during difficult circumstances. But a blessing becomes a problem when somebody begins treating it as an excuse to disregard responsibilities plainly established in Scripture. The internet is an excellent servant for distributing truth, but it makes a miserable substitute for obeying truth when obedience requires personal involvement. A livestream may deliver the preacher's voice, but the Christian life involves considerably more than hearing a voice.

The local church was never intended to function as a religious broadcasting company with an unlimited number of spectators and practically no participants. Hebrews 10:24–25 commands believers to consider one another, provoke unto love and good works, and avoid forsaking their assembling together. Galatians 6:2 commands mutual burden-

bearing. Romans 12:10 commands brotherly affection, while 1 Thessalonians 5:14 instructs Christians to warn the unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, and exercise patience toward all men. These are not instructions for collecting religious content. They describe actual relationships involving people who sometimes require more than a quotation beneath their troubles. Scripture does not command every believer to attend an unsafe congregation, submit to false doctrine, or accomplish physically what genuine circumstances make impossible. It does command Christians to take their obligations toward the brethren seriously. Saved sheep need more than a favorite preacher, a comfortable chair, and a reliable internet connection. They need the word of God, and wherever circumstances permit, they need a flock in which that word becomes visible through obedience.

**1. The Law of Christ Cannot Be Fulfilled by Spectators**

Galatians 6:2 does not appear in isolation as a sentimental encouragement toward generalized kindness. Paul begins the chapter by addressing the responsibility of spiritual believers toward someone overtaken in a fault. He writes, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." (Galatians 6:1). The command to bear one another's burdens follows immediately. This is instruction to believers under grace, not an attempt to place the Church beneath Israel's Mosaic covenant. In Galatians 5:13–14, Paul had already connected Christian liberty with serving one another by love. The law of Christ expresses the believer's responsibility toward others, not a new arrangement by which sinners earn eternal salvation through charitable accomplishments. A saved man does not carry another believer's burden to purchase a place in heaven. He carries it because the Saviour who gave him eternal life has commanded him to love the brethren.

Notice the spiritual qualifications Paul attaches to restoration. The person assisting the fallen brother must act in meekness and consider his own vulnerability to temptation. This eliminates the religious busybody who enjoys exposing someone else's failure because it provides an opportunity to feel superior. Biblical burden-bearing does not consist of collecting embarrassing information, distributing it among friends, and calling the resulting gossip a prayer concern. It involves seeking restoration while remembering that every Christian remains dependent upon God's grace. Romans 15:1 declares, "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves." Strength carries responsibility rather than entitlement. A mature believer should assist the struggling instead of treating their difficulties as proof of his personal greatness. Some Christians are wonderfully talented at identifying a wounded sheep, but instead of helping

it stand, they climb onto its back to obtain a better view of their own spirituality. That is not burden-bearing. It is religious vanity with dirty boots.

Galatians 6:5 subsequently declares, "For every man shall bear his own burden." There is no contradiction between that statement and verse 2. Paul addresses mutual assistance while also establishing personal responsibility. Every believer must answer for his own conduct, examine his work, and refuse to make other Christians permanently responsible for obligations he can fulfill himself. Biblical fellowship is neither cold independence nor a system in which laziness receives unlimited financial support. Second Thessalonians 3:10 addresses those unwilling to work, establishing that Christian charity does not abolish responsibility. Yet such warnings must never become excuses to neglect the genuinely weak, sick, grieving, or needy. The Church must distinguish unwillingness from inability and ordinary responsibility from an overwhelming burden requiring assistance. A brother who needs help carrying a heavy load does not need a lecture about the virtues of independence, and a man who refuses to lift his own hands does not need a congregation trained to carry him forever. Scripture demands discernment in both directions.

**2. Hebrews Commands an Assembly, Not a Religious Subscription Service**

Hebrews 10:24–25 declares, "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching." The instruction appears within an epistle addressed to Hebrews, where the superiority of Christ's priesthood and sacrifice is established against the background of Israel's former sacrificial system. Verses 19–22 speak of boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus and of drawing near through the work of the great High Priest. The warning against forsaking assembly is therefore connected to perseverance, confidence in Christ, and mutual encouragement. It is not a command to earn salvation through an attendance record. The blood of Christ provides access to God; the assembly provides opportunities for believers to encourage one another in the faith. Confuse those two truths, and church attendance becomes another religious payment plan for salvation.

Notice that Hebrews does not merely command people to gather beneath the same roof. Verse 24 begins with the expression "consider one another." That requires deliberate attention to other believers rather than exclusive concern with one's personal religious experience. The purpose includes provoking one another unto love and good works, followed by the command to exhort one another. A Christian who attends every scheduled service while refusing fellowship, despising the brethren, and ignoring their difficulties has not fulfilled the passage merely by occupying a seat. Physical presence provides opportunities for obedience, but it does not automatically produce obedient conduct.

Likewise, the passage does not establish that a saved person loses eternal life whenever illness, employment responsibilities, or unavoidable circumstances prevent attendance. A church attendance register can establish who entered the building, but it cannot establish whether anybody inside actually encouraged a brother, strengthened a sister, or practiced the love being preached from the pulpit.

The approaching day adds urgency to the responsibility rather than eliminating it. Believers should not imagine that prophetic expectation excuses withdrawal from fellowship. The New Testament distinguishes the Church's blessed hope from the future judgments associated with Israel and the nations, and those doctrinal distinctions must be preserved rather than discarded to manufacture an emotional appeal. Nevertheless, anticipation of Christ's coming should encourage faithfulness rather than cultivate indifference. First Thessalonians 4:18 follows the revelation concerning the gathering of believers unto Christ with the instruction, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." Prophetic truth was intended to produce actual encouragement among believers. Consider the absurdity of a Christian who spends every evening calculating prophetic possibilities while refusing to make time for a struggling member of the congregation. If studying the return of Christ leaves a believer less interested in loving the people Christ is coming to receive, something has gone wrong between the prophecy chart and the Christian's conduct.

**3. A Sermon Can Be Downloaded, but Fellowship Must Be Lived**

Acts 2:42 describes the earliest believers continuing steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. The historical circumstances were distinctive, taking place in Jerusalem during the opening period of the apostolic witness, and every detail should not be mechanically imposed upon modern congregations. Nevertheless, the passage reveals something that religious consumers frequently overlook: doctrine and fellowship belonged together. The believers did not merely gather information from the apostles and then disappear into permanently isolated lives. Acts 2:44–47 describes practical relationships, shared concerns, and continuing participation among those who had received the word. Their common life extended beyond hearing sermons. The congregation was becoming an identifiable fellowship of believers whose relationships carried practical consequences. The early Christians did not possess livestreaming equipment, but they understood something that modern technology has not improved: hearing biblical truth and living biblical truth are two different responsibilities.

Romans 12:9–16 presents Christian fellowship in terms that require more than intellectual agreement. Paul instructs believers to love without dissimulation, demonstrate brotherly affection, distribute to the necessity of saints, practice hospitality, rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. These commands reach directly into ordinary

relationships. Hospitality requires opening one's home or providing personal welcome. Weeping with the grieving requires genuine concern rather than treating another person's sorrow as an inconvenience. Distributing to necessity may require sharing resources that could otherwise have been spent upon personal comforts. A Christian can certainly initiate some of these activities through electronic communication, but the responsibility does not end when a message has been transmitted. It is remarkably easy to announce that we love the brethren while maintaining enough distance to ensure that nobody ever asks us to prove it. Biblical fellowship has a way of exposing the difference between affection expressed in words and affection demonstrated through sacrifice.

First Thessalonians 5:11 commands believers to comfort and edify one another, while verses 12–14 address spiritual leadership, peace among believers, warning the unruly, comforting the feebleminded, supporting the weak, and patience toward all men. These instructions assume relationships in which believers know enough about one another to recognize genuine needs. The assembly is not merely a gathering of people who happen to enjoy the same preacher. It is a congregation responsible for encouraging spiritual growth and addressing difficulties with biblical discernment. Some believers need instruction, others need correction, and others require patient assistance through circumstances they cannot immediately overcome. None of those responsibilities authorizes gossip, intimidation, or interference in matters beyond biblical authority. But neither does personal privacy become an excuse for refusing every meaningful relationship. A congregation where everybody knows the preacher's favorite illustrations but nobody knows which members are struggling has developed religious familiarity without developing Christian fellowship.

**4. The Body Has Members, Not Customers Waiting for Religious Delivery**

First Corinthians 12:12–27 describes the spiritual body of Christ through the illustration of a physical body possessing many members with different functions. Paul explains that believers are baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, bond or free. This is the supernatural work of God placing saved people into Christ, not an administrative procedure performed by the local church. Nevertheless, the passage establishes principles of mutual dependence that directly affect Christian relationships. The eye cannot declare the hand unnecessary, and the head cannot dismiss the feet as worthless. Different members possess different functions, yet all belong to the same body under Christ. A Christian who announces that he needs absolutely nothing from other believers resembles a hand declaring independence from the arm while congratulating itself upon discovering personal freedom. It may sound impressive for a moment, but the arrangement will not accomplish much work.

Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 12:25–26 by explaining that members should demonstrate the same care for one another. He writes, "And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it." That instruction exposes the inadequacy of a Christianity built entirely around private religious consumption. Suffering is not supposed to become an invisible event concerning which the congregation knows nothing and does nothing. Likewise, the blessing of another believer should not produce jealousy, rivalry, or resentment. Christians are called to rejoice together and suffer together. This does not require emotional performances or the abandonment of reasonable personal boundaries. It requires genuine identification with the welfare of the brethren. The body of Christ is not a collection of competing religious businesses in which every member advertises personal success while concealing everyone else's troubles. When one member suffers, Christian concern should reach farther than a sympathetic expression delivered from a comfortable distance.

Ephesians 4:11–16 identifies the Lord's provision for the edification of His people and connects spiritual growth with the proper functioning of the body. Verse 16 describes the body increasing through the effective working of its parts and being edified in love. This is not an argument that every saved person must possess an official position, teach a class, or participate in every scheduled church activity. Christians have differing abilities, circumstances, responsibilities, and opportunities. A bedridden believer may accomplish meaningful ministry through prayer and encouragement, while another may serve through teaching, hospitality, practical assistance, or financial generosity. The issue is willingness to contribute according to what God has provided. Church membership should not resemble a subscription in which customers pay for weekly religious delivery and complain when the service fails to meet their expectations. The congregation is supposed to be a fellowship of servants, not an auditorium full of critics waiting to review the performance.

**5. Paul Sent Letters Because He Could Not Always Be There — Not Because Being There Was Worthless**

The Apostle Paul's ministry demonstrates both the value and the limitations of communication across distances. His epistles instructed believers in congregations he could not always visit personally. Colossians 4:16 directs that his letter be read among the believers and shared with the church of the Laodiceans. These written communications carried authoritative apostolic instruction and strengthened assemblies separated from Paul by considerable distances. Their spiritual value did not depend upon his physical presence. This establishes an important principle for modern communication: truth does not lose its authority because it travels through a medium. A Bible lesson delivered electronically may be doctrinally sound, spiritually profitable, and genuinely useful. The

method of delivery does not determine whether the teaching is biblical. The same apostle who traveled to establish churches also wrote letters when he could not be present. He understood the usefulness of distance communication long before anybody invented a microphone, television camera, or computer screen.

Yet Paul's letters also reveal how deeply he valued personal fellowship. First Thessalonians 2:17 records his longing to see the believers face to face after being separated from them. He described the separation as involving presence rather than heart, expressing his desire for renewed personal contact. Second John 1:12 likewise states, "Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink: but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full." Written communication was valuable, but it did not eliminate the desire for personal fellowship. Third John 1:13–14 expresses a similar expectation of speaking face to face. These passages establish no prohibition against long-distance ministry. They demonstrate that communication and personal fellowship are complementary rather than interchangeable. Paul did not despise letters because he preferred personal visits, and he did not decide personal visits were unnecessary because he could write letters. That distinction remains just as sensible when paper and ink have been replaced by screens and keyboards.

The Philippian believers provide another example of fellowship extending beyond shared religious information. Philippians 4:10–18 describes their concern for Paul's needs and their practical participation in supporting his ministry. Their relationship involved more than receiving his teaching and expressing admiration for his preaching. They contributed materially to the work, and Paul acknowledged their gift as acceptable and pleasing to God. Today a believer can support missionaries, assist struggling congregations, send encouragement to isolated Christians, and distribute sound biblical instruction through modern technology. These are legitimate forms of service, not inferior activities merely because distance is involved. But the usefulness of digital ministry does not prove that every form of fellowship can be reduced to a digital exchange. A livestream can deliver preaching into a hospital room, and a message can encourage a missionary across the world. Thank God for both. But neither accomplishment proves that Christians who can personally serve their neighbors have been relieved of the responsibility to do so.

**6. Love That Never Opens Its Hands Has Misunderstood Its Own Vocabulary**

First John 3:17 asks a question that ought to make every comfortable Christian examine the relationship between his profession and his conduct: "But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" The following verse commands believers not to love merely in word or tongue, but in deed and truth. John is not teaching that charitable

contributions purchase salvation or that eternal life depends upon maintaining a particular financial record. He is exposing the contradiction between professed Christian love and deliberate indifference toward genuine need. It is possible to express tremendous concern for suffering people while arranging one's life so that the concern never costs anything. A Christian who possesses the means to help a hungry brother but offers nothing beyond an impressive religious quotation has supplied words where bread was needed. The quotation may be accurate, but the application is missing.

James 2:15–17 confronts a similar problem through the illustration of a brother or sister lacking sufficient clothing and daily food. The person who offers pleasant expressions without supplying necessary assistance has failed to address the practical need. James asks what profit such words provide. His discussion concerning faith and works must be interpreted within its own argument rather than used to overthrow salvation by grace through faith as established in Ephesians 2:8–9. Nevertheless, the practical correction is unmistakable. Christian faith should not produce indifference toward genuine suffering. Galatians 6:10 likewise instructs believers to do good unto all men, especially those of the household of faith, as opportunity permits. There is a time to explain biblical doctrine, and there is a time to stop explaining long enough to purchase groceries for a struggling family. A mature Christian should possess enough discernment to recognize that both responsibilities belong to the same Bible.

Acts 6:1–7 provides a particularly instructive example of practical responsibility within the early assembly at Jerusalem. A problem arose because certain widows were neglected in the daily ministration. The apostles did not dismiss their need as a distraction from spiritual ministry, nor did they abandon preaching to personally administer every practical detail. They instructed the believers to select qualified men to handle the matter, allowing the apostles to continue in prayer and the ministry of the word. The circumstances belonged to the historical development of the Jerusalem church and should not be transformed into a universal command concerning modern administrative arrangements. The principle, however, remains clear: genuine needs required genuine action. The Jerusalem believers did not solve neglected widows by organizing a theological debate about whether widowhood was unfortunate. They organized responsible assistance. The church needs men who can explain the Scriptures, but it also needs believers willing to put those Scriptures into practice.

**7. Genuine Obstacles Deserve Compassion, but Convenient Excuses Deserve Correction**

Not every Christian who lacks regular access to a local assembly has deliberately forsaken fellowship. Serious illness, disability, advanced age, caregiving responsibilities,

geographical isolation, persecution, and the genuine absence of a sound congregation can create substantial obstacles. Scripture does not authorize believers to condemn the bedridden saint because he cannot walk into an auditorium or the isolated missionary because no established congregation exists within reasonable reach. James 5:14–16 addresses prayer and pastoral concern for the sick, while Romans 12:15 commands believers to weep with those who weep. The congregation should seek ways to minister to Christians facing genuine limitations rather than treating those limitations as proof of disobedience. Digital teaching, telephone calls, correspondence, home visits, and practical assistance can be valuable means of maintaining fellowship. The Christian confined to a sickbed does not need a sermon accusing him of neglecting the assembly. He needs brethren who remember that fellowship can travel to the hospital when the patient cannot travel to the church.

Neither does Scripture require believers to remain beneath false teaching, corrupt leadership, or abusive religious control merely to maintain an appearance of faithful attendance. Acts 17:11 commends the examination of teaching against the Scriptures, and Acts 5:29 establishes the superior authority of obedience to God. First Peter 5:3 forbids elders from behaving as lords over God's heritage. Christians must exercise discernment concerning congregations that manipulate members, corrupt the gospel, conceal serious wrongdoing, or demand loyalty contrary to Scripture. Leaving such an assembly does not automatically constitute rebellion against biblical fellowship. Nevertheless, the failures of one congregation do not establish that every congregation is corrupt or that meaningful fellowship has become obsolete. Romans 16:5 refers to a church meeting in a house, demonstrating that biblical assembly need not depend upon impressive buildings or elaborate institutions. A believer should not remain under a wolf merely because the wolf has a church sign, but neither should he conclude that all sheep are wolves because one congregation mistreated him.

The distinction between obstacles and excuses must finally be faced. A Christian may be unable to assemble because of circumstances beyond his control, while another may possess every reasonable opportunity and simply refuse involvement because fellowship requires inconvenience. The two situations are not morally identical. Hebrews 10:25 warns against forsaking assembly, while Galatians 6:2 establishes the responsibility of mutual burden-bearing. A believer who can attend a sound congregation, participate responsibly, and assist the brethren should not use the availability of online preaching as an excuse for permanent isolation. At the same time, attendance must not become a religious scorecard used to measure salvation or intimidate people facing legitimate difficulties. The issue is not whether every Christian can occupy a pew every Sunday. The issue is whether the believer desires to obey the Scriptures and serve the brethren according to the

opportunities God actually provides. Christian faithfulness requires obedience, not religious bookkeeping.

**Conclusion**

The New Testament does not describe Christianity as a collection of permanently disconnected individuals who happen to possess the same doctrinal convictions. Believers are united in the spiritual body of Christ by the Holy Spirit, as 1 Corinthians 12:13 declares, and that spiritual relationship carries responsibilities toward one another. Salvation remains entirely by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, not through church attendance, fellowship activities, or charitable service. Ephesians 2:8–10 establishes the proper order: salvation is God's gift, while good works belong to the life that follows. The local assembly provides ordinary opportunities for believers to receive instruction, practice fellowship, bear burdens, exercise spiritual gifts, and encourage one another in the faith. Church attendance cannot save a sinner, but salvation was never intended to produce a Christian who regards every other believer as an unnecessary inconvenience. The Lord saved individuals, placed them into His body, and instructed them to love the brethren.

Modern technology can assist that responsibility in extraordinary ways. Sound biblical teaching can reach Christians who are separated by oceans, confined by illness, threatened by persecution, or isolated from faithful congregations. Such ministry should be valued rather than dismissed. Yet technology also presents the temptation to confuse religious accessibility with personal obedience. A believer can listen to thousands of sermons without ever helping another Christian. He can build an impressive digital library while remaining practically useless to the people around him. He can become famous for defending doctrinal distinctions while refusing the elementary obligations of patience, generosity, hospitality, and brotherly affection. The problem is not that Christians possess too much access to biblical teaching. The problem is that some have mistaken unlimited access to instruction for unlimited evidence of obedience. A thousand downloaded sermons will not carry one burden unless somebody applies what those sermons have taught.

And now the question reaches beyond church buildings, attendance records, internet platforms, and religious preferences. Are believers actually living according to the responsibilities established in the King James Bible? Are the strong helping the weak, the instructed teaching the ignorant, the comfortable remembering the suffering, and the spiritually mature restoring those overtaken in a fault? Are congregations cultivating genuine relationships rather than merely increasing attendance? Are Christians using modern communication to strengthen fellowship or to manufacture excuses for avoiding

it? The answer must come from Scripture rather than convenience. The local church is not the Saviour, and no congregation possesses authority to replace Jesus Christ. But the Lord who purchased His people with His blood also instructed those people to love one another, assemble where possible, and bear one another's burdens. A computer screen can display the Scriptures, transmit the gospel, and carry the voice of a faithful preacher around the world. It can deliver truth to the lonely, encourage the isolated, and strengthen believers separated by circumstances. But when a brother needs someone beside his hospital bed, a widow needs assistance, a struggling family needs provision, or a wounded Christian needs patient restoration, somebody must eventually get beyond the screen and practice the truth. Sheep need feeding, but they also need a flock. And a flock that only watches one another suffer has forgotten why the Shepherd commanded them to love.

**7 of 10 — The Local Church — Water Cannot Wash Away Sin, and Bread Cannot Become a Saviour**

Key Passage: "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect." (1 Corinthians 1:17)

**Introduction**

"For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Corinthians 1:17). There stands one of the clearest distinctions in the New Testament, and it ought to end a considerable amount of religious foolishness before somebody fills another baptistry or lights another candle beside a ceremonial altar. The Apostle Paul did not despise baptism, nor did he suggest that the Lord's instructions could be casually discarded. He distinguished the saving message of Jesus Christ from the outward ordinance that follows faith. Yet religious institutions have spent centuries attaching eternal salvation to water, ceremonies, clerical authority, and the administration of bread and wine. Some teach that a sinner must enter the water before he can enter heaven. Others insist that salvation must continually pass through sacramental ceremonies administered by an authorized religious official. The result is a Christianity in which the finished work of Jesus Christ somehow becomes unfinished until a church organization performs its part. If the blood of Jesus Christ cannot cleanse a sinner without assistance from a baptistry or a communion table, then somebody has misunderstood what the Saviour accomplished when He cried, "It is finished." (John 19:30).

The ordinances of the New Testament local church are serious matters because Jesus Christ established them for the instruction and obedience of His people. Believers'

baptism publicly identifies the Christian with the Lord Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. The Lord's supper commemorates His sacrifice, directs believers to examine themselves, and proclaims His death until He comes. Neither ordinance should be treated lightly, neglected through indifference, or transformed into an empty religious performance. Nevertheless, the importance of an ordinance does not establish that the ordinance possesses saving power. The distinction between a divine command and the divine work of redemption must remain absolutely clear. Water baptism is not spiritual regeneration, and the bread and cup are not another sacrifice for sins. A sinner receives eternal life through faith in the crucified and risen Saviour, not through a ceremony performed by another sinner wearing religious clothing. The ordinances were given to testify concerning Christ, not to compete with Christ. When the symbol begins receiving the confidence that belongs to the Saviour, religion has turned a biblical instruction into an instrument of doctrinal confusion.

The local church must therefore examine these ordinances with an open King James Bible rather than allowing centuries of religious tradition to determine their meaning. Acts 8:36–38 establishes the relationship between personal faith and water baptism. Romans 6:3–4 reveals the believer's identification with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. First Corinthians 11:23–29 provides direct instruction concerning the Lord's supper, its purpose, and the solemn responsibility of those participating. Other passages clarify salvation by grace through faith, the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, and the difference between genuine spiritual union and outward religious observance. This examination will confront baptismal regeneration, infant baptism as a supposed means of salvation, sacramental dependence, transubstantiation, and the dangerous notion that an institution can control access to God's grace. It will also rebuke those who use salvation by grace as an excuse to disregard the Lord's commands. The answer to religious superstition is not religious disobedience. The answer is to believe what God said, obey what He commanded, and never allow an ordinance to occupy the throne belonging exclusively to Jesus Christ.

**1. The Ethiopian Believed Before Anybody Took Him Near the Water**

Acts 8:26–40 records Philip's encounter with an Ethiopian official returning from Jerusalem. The man was reading the prophet Isaiah but did not understand the passage concerning the suffering servant. Philip approached him, heard the Scripture being read, and asked whether he understood it. The Ethiopian acknowledged his need for instruction, and Philip began with the passage before him. Acts 8:35 declares, "Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus." Notice the subject of Philip's preaching. He did not begin with denominational membership, sacramental theology, or the necessity of obtaining water before the man's journey could continue. He

preached Jesus Christ. The Ethiopian needed to understand the Saviour revealed through the Scriptures. A preacher who possesses enough time to explain baptism but never gets around to explaining the gospel has reversed the order established by the very passage he claims to believe. Water has its place, but it is a poor substitute for the Son of God.

As they continued their journey, the Ethiopian saw water and asked, "See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?" (Acts 8:36). Philip's response in Acts 8:37 establishes the essential condition: "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." The Ethiopian then confessed, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." Only afterward did the chariot stop, and Acts 8:38 records that Philip and the Ethiopian went down into the water and that Philip baptized him. The sequence is plain. The man heard the message concerning Christ, professed his faith, and submitted to baptism. The water did not manufacture the faith. The minister did not create the man's relationship with Jesus Christ through his physical actions. Philip did not drag an unbeliever into the water and hope that salvation would occur somewhere between the first splash and the final amen. He preached Christ to a man who then confessed his belief.

The same distinction appears in other passages throughout Acts. Acts 10:44–48 records the Holy Ghost falling upon Gentile hearers while Peter was still speaking, before their water baptism. Peter then commanded that they be baptized, demonstrating that the ordinance followed God's saving work rather than producing it. Acts 16:30–33 records the Philippian jailer asking what he must do to be saved. Paul and Silas answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house." (Acts 16:31). They subsequently spoke the word of the Lord to those in his house, and baptism followed. These passages must be understood within the historical developments recorded in Acts, particularly the transition from the opening Jewish witness to the inclusion of Gentiles under the gospel. Nevertheless, the distinction between faith and water remains unmistakable. The gospel must be preached, Christ must be believed, and baptism must be understood as obedience rather than a religious procedure that performs salvation on an otherwise unbelieving sinner.

**2. Buried With Christ Is Not the Same Thing as Washed Into Salvation**

Romans 6:3–4 is frequently brought into discussions of water baptism, but the immediate context must govern its interpretation. Paul begins the chapter by confronting the suggestion that believers should continue in sin so that grace may abound. His answer is emphatic: "God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?" (Romans 6:2). He then declares that believers baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into His death and identifies their burial with Him and their responsibility to walk in newness of life. Paul's argument concerns the believer's spiritual identification with the crucified and

risen Saviour and the resulting obligation to reject sin's former dominion. The passage cannot be properly understood by reducing the entire argument to the physical movement of a person beneath water. If salvation depended upon a preacher successfully lowering somebody into a baptistry, the Apostle Paul would hardly have described the believer's relationship to Christ in terms of a spiritual reality already accomplished.

Water baptism provides a visible testimony corresponding to the believer's identification with Christ. The pattern of burial and resurrection is appropriately represented through immersion, as the Ethiopian's baptism in Acts 8:38–39 illustrates by describing both men going down into and coming up out of the water. The outward picture declares that the believer identifies with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But a picture is not the event it depicts. A photograph of a wedding is not the marriage, and a painting of an open tomb does not possess power to raise the dead. Likewise, immersion portrays a spiritual truth without creating that truth through physical movement. Colossians 2:12 connects being buried with Christ in baptism with faith in the operation of God, who raised Him from the dead. The saving power belongs to God. The baptistry can illustrate a burial, but it cannot bury the old man's guilt beneath water and bring up a regenerated soul through hydraulic assistance.

The distinction becomes clearer in 1 Corinthians 12:13, where Paul declares, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." This describes the Holy Spirit placing believers into Christ's spiritual body, not the pastor administering a water ordinance. Ephesians 1:13–14 likewise teaches that believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit after hearing and believing the gospel. These passages establish the supernatural work of God in salvation, while water baptism provides outward identification and obedience. The two must not be confused merely because the Scriptures employ baptismal language in different settings. Nor should the believer conclude that water baptism is unimportant because it cannot save. The Lord's instructions possess authority regardless of whether obedience earns eternal life. A saved Christian should not refuse baptism on the grounds that water cannot redeem him. That is like refusing to obey a command because obedience cannot purchase the relationship that made the command meaningful. Grace removes the price of salvation; it does not abolish the responsibility of obedience.

**3. Baptismal Regeneration Turns a Command Into a Counterfeit Gospel**

Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes the doctrine of salvation without leaving room for religious improvements: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Titus 3:5 adds, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost." That washing is connected with

regeneration and the renewing work of the Spirit, not a declaration that physical water possesses independent power to produce eternal life. Baptismal regeneration confuses the ordinance with the saving work it represents. The doctrine places confidence in a ceremony where Scripture places confidence in Jesus Christ. Water may wash the outside of a sinner, but it cannot reach the guilt recorded against him before God. The blood of Christ accomplishes what every river, fountain, and baptistry on earth remains powerless to perform.

Infant baptism raises a related difficulty because the New Testament pattern of believers' baptism connects the ordinance with the reception of the gospel and an intelligible profession of faith. An infant cannot personally explain the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ or confess trust in His finished work. Arguments drawn from household baptisms cannot establish that unbelieving infants received saving regeneration through water. Acts 16:32 specifically records the word being spoken to the jailer's household, while Acts 16:34 describes rejoicing connected with belief in God. Such passages must not be forced to prove what they do not explicitly state. Neither may circumcision under God's covenant with Israel be automatically transformed into infant baptism for the Church. Romans 4 distinguishes Abraham's faith from the sign of circumcision, while Colossians 2 must be understood in its context concerning spiritual identification with Christ. A baby can be carried into a religious ceremony, but no minister can carry that child's personal faith into existence with a handful of water.

Difficult passages must be handled honestly rather than ignored. Mark 16:16 declares that the one who believes and is baptized shall be saved, but identifies unbelief as the reason for condemnation. Acts 2:38 belongs to Peter's Pentecostal address to the house of Israel and must be interpreted within that historical setting rather than used to overthrow the gospel of grace. First Peter 3:21 explicitly states, "The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us," but immediately qualifies the statement with "not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God," and connects the matter with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The passage cannot be reduced to ordinary physical washing. First Corinthians 1:17 further distinguishes Paul's commission to preach the gospel from baptism itself. A doctrine that requires Scripture to contradict Scripture has not discovered deeper truth. It has mistaken an outward ordinance for the inward work of God and then demanded that the gospel accommodate the confusion.

**4. The Lord's Supper Is a Memorial, Not Another Trip to Calvary**

First Corinthians 11:23–25 provides direct instruction concerning the Lord's supper within the New Testament church. Paul writes, "For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, That the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took

bread." (1 Corinthians 11:23). The setting is solemn. Christ instituted the supper in connection with His approaching sacrifice, not as a religious fundraising ceremony or an opportunity for a priestly institution to manufacture additional saving grace. Paul was correcting disorder within the Corinthian assembly and reminding believers of what the Lord had established. The bread and cup directed attention toward Christ's body and blood, the sacrifice by which redemption was accomplished. Their meaning did not depend upon elaborate ceremonial equipment or the social position of the person administering them. The Lord established a remembrance of His sacrifice, but religious tradition has repeatedly tried to turn that remembrance into another performance of the sacrifice itself.

When Christ took the bread, gave thanks, and broke it, He declared, "Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me." (1 Corinthians 11:24). The phrase "in remembrance of me" establishes the stated purpose. The ordinance directs believers to remember the Saviour whose body was given for them. Verse 25 applies the same memorial language to the cup, identifying it with the new testament in His blood. The Lord was speaking before His crucifixion, and the elements were being used to signify the sacrifice He was about to accomplish. The Church does not create another Calvary by repeating the supper. It proclaims the historical sacrifice of Christ, already accomplished and sufficient for redemption. A memorial does not become the event being remembered. A photograph of a battlefield is not another battle, and a remembrance of Calvary does not place Jesus Christ back upon the cross.

Paul continues, "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come." (1 Corinthians 11:26). The ordinance therefore looks backward to the cross and forward to the Lord's coming. It reminds believers of the redemption already secured while maintaining expectation concerning the Saviour's return. The expression "as often as" establishes repeated observance without prescribing one universal frequency for every congregation. Churches should conduct the supper reverently and responsibly, but neither weekly participation nor a particular ceremonial calendar purchases additional righteousness. The ordinance is not a religious battery that must continually be recharged to keep salvation operating. Believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption, as Ephesians 4:30 declares. The Lord's supper remembers a finished sacrifice while awaiting a returning Saviour. It does not keep the sacrifice unfinished or the believer's salvation perpetually uncertain.

**5. Bread Cannot Become the Redeemer, and Priests Cannot Improve His Sacrifice**

The doctrine of transubstantiation teaches that, through consecration, the substance of the bread and wine becomes the body and blood of Jesus Christ, although the outward

appearances remain. That claim must be examined against the Scriptures rather than accepted because centuries of religious tradition have repeated it. The Lord's words, "This is my body," cannot be separated from His command to observe the supper in remembrance of Him. Scripture frequently employs physical objects and illustrations to communicate spiritual truth. Jesus declared, "I am the door" (John 10:9), without requiring believers to imagine that His physical body had become wooden panels and hinges. He likewise described Himself as the true vine in John 15:1. These expressions communicate genuine truths without demanding a physical transformation into the objects mentioned. When religious tradition insists that bread must literally become Christ before the supper has meaning, it has exchanged the Lord's stated purpose for a theological claim the memorial itself does not require.

John 6 is frequently brought into this discussion because Christ spoke about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. But the passage must be understood within its actual setting. Jesus was addressing Jews following the feeding of the multitude, confronting their interest in physical bread and directing them toward Himself as the bread of life. In John 6:35, He declared that the one coming to Him would never hunger and the one believing on Him would never thirst. Later, in verse 63, He explained, "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." The discourse preceded the institution of the Lord's supper and cannot simply be converted into an explanation of a later priestly consecration ceremony. Christ directed hungry sinners toward believing on Him, not toward discovering a religious official capable of changing the substance of their breakfast.

Hebrews 10 settles the question concerning the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. Verse 10 declares, "By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." Verse 12 describes Christ offering one sacrifice for sins for ever and sitting down on the right hand of God. Verse 14 adds, "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." The contrast with repeated priestly sacrifices under Israel's former system is deliberate. The Lord Jesus Christ completed what those earlier sacrifices could never accomplish. His offering does not require continuation, repetition, or sacramental supplementation. First Corinthians 10:16 describes communion in the body and blood of Christ, establishing meaningful spiritual participation and fellowship rather than requiring another sacrifice. Calvary was not a down payment requiring generations of priests to complete the transaction. Christ offered Himself once, and the finished work of the Son of God does not need ceremonial maintenance from men.

**6. Eating Unworthily Is Serious, but the Table Does Not Control Eternal Salvation**

First Corinthians 11:17–22 reveals why Paul needed to correct the Corinthian congregation. Their gatherings had become occasions of division, selfishness, and disgraceful conduct. Instead of demonstrating proper fellowship, some were eating their own supper while others went hungry, and drunkenness was present among them. Paul asked whether they despised the church of God and shamed those who had not. This historical context matters because the warnings concerning the Lord's supper were not delivered as an abstract invitation for religious officials to control believers through fear. The congregation was mishandling a sacred observance while displaying contempt for fellow members. Their outward participation contradicted the sacrifice and fellowship the ordinance proclaimed. A church that celebrates the broken body of Christ while humiliating hungry members has managed to perform the ceremony and deny its practical significance at the same time. The bread may be properly arranged, but the fellowship is badly disordered.

Paul commands, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup." (1 Corinthians 11:28). The instruction concerns self-examination and proper participation, not the impossible requirement that believers become sinlessly perfect before approaching the table. Verse 27 warns about eating and drinking unworthily, referring to the manner in which the ordinance is observed. Every saved believer remains dependent upon grace, and nobody approaches God on the strength of personal righteousness. Nevertheless, grace does not excuse irreverence, deliberate sin, or contempt toward fellow believers. The Corinthians were commanded to recognize the seriousness of what they were doing rather than treating the gathering as an ordinary opportunity for selfish indulgence. The Lord's supper is not a prize awarded to Christians who have finally become worthy of salvation. It is a solemn remembrance for people whose only claim to redemption rests upon the worthiness of Jesus Christ.

Paul's warning becomes even more serious in verses 29–32. He explains that improper participation brings judgment upon the offender and identifies weakness, sickness, and death among the Corinthians in connection with their conduct. Verse 32 clarifies, "But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world." This distinction must not be ignored. Divine chastening of believers is not the same as the eternal condemnation of the lost. The passage does not teach that a saved Christian loses eternal life through an improper observance of the supper. It teaches that the Lord takes the ordinance seriously and may discipline His people for treating it with contempt. Hebrews 12:6 likewise identifies chastening as an expression of the Father's relationship with His children. A congregation must not turn the communion table into a carnival, but neither should a preacher transform it into a spiritual tollbooth where frightened believers are told that their eternal salvation depends upon his permission to approach.

**7. The Ordinances Must Remain Biblical Without Becoming Religious Idols**

A sound local church should administer believers' baptism in accordance with the scriptural pattern of personal faith followed by public identification with Christ. This requires preaching the gospel clearly, examining professions responsibly, and refusing to confuse religious enthusiasm with regeneration. Pastors are not capable of looking directly into another person's heart, but they can ask whether the individual understands the gospel and professes faith in Jesus Christ. The ordinance should not be administered merely to satisfy relatives, increase church statistics, or create an impressive ceremonial occasion. Nor should an individual who has genuinely trusted Christ be encouraged to disregard baptism because salvation is secure apart from water. Acts 8 demonstrates faith followed by baptism, and Matthew 28:19–20 establishes baptism and teaching within the commission given by the risen Lord. The church must neither baptize unbelievers into imaginary salvation nor persuade genuine believers that obedience becomes unnecessary because grace has already saved them.

The Lord's supper should likewise be observed with biblical understanding, reverence, and concern for the congregation's spiritual condition. First Corinthians 11 directs believers toward remembrance, self-examination, proper fellowship, and the proclamation of Christ's death. The ordinance belongs within the responsible life of the local assembly, where sound teaching and appropriate oversight can protect against confusion and disorder. Churches may establish reasonable procedures for its observance, but those procedures must remain subordinate to Scripture. Neither the pastor nor the congregation possesses authority to invent additional conditions for eternal salvation. The bread and cup must not become instruments of denominational control, financial pressure, or spiritual intimidation. At the same time, believers should not treat communion as an empty custom that can be performed carelessly while disregarding the brethren. A sacred ordinance becomes a religious idol when people begin trusting the ceremony more than the Christ it was established to honor.

Both ordinances ultimately direct attention away from human achievement and toward the finished work of Jesus Christ. Baptism identifies the believer with the Saviour's death, burial, and resurrection, while the Lord's supper remembers His sacrifice and proclaims His death until He comes. Neither creates salvation, but both possess meaning because salvation has already been accomplished. This distinction protects the gospel from sacramental corruption while preserving the believer's responsibility to obey the Lord. Colossians 2:10 declares, "And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power." The Christian does not become increasingly complete in Christ through repeated ceremonies. His spiritual standing rests upon the Saviour, while his conduct

should reflect grateful obedience. The ordinances are not spiritual machinery designed to manufacture grace. They are biblical testimonies pointing toward the One who has already accomplished redemption. Keep Christ in His rightful place, and the ceremonies become meaningful. Replace Christ with the ceremonies, and religion becomes another counterfeit gospel.

**Conclusion**

The New Testament establishes a distinction that religious tradition has repeatedly attempted to erase. Jesus Christ saves sinners through His finished work, and the ordinances of the local church testify concerning that work. Water baptism does not regenerate the soul, remove the guilt of sin, or complete salvation. The Lord's supper does not reproduce Calvary, create another sacrifice, or place the believer's eternal standing beneath the control of a priestly institution. Acts 8 demonstrates the importance of personal faith before baptism. Romans 6 reveals the believer's identification with the death and resurrection of Christ. First Corinthians 11 establishes the memorial purpose and solemn responsibilities of the Lord's supper. Ephesians 2:8–9 protects salvation by grace through faith, while Hebrews 10 establishes the once-for-all sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. The gospel does not need a baptistry to become effective, and the cross does not need an altar to remain sufficient. Jesus Christ accomplished redemption before a single modern denomination ever wrote its ceremonial instructions.

Nevertheless, salvation by grace does not give Christians permission to disregard the commands of the Lord. Baptism should be observed because Christ commanded it, not because water possesses saving power. The Lord's supper should be approached reverently because it commemorates His sacrifice, not because bread and wine possess independent power to dispense eternal life. The believer who refuses obedience merely because obedience cannot save has misunderstood the relationship between grace and Christian responsibility. Ephesians 2:10 explains that those saved by grace are created in Christ Jesus unto good works. The order is essential. Salvation produces the obligation of grateful obedience; obedience does not purchase salvation. The congregation must teach these truths carefully rather than allowing religious tradition or careless independence to govern its practices. The Christian does not enter the water to become redeemed. He enters because he belongs to the Redeemer. He does not approach the Lord's table to purchase grace. He approaches to remember the grace that purchased him.

And now the matter reaches its final and unavoidable conclusion. A sinner standing before God cannot plead the number of times he was baptized, the ceremonies he attended, the religious officials who blessed him, or the institution that maintained his sacramental records. Eternal salvation rests upon the Lord Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, was

buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. The religious world may manufacture elaborate ceremonies, decorate altars with gold, assign extraordinary titles to its officials, and insist that grace must pass through institutional hands before reaching the sinner. But the King James Bible declares that salvation is the gift of God through faith in Christ. No priest can improve His sacrifice, no water can supplement His blood, and no communion ceremony can repeat His finished work. The baptistry is not Calvary, the communion table is not the cross, and the preacher is not the Saviour. Water can make a sinner wet, but only Christ can make him clean. Bread can nourish the body, but it cannot become the Redeemer of the soul. The ordinances point toward Jesus Christ, and when religion begins pointing sinners toward the ordinances instead, it has exchanged the substance for the symbol and the Saviour for a ceremony. Keep the ordinances, obey the Scriptures, remember the sacrifice, and never forget who actually paid for salvation.

**8 of 10 — The Local Church — When Nobody Corrects Sin, the Whole Congregation Pays the Bill**

Key Passage: "Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6)

**Introduction**

"Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Corinthians 5:6). There stands the Apostle Paul's verdict upon a congregation that had become so comfortable with open wickedness that it was apparently more interested in congratulating itself than correcting what God had already condemned. The Corinthians possessed spiritual gifts, impressive religious knowledge, and enough congregational disagreements to keep an entire committee occupied until the Second Advent. Yet when flagrant immorality appeared among them, their response was not biblical sorrow or responsible correction. They were puffed up. Imagine that! A church tolerating scandal while maintaining an inflated opinion of its own spirituality. Modern Christianity has improved the furniture, upgraded the lighting, and perfected the public relations department, but it certainly has not eliminated the problem. Churches can overlook dishonesty, conceal immorality, excuse destructive conduct, and call the whole miserable arrangement Christian love. A congregation that refuses to confront sin has not discovered a superior form of grace. It has simply learned how to decorate disobedience with religious vocabulary.

The opposite extreme deserves an equally severe rebuke. There are religious establishments where church discipline has become a preacher's private punishment department, where questioning leadership is treated as rebellion against God, and where members are threatened with public humiliation for refusing to surrender their consciences to somebody else's opinions. A man can ask an honest question about the church finances and suddenly find himself accused of sowing discord, while the fellow mishandling the offerings continues occupying the platform with a smile large enough to qualify for a toothpaste advertisement. In other congregations, victims of serious wrongdoing are pressured into silence while the institution congratulates itself upon protecting its testimony. That is not biblical discipline. It is hypocrisy operating under ecclesiastical management. First Peter 5:3 forbids elders from behaving "as being lords over God's heritage," and 1 Timothy 5:20 requires correction when leaders themselves sin. The Bible never authorized the pastor to become Caesar, the deacons to become his imperial guard, or the congregation to become a collection of frightened subjects afraid to ask what Scripture actually says.

The local church must therefore maintain two truths without sacrificing either one. Sin matters, and grace matters. Holiness must not be abandoned to protect attendance figures, but mercy must not be discarded to satisfy religious pride. Matthew 18:15–17 establishes principles of personal confrontation and responsible escalation. First Corinthians 5 addresses serious public wickedness within an assembly. Galatians 6:1 commands spiritual believers to pursue restoration in meekness, while 2 Corinthians 2:6–8 demonstrates that correction must not become endless punishment after sufficient discipline. These passages are not interchangeable slogans. Their audiences, circumstances, and purposes must be examined carefully before applications are made. Church discipline cannot produce eternal salvation, and it cannot remove the genuinely saved believer from the spiritual body of Christ. It concerns the responsibility of an identifiable congregation to maintain sound doctrine, godly conduct, and honest fellowship. A church that never corrects wrongdoing teaches its members that holiness is negotiable, while a church that never restores the repentant teaches them that mercy ended somewhere between Calvary and the church business meeting.

**1. Corinth Had a Scandal, and the Church Was Too Proud to Blush**

First Corinthians 5:1 identifies the offense confronting the Corinthian assembly: "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife." Paul was not investigating an ordinary disagreement concerning personalities, worship preferences, or somebody's displeasure with the preacher's latest decision. He was confronting a publicly

reported case of serious sexual immorality within an identifiable congregation. The historical setting matters. Corinth was a Gentile city, and Paul was writing to the church of God located there during the present dispensation of grace. His instruction was not a transfer of Israel's civil penalties under the Mosaic law into Church Age congregational government. It concerned fellowship and responsibility among professing Christians. The church had no authority to stone the offender, but it certainly had authority to stop pretending that open wickedness was an acceptable expression of Christian liberty.

Paul's next statement exposes the congregation's spiritual condition. "And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you." (1 Corinthians 5:2). Their problem extended beyond the individual offender. The assembly had tolerated the situation while maintaining an attitude of pride. Instead of mourning the damage being done to its testimony and fellowship, the congregation apparently possessed enough self-satisfaction to overlook the matter. This is the danger of confusing the absence of correction with the presence of love. A church may boast that everybody is welcome, that nobody is ever confronted, and that uncomfortable subjects are carefully avoided. Such policies can sound generous until the congregation becomes a refuge for unrepentant wrongdoing. A hospital that refuses to diagnose disease because patients might become offended has not demonstrated exceptional compassion. It has abandoned the very responsibility for which the hospital exists.

Paul then introduces the illustration of leaven, which commonly portrays permeating influence within Scripture, although its significance must always be determined by context. First Corinthians 5:7 declares, "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us." The reference draws upon the historical Passover and unleavened bread associated with Israel, but Paul applies its significance to the conduct of believers in Christ. He is not placing the Corinthian church beneath Israel's national covenant or requiring Christians to observe the Mosaic festival calendar. He is using a scriptural illustration to expose the contradiction between redemption through Christ and the deliberate toleration of evil. Verse 8 contrasts malice and wickedness with sincerity and truth. The blood of the Passover Lamb was never permission to celebrate corruption, and the blood of Jesus Christ does not become a denominational license to accommodate whatever wickedness the congregation finds convenient.

**2. Matthew 18 Begins With a Brother, Not a Public Firing Squad**

Matthew 18:15 records the Lord Jesus Christ saying, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." The immediate setting belongs to Christ's earthly ministry,

when He was instructing His disciples before His death, resurrection, and the full revelation of the Church under grace. We must recognize that historical setting rather than pretending every detail of Matthew automatically establishes an identical doctrinal arrangement for every later circumstance. Nevertheless, the passage provides an unmistakable pattern concerning personal offenses, responsible confrontation, and the desire for reconciliation. The injured person is instructed to approach the offending brother privately. The purpose is not revenge or humiliation. It is to gain the brother. When a private offense can be settled privately, the believer who immediately broadcasts it to the congregation has skipped the Lord's instruction and opened a publicity department that heaven never commissioned.

Christ continues in Matthew 18:16 by directing that one or two others be taken if the offending brother refuses to hear, "that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." Verse 17 then describes the matter being brought before the church if the refusal continues. This progression is deliberate. A personal disagreement should not automatically become a public spectacle, and accusations should not be accepted simply because somebody delivers them confidently. Witnesses establish credible testimony and help distinguish genuine wrongdoing from misunderstanding, exaggeration, and personal hostility. The goal remains responsible correction rather than an escalating contest over who can embarrass whom more effectively. Some churches have turned disagreement into an Olympic event, with participants competing to discover who can collect the largest audience before anybody has examined the facts. The Bible commands witnesses because truth matters; gossip requires an audience because attention matters. Those are not the same thing.

Matthew 18 must also be applied with discernment rather than mechanically imposed upon every possible offense. A private personal trespass is not the same as a publicly documented scandal, a serious threat, or criminal abuse. Scripture does not require a victim of violence or sexual abuse to confront an offender alone before seeking protection or reporting wrongdoing. Nor must a congregation conceal criminal conduct until an internal disciplinary sequence has been completed. Romans 13:1–4 recognizes the legitimate responsibility of civil authorities concerning wrongdoing, while 1 Corinthians 5 addresses an openly known offense without pretending that every case begins as a private misunderstanding. The nature of the wrongdoing determines what responsible action requires. Matthew 18 is not a procedural loophole through which dangerous people may escape accountability while victims are instructed to return for another private conversation. Biblical correction protects truth and people; it does not sacrifice either one to preserve appearances.

**3. False Accusations, Hidden Scandals, and the Convenient Protection of Important People**

First Timothy 5:19–21 establishes serious safeguards concerning accusations against spiritual leaders. Paul declares, "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses." This instruction protects against reckless accusations and malicious attacks, but it does not place elders beyond investigation or correction. The following verse declares, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." Verse 21 demands impartiality, commanding that nothing be done through preference or partiality. Those instructions destroy the convenient theory that ordinary members must answer for every offense while prominent leaders enjoy permanent immunity. Evidence matters, and so does the responsibility to address established wrongdoing. A church that demands witnesses before correcting an ordinary member but refuses to hear credible evidence against its pastor has not established biblical order. It has established a protected class of religious officials.

Accusations must therefore be examined honestly, without presuming either guilt or innocence merely because someone occupies an influential position. Proverbs 18:13 warns, "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him." A congregation must not destroy a person's reputation because somebody circulated an allegation, but neither should it dismiss credible concerns because the accused is popular, wealthy, or useful to the ministry. Serious matters require appropriate investigation, reliable testimony, and protection against retaliation. Allegations involving violence, sexual abuse, exploitation, or criminal conduct may also require reporting to appropriate civil authorities. Church discipline is not a replacement for lawful investigation, and religious leaders possess no authority to conceal crimes beneath a claim of spiritual confidentiality. A congregation that buries evidence to protect its reputation has forgotten that truth is more valuable than its public image. God is not honored when the church sign remains polished while corruption continues behind the doors.

Consider the extraordinary double standard that can develop when a church begins protecting personalities instead of principles. An ordinary member questions an unexplained financial transaction and is immediately accused of rebellion. Another member raises concerns about misconduct and is warned against touching God's anointed. Meanwhile, the actual wrongdoing receives endless explanations, private meetings, and assurances that everything has been handled. That is not the impartiality commanded in 1 Timothy 5:21. Peter himself required public correction when his conduct contradicted the truth of the gospel, as Paul records in Galatians 2:11–14. If an apostle could be confronted concerning public wrongdoing, a modern pastor cannot claim

immunity through his title. The man who preaches accountability for everybody beneath him while demanding immunity for himself has mistaken the pulpit for a throne. A church that tolerates such an arrangement will eventually discover that favoritism is a very expensive substitute for righteousness.

**4. Biblical Discipline Is Not a Preacher's Personal Punishment Department**

First Peter 5:2–3 instructs elders to feed the flock willingly and warns them against acting "as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock." Those words establish a limitation upon pastoral authority that no religious institution has permission to erase. A pastor possesses responsibility to teach sound doctrine, correct genuine error, and protect the assembly. He does not possess unrestricted authority over the private conscience of every Christian. His opinions concerning personal preferences, business decisions, harmless associations, and matters where Scripture has not spoken cannot automatically become disciplinary laws. The congregation belongs to Jesus Christ, not to the man occupying the pulpit. A pastor may faithfully explain what God has commanded, but he cannot manufacture new commandments merely because he dislikes somebody's decisions. The preacher's authority ends where his personal preferences begin pretending to be Scripture.

Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans because they searched the Scriptures daily to determine whether the things preached were so. Their willingness to examine apostolic teaching against God's written revelation should settle the question concerning the legitimacy of sincere biblical inquiry. Christians are not commanded to surrender discernment whenever a man receives ordination. A believer who respectfully questions an unsupported doctrine is not automatically sowing discord. A member requesting honest financial accountability is not necessarily rebelling against spiritual leadership. The distinction lies in the substance and conduct involved. Malicious accusations, deliberate division, and persistent opposition to sound doctrine are genuine concerns. Honest questions and responsible requests for accountability are not equivalent offenses. When a church begins disciplining people for opening their Bibles and asking questions, it has wandered a considerable distance from the Bereans and moved dangerously close to the religious establishments that feared examination.

Nevertheless, the condemnation of authoritarian leadership must not become permission for genuine rebellion. Hebrews 13:17 commands believers to obey those exercising legitimate spiritual oversight, recognizing their accountability before God. First Thessalonians 5:12–13 likewise calls Christians to respect faithful labor and admonition. A congregation cannot function properly when members deliberately undermine sound leadership, spread malicious reports, or refuse correction concerning unmistakable

biblical wrongdoing. Spiritual freedom does not mean everybody becomes his own pope with a private congregation of one. Both pastors and members must remain subject to Scripture. The preacher who uses discipline to silence every disagreement is a tyrant, but the church member who labels every biblical correction tyranny is simply rebellion wearing a more respectable hat. The local assembly needs neither a dictator behind the pulpit nor a revolution in every pew. It needs obedience to Jesus Christ.

**5. Remove the Leaven Without Turning Discipline Into Revenge**

Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 5 reaches its practical force when he addresses the congregation's continued fellowship with the openly unrepentant offender. Verse 11 describes a person called a brother whose conduct involves serious wrongdoing, including fornication, covetousness, idolatry, railing, drunkenness, or extortion, and directs the assembly to withdraw ordinary fellowship under those circumstances. Verse 13 concludes, "Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person." The issue is not whether Christians may speak to unbelievers or associate with sinners while proclaiming the gospel. Paul specifically distinguishes those outside the congregation from those professing Christian fellowship while openly maintaining wicked conduct. Church discipline does not mean building a religious quarantine around everybody who needs salvation. It means refusing to advertise unrepentant wickedness as acceptable Christian fellowship merely because the offender happens to possess a membership card.

The severity of 1 Corinthians 5 must not be softened, but neither may the passage be transformed into a weapon for personal retaliation. Paul describes the offender being delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, "that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." (1 Corinthians 5:5). This is solemn apostolic instruction concerning a particular case, not a license for modern pastors to announce supernatural sentences against anyone who displeases them. The congregation's responsibility concerns identifiable fellowship, public testimony, and obedience to the truth. It cannot independently cancel regeneration, revoke the Holy Spirit's sealing, or manufacture eternal condemnation. Salvation under grace rests upon the finished work of Jesus Christ, as Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes. Removing a man from church fellowship is not the same thing as removing him from the hand of Christ. Any preacher claiming authority to erase eternal salvation through a disciplinary vote has promoted himself far beyond his biblical jurisdiction.

Second Thessalonians 3:14–15 provides additional instruction concerning withdrawal from disorderly believers who reject apostolic teaching. Paul directs that such a man be marked and fellowship restricted, but adds, "Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." That final statement is essential. Correction must pursue a legitimate spiritual

purpose rather than satisfying the congregation's appetite for punishment. Titus 3:10 similarly establishes admonition before rejecting a divisive heretic. The appropriate response depends upon the nature of the offense, the evidence, the danger involved, and the individual's response to correction. Discipline is not necessarily identical in every situation. A church that treats a repentant believer like a permanent enemy has forgotten the difference between correction and revenge. Biblical discipline removes the approval of sin; it does not authorize cruelty, personal vendettas, or a lifelong campaign to destroy the offender.

**6. When Repentance Comes, Mercy Must Not Be Locked Outside the Door**

Galatians 6:1 provides one of the clearest statements concerning the spirit in which correction must occur: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." Notice the objective. Restore. The believer who possesses sufficient spiritual maturity to assist another should remember his own vulnerability to temptation. This is not an invitation to overlook wrongdoing, excuse persistent rebellion, or substitute pleasant language for necessary confrontation. Restoration may require confession, changed conduct, restitution, and renewed accountability. But the correction should be directed toward genuine spiritual recovery rather than the humiliation of someone who has fallen. A man who enjoys exposing another Christian's failures more than helping him recover has mistaken religious superiority for spiritual maturity. The purpose of correction is not to produce trophies for the disciplinarian. It is to recover the wounded wherever recovery is possible.

Second Corinthians 2:6–8 presents a situation in which discipline had been administered and the congregation needed to respond with forgiveness and comfort. Paul writes, "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many." (2 Corinthians 2:6). He then warns that the individual might be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow and urges the believers to confirm their love toward him. The passage does not explicitly identify this individual as the offender described in 1 Corinthians 5, so that identification should not be treated as an established fact. Nevertheless, the principle is unmistakable: when correction has accomplished its proper purpose, continued punishment may become spiritually destructive. A church that knows how to remove somebody but has forgotten how to forgive him has learned only half the lesson. Discipline without the possibility of restoration becomes a prison sentence administered by people who claim to preach grace.

Forgiveness, however, must not be confused with the immediate restoration of every privilege, office, or position of trust. A person may sincerely repent while still facing

legitimate consequences arising from previous misconduct. A leader disqualified by serious wrongdoing does not automatically recover his office because he expresses sorrow. Financial dishonesty may require restitution, while abusive conduct may require protective boundaries and legal accountability. Victims must not be pressured into unsafe contact or instructed to trust an offender before genuine change has been established. Matthew 18:21–22 teaches the importance of forgiveness, but forgiveness does not abolish prudence or place vulnerable people back in danger. Grace can forgive a man without handing him the keys to the treasury he emptied. Mercy can seek his spiritual restoration without returning him to the position he abused. Biblical forgiveness is not an administrative eraser that makes every consequence disappear.

**7. A Holy Church Must Begin by Examining Its Own Hands**

First Peter 1:15–16 declares, "But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy." Peter applies the divine standard of holiness to believers, drawing upon the Old Testament revelation of God's character without transferring Israel's national covenant arrangement to the Church. Holiness is not an optional preference reserved for unusually strict congregations. It belongs to the believer's responsibility before God. Yet the call to holiness begins with personal examination rather than a campaign to discover everybody else's failures. First Corinthians 11:31 declares, "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged." Though that verse concerns the improper observance of the Lord's supper, its insistence upon self-examination exposes a principle often neglected by religious disciplinarians. A church cannot establish a credible testimony for holiness when its leadership spends every week measuring other people's sins while refusing to examine its own conduct.

Matthew 7:3–5 confronts the hypocrisy of a man attempting to remove a mote from his brother's eye while ignoring the beam in his own. The Lord's illustration occurs within His earthly kingdom teaching, and its immediate setting must be respected. Nevertheless, its moral force remains unmistakable. Hypocritical judgment is condemned, but the passage does not teach that wrongdoing should never be corrected. Christ instructs the hypocrite to address his own condition first so that he may see clearly to help his brother. This is remarkably different from the popular misuse of "Judge not" as a universal prohibition against moral discernment. Romans 12:9 commands believers to abhor evil and cleave to good. Ephesians 5:11 instructs Christians to have no fellowship with unfruitful works of darkness but rather reprove them. The Bible does not condemn every act of correction. It condemns the hypocrite who tries to perform eye surgery while carrying a telephone pole across his own face.

A spiritually healthy congregation therefore requires a consistent commitment to truth, accountability, justice, mercy, and the protection of its members. It must teach the Scriptures clearly enough that believers understand the difference between biblical commands and personal preferences. It must establish responsible ways to address credible accusations, resist favoritism, protect vulnerable people, and correct serious wrongdoing. Pastors must remain accountable, members must act honestly, and discipline must never become a substitute for lawful investigation when criminal conduct is involved. Churches should not advertise sin as acceptable Christian liberty, but neither should they turn spiritual oversight into a system of intimidation. The congregation that refuses all correction eventually becomes a refuge for corruption, while the congregation that corrects without fairness eventually becomes a refuge for tyranny. Holiness requires truth, and truth requires the courage to apply the same biblical standard even when the person being examined occupies the most important chair in the building.

**Conclusion**

The King James Bible does not permit the local church to ignore serious wrongdoing merely because correction might disturb its reputation, membership, or financial stability. First Corinthians 5 exposes the consequences of tolerating open immorality within an assembly. Matthew 18 establishes principles of responsible confrontation and reconciliation. Galatians 6:1 commands restoration in meekness, while 2 Corinthians 2:6–8 demonstrates the necessity of forgiveness and comfort when discipline has served its proper purpose. These passages must be rightly divided and applied according to their circumstances, but together they establish a serious responsibility for congregational integrity. The local church belongs to Jesus Christ, not to a preacher, committee, denomination, or influential family. Its members are saved by grace, not by disciplinary performance, yet that grace does not authorize unrepentant conduct to become an accepted part of Christian fellowship. The blood of Christ purchased the Church, and the Church has no authority to sell its testimony for a few additional offerings or a more comfortable attendance report.

Every congregation should therefore examine whether its approach to discipline reflects the Scriptures or merely the preferences of those exercising authority. Does the church confront genuine wrongdoing, or does it conceal scandal until somebody outside discovers it? Are credible accusations examined fairly, or are uncomfortable questions dismissed because the accused possesses influence? Does leadership submit to the same standards it expects ordinary members to obey? Are private offenses handled responsibly rather than converted into public spectacles? Is repentance welcomed, restoration pursued, and forgiveness genuinely extended where appropriate? Do protective boundaries remain in place when serious harm has occurred? These questions cannot be answered by pointing

toward a doctrinal statement hanging in the hallway. They require actual conduct. A church that advertises holiness while concealing wickedness has become a billboard for a product it refuses to practice. And a church that advertises grace while humiliating repentant believers has forgotten the mercy upon which its own salvation depends.

The final verdict is unavoidable. Biblical church discipline is neither religious cruelty nor institutional cowardice. It is the responsible application of God's word to the conduct and fellowship of His people. Sin must be identified honestly, accusations must be examined fairly, correction must be proportionate, and restoration must remain a genuine objective wherever repentance makes it possible. Pastors must not become dictators, congregations must not become gossip factories, and believers must not mistake Christian liberty for permission to practice open wickedness. Jesus Christ remains the Head of the Church, and His word must govern the assembly. A church that never corrects sin will eventually teach its members that holiness is negotiable. A church that never forgives repentance will eventually teach them that grace is merely a word painted above the entrance. And a church that protects its leaders while punishing the vulnerable has exchanged biblical accountability for religious corruption. When nobody corrects sin, the whole congregation pays the bill. But when correction is carried out faithfully, impartially, and with a genuine desire for restoration, the church demonstrates that truth and mercy were never intended to be enemies. The same Saviour who commands holiness also provides forgiveness, and the congregation that belongs to Him must never abandon either one.

**9 of 10 — The Local Church — The Great Commission Was Not a Marketing Campaign**

Key Passage: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen." (Matthew 28:19–20)

**Introduction**

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19). There stands the command of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, and nowhere in the passage do we discover instructions to hire an advertising agency, develop a religious celebrity brand, purchase an impressive auditorium, or compete with the entertainment industry for the largest possible audience. Christ commanded His disciples to go, teach, baptize, and instruct others in obedience to His revealed truth. Yet modern Christianity has developed an astonishing ability to transform evangelism into a business strategy, salvation into a marketing objective, and

church attendance into a numerical competition. Some congregations appear more concerned with increasing their market share than explaining the new birth. Their advertisements promise exciting experiences, comfortable environments, inspiring personalities, and enough recreational activities to make an amusement park feel inadequately staffed. The gospel occasionally receives a brief mention somewhere between the musical performance and the announcement concerning next month's building campaign. Jesus Christ did not command His followers to make Christianity more attractive than the world. He commanded them to preach a Saviour who died for the sins of the world.

The problem is not that churches communicate publicly, maintain buildings, operate websites, distribute literature, or make reasonable efforts to reach their communities. Those activities can serve legitimate purposes when governed by Scripture. A church sign can announce meeting times, a website can provide biblical teaching, and a missionary newsletter can communicate the work of the gospel across continents. The problem begins when the machinery intended to carry the message becomes more important than the message itself. We have reached the point where some ministries can analyze audience engagement, calculate advertising conversions, monitor online impressions, and produce impressive presentations while remaining unable to explain justification by faith without wandering into religious performance. A thousand people may attend an event because the entertainment was exceptional, but their presence does not establish that a thousand sinners understood or believed the gospel. A full parking lot proves that people arrived. It does not prove that anybody was born again. Heaven is not obligated to accept a church's attendance report as evidence of spiritual success.

The New Testament establishes a far more substantial commission. Matthew 28:18–20 places the authority of the risen Christ behind the work of teaching the nations. Acts 1:8 identifies the power of the Holy Ghost and the expanding witness of the apostles. Romans 10:13–17 establishes the necessity of hearing and believing the word of God, while 2 Corinthians 5:18–20 describes the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to those representing Christ. These passages reveal evangelism as the proclamation of divine truth rather than the manipulation of human responses. They also demonstrate that the work does not end when someone raises a hand, walks an aisle, signs a card, or appears in a photograph celebrating another successful outreach campaign. Converts need instruction, believers need fellowship, missionaries need support, and local assemblies must remain faithful to the gospel they proclaim. The Great Commission is not an invitation to build a religious audience around human personalities. It is a responsibility to make Jesus Christ known, preach His finished work, and teach those who believe to walk according to His word.

**1. Christ Possesses the Authority, Not the Church Marketing Department**

Matthew 28:18 begins with the declaration, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." That statement establishes the authority behind the commission before the command itself is delivered. The risen Jesus Christ was addressing His disciples in Galilee following His resurrection, as Matthew 28:16–17 records. The One who had been crucified now stood before them alive, possessing authority that no earthly government, denomination, or religious institution could manufacture. The commission therefore begins with Christ's supremacy rather than human organizational ambition. His followers were not being invited to conduct an experimental religious enterprise and measure its success according to public approval. They were being commanded to carry His message under His authority. A church may possess a magnificent communications department, but it cannot improve upon the authority of the One who conquered death. The empty tomb accomplished more for the credibility of Christianity than every advertising campaign ever purchased.

The immediate historical setting must be respected. Christ spoke directly to the eleven disciples following His resurrection, and the commission unfolded through the subsequent apostolic witness recorded in Acts. We must not erase Israel's prophetic setting, transfer Israel's national covenant promises to the Church, or turn every circumstance surrounding the apostles into an unrestricted claim of identical authority for modern religious personalities. Nevertheless, the New Testament plainly establishes the continuing proclamation of the gospel among the nations. Acts records that witness expanding from Jerusalem, and Paul's ministry reveals the gospel reaching Gentiles through the preaching of Jesus Christ. The present Church Age message is clarified in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4: Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. Salvation is by grace through faith, not religious enrollment. Rightly dividing Scripture does not provide an excuse to abandon evangelism. It protects the gospel from being buried beneath promises, ceremonies, and conditions belonging to different biblical settings.

The commission also exposes the danger of making the institution more prominent than the Saviour. Jesus did not declare that all power had been given to a denominational headquarters or to whichever preacher could attract the largest television audience. The authority remains His. Second Corinthians 4:5 declares, "For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." A faithful congregation may explain where it meets, identify its ministers, and invite people to hear sound teaching, but these practical matters must remain subordinate to the proclamation of Christ. The purpose of evangelism is not to persuade sinners that one organization has superior facilities or more impressive personalities. It is to proclaim the One who can save their

souls. When the preacher becomes the attraction, the church becomes the product, and attendance becomes the objective, the Great Commission has been replaced by a sales campaign wearing a religious necktie.

**2. The Holy Ghost Empowered Witnesses, Not Professional Religious Spectators**

Acts 1:8 records Christ declaring, "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." The historical setting is significant. The risen Lord was addressing His apostles before His ascension, and the promised coming of the Holy Ghost would accompany the opening witness recorded in Acts 2. The geographical movement in the verse anticipates the historical expansion of that witness. Jerusalem came first, followed by regions beyond Judea and ultimately the nations. The command was not to remain permanently gathered in one impressive religious facility while waiting for interested customers to discover the location. The gospel was to be proclaimed beyond familiar boundaries. The Lord did not tell the apostles to build a comfortable headquarters in Jerusalem and congratulate themselves whenever somebody wandered through the entrance. He directed His witnesses toward the world.

Acts 8:4 records that believers scattered by persecution "went every where preaching the word." The immediate context concerns persecution following Stephen's death, and the believers' movement was shaped by those historical circumstances. Nevertheless, their response demonstrates that the proclamation of biblical truth was not confined exclusively to a professional religious class. Philip preached Christ in Samaria, while other believers carried the message wherever circumstances took them. The local church should cultivate that same concern for the lost without pretending that every Christian possesses identical gifts or responsibilities. Ephesians 4:11 distinguishes evangelists, pastors, and teachers within the Lord's provision for the edification of His people. Not every believer occupies the office of an evangelist, but Christians can still speak concerning their Saviour, distribute sound gospel literature, support missionary labor, and answer sincere questions from unbelievers. Evangelism is not a spectator sport in which the congregation purchases tickets while the preacher performs all the witnessing.

Personal witnessing requires biblical substance rather than manipulative techniques. First Peter 3:15 instructs believers to be ready to give an answer concerning their hope with meekness and fear. The surrounding passage concerns suffering and the believer's testimony, but the principle of responsible explanation remains valuable. A Christian should understand the gospel well enough to explain why Jesus Christ died, why His resurrection matters, and why human works cannot purchase eternal life. That does not require memorizing a theatrical sales presentation or possessing a seminary education. It

requires knowing the Scriptures and speaking truthfully. Some believers can debate obscure historical controversies for hours but become strangely helpless when a neighbor asks how to be saved. A man who can explain seven prophetic kingdoms but cannot explain the gospel to a lost sinner has accumulated information without learning how to deliver the most important message in his possession.

**3. Faith Comes by Hearing the Word, Not by Responding to a Sales Pitch**

Romans 10:13 declares, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." That glorious statement must be read with the verses that follow rather than lifted from its setting and converted into a religious slogan. Paul is addressing the place of Israel within God's dealings and explaining the righteousness received through faith. Romans 10:9–10 identifies believing in the heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, while verses 14–15 ask how sinners can call upon One they have not believed, believe without hearing, or hear without a preacher. The argument connects salvation with the proclamation and reception of divine truth. Verse 17 declares, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Faith does not come by clever advertising, emotional pressure, or the promise of free refreshments. It comes through the word of God directing the sinner toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

This distinction exposes the dangers of pressure-driven professions. A preacher may persuade someone to repeat particular words, raise a hand, sign a card, or walk forward during an invitation, but none of those actions automatically establishes that the person believed the gospel. There is nothing inherently wrong with inviting a sinner to receive Christ or helping someone express genuine faith through prayer. The error begins when a human response becomes the supposed basis of salvation. Romans 4:5 declares, "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness." The saving object is Jesus Christ, not the perfection of a ceremony or the sincerity of a momentary emotional response. A preacher can count every hand that goes up, but he cannot look into every heart that remains seated. The Holy Spirit does not issue regeneration certificates according to the number of people who followed an invitation correctly.

Consider the congregation that proudly announces hundreds of decisions from a recent outreach campaign while providing almost no explanation concerning what those individuals actually believed. Were they taught that Christ died for their sins and rose again? Did they understand salvation by grace apart from works? Were they trusting Jesus Christ or merely attempting to satisfy the person presenting the invitation? These questions matter because religious excitement can produce impressive numbers without corresponding spiritual understanding. First Corinthians 3:6 declares, "I have planted,

Apollos watered; but God gave the increase." The minister plants and waters through faithful labor, while God accomplishes what human performance cannot. The church should rejoice whenever a sinner genuinely trusts Christ, but it should never manufacture certainty from statistics. A decision card is evidence that somebody completed a card; the new birth is a work of God that no attendance spreadsheet can perform.

**4. The Great Commission Makes Disciples, Not Permanent Religious Consumers**

Matthew 28:19–20 contains more than an instruction to announce a message and immediately begin searching for another audience. Christ commanded His disciples to teach the nations, baptize, and teach those reached to observe what He had commanded. The order establishes an ongoing responsibility extending beyond the initial proclamation. Evangelism must communicate the saving message clearly, while discipleship instructs believers concerning the truths and responsibilities following salvation. Acts 2:41–42 demonstrates a recognizable pattern during the opening Jerusalem witness. Those who received the word were baptized and continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship. The historical circumstances were distinctive, but the relationship between receiving the message and continuing in instruction remains unmistakable. The Great Commission does not terminate when a sinner makes a profession. The church has not finished its responsibility merely because another name can be added to the report.

Baptism belongs within that responsibility without becoming a condition for obtaining eternal life. Acts 8:36–38 records the Ethiopian official professing faith in Jesus Christ before Philip baptized him. First Corinthians 1:17 distinguishes Paul's commission to preach the gospel from water baptism, preventing the ordinance from being confused with the saving message itself. Ephesians 2:8–10 establishes salvation by grace through faith and then describes the good works for which believers are created in Christ Jesus. A congregation should therefore explain believers' baptism, teach sound doctrine, and encourage obedience without turning Christian growth into an additional payment for redemption. The baptistry is not a factory for manufacturing Christians, and the discipleship classroom is not a workshop for completing salvation. Christ saves the sinner; the church then teaches the saved sinner to understand and obey the Scriptures.

Discipleship also requires patience because spiritual maturity does not arrive automatically with regeneration. A newly saved person may possess genuine faith while knowing remarkably little about biblical doctrine, Christian conduct, or the difference between Israel and the Church. Second Timothy 2:2 instructs Timothy to entrust what he has heard to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. The pattern involves instruction capable of continuing beyond the original teacher. Local congregations should develop believers who can understand the King James Bible, explain the gospel, exercise

discernment, and serve responsibly. The objective is not lifelong dependence upon a religious celebrity who must interpret every verse for an admiring audience. A church that produces thousands of spectators but almost nobody capable of explaining the Scriptures has not created a mature congregation. It has built a theological nursery where the furniture keeps getting larger while the occupants remain infants.

**5. Missionary Support Is Gospel Partnership, Not an Investment in Celebrity Empires**

Acts 13:1–3 records the assembly at Antioch participating in the sending of Barnabas and Saul for missionary labor. The Holy Ghost directed their separation for the work to which they had been called, and the believers fasted, prayed, laid hands upon them, and sent them away. This passage records a significant historical development within the apostolic mission, demonstrating the relationship between an identifiable local congregation and gospel work beyond its immediate location. The church did not exist merely to maintain its own facilities or provide spiritual entertainment to the same comfortable audience every week. It participated in the proclamation of Christ beyond its geographical boundaries. A congregation that spends every available dollar polishing its own building while remaining indifferent to gospel work outside its walls has confused property maintenance with missionary vision.

Paul's relationship with the Philippian believers demonstrates the legitimacy of financial support for gospel labor. Philippians 4:15–18 records their participation in giving and receiving, and Paul acknowledges their contribution as a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. His language makes clear that their support was more than a business transaction. They were participating in work extending beyond their own congregation. Third John 1:5–8 similarly commends faithful assistance to brethren engaged in the truth and speaks of becoming fellowhelpers to that truth. A church may therefore support missionaries, distribute gospel literature, assist evangelistic labor, and contribute toward sound biblical teaching beyond its immediate community. Such giving should arise from conviction and responsible stewardship, not financial intimidation. Missionary support is not a purchase of heavenly publicity. It is the practical cooperation of believers who understand that the gospel must travel farther than the church parking lot.

Financial integrity is essential because evangelistic work can become a convenient cover for dishonesty. Second Corinthians 8:20–21 reveals Paul's concern to avoid blame in the administration of financial gifts, providing for honest things not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of men. Churches and independent ministries should handle contributions transparently, maintain meaningful accountability, and distinguish legitimate expenses from personal extravagance. Second Peter 2:3 warns about false teachers who, through covetousness, make merchandise of people with feigned words. An impressive

missionary presentation does not excuse missing financial records, and dramatic stories do not confer immunity from scrutiny. When a ministry spends more effort manufacturing emotional fundraising appeals than explaining how contributions are used, the congregation has good reason to ask whether it is supporting the gospel or financing somebody's religious lifestyle. The Great Commission was never a blank check for ministerial luxury.

**6. A Digital Audience Is Not a Local Church, but the Gospel Can Travel Through Both**

Modern communication has opened remarkable opportunities for distributing biblical truth. A Christian ministry can publish detailed Bible studies, distribute gospel literature electronically, provide recorded preaching, and reach readers in countries where direct personal contact would be difficult. Paul himself employed written communication to instruct distant congregations. Colossians 4:16 directs that his epistle be read among the believers and shared with another assembly. His letters did not become less authoritative because they traveled across geographical distances. Likewise, sound biblical teaching does not become spiritually worthless because it reaches someone through a computer screen. The medium may change, but the truth of Scripture remains the same. A printing press cannot save a sinner, a radio cannot regenerate a soul, and a computer cannot forgive sins. But all three can carry the gospel message concerning the Saviour who can. The machinery is not the miracle; the message concerns the miracle.

Nevertheless, digital communication must not be confused with the complete function of a local church. An online ministry may reach hundreds of thousands of people, but that audience does not automatically constitute an identifiable congregation exercising the responsibilities described in the New Testament. Acts 2:42 presents believers continuing in doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. Hebrews 10:24–25 commands mutual encouragement and assembly, while 1 Corinthians 5 demonstrates the responsibility of an identifiable congregation concerning serious public wrongdoing among its members. A digital audience may include saved believers, curious unbelievers, isolated Christians, hostile critics, and individuals who never intend to participate beyond occasionally reading a post. Such reach can accomplish genuine good without becoming equivalent to church membership. A hundred thousand followers do not become a congregation merely because they follow the same preacher. An audience can hear the sermon, but hearing the sermon does not automatically fulfill every responsibility of fellowship.

The proper relationship between local assemblies and broader ministries should therefore be cooperation rather than competition. A faithful church should welcome sound biblical resources that strengthen its members, while an independent publishing or teaching ministry should not pretend that access to its content removes every need for local

fellowship. Some believers cannot attend an assembly because of illness, disability, geographical isolation, persecution, or the absence of sound congregations. Digital ministry can provide substantial encouragement in those circumstances, and such opportunities should be used responsibly. Yet popularity must never become the standard of doctrinal authority. A preacher with millions of views can be wrong, while a faithful teacher addressing a handful of people can be right. The number beneath a video measures how often the video was viewed, not how accurately its Scriptures were handled. The gospel must never be rewritten to satisfy an algorithm, and biblical truth does not become false because the algorithm refuses to distribute it.

**7. Heaven Measures Faithfulness Differently From the Annual Attendance Report**

First Corinthians 4:2 declares, "Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." That statement establishes a standard fundamentally different from the measurements commonly advertised as proof of ministerial success. Faithfulness involves handling what belongs to another according to the owner's instructions. The local church belongs to Jesus Christ, and its ministers are responsible for preaching His word rather than constructing personal reputations. First Corinthians 3:6–8 distinguishes those who plant and water from God, who gives the increase, and explains that each laborer shall receive reward according to his own labor. The passage does not establish that every faithful preacher will attract an enormous congregation or that every large ministry is necessarily unfaithful. It establishes that spiritual responsibility cannot be reduced to visible numbers. A church may have five hundred people listening to nonsense and another congregation may have fifty people receiving sound doctrine. The larger audience has more chairs occupied, but occupied chairs are not an inspired measurement of faithfulness.

The book of Acts demonstrates that faithful gospel preaching did not produce identical responses in every location. When Paul preached in Athens, Acts 17:32–34 records some mocking, others postponing consideration, and certain individuals believing. The varied reactions did not change the truth of the message. Similarly, Acts 13:44–52 records opposition to apostolic preaching alongside the reception of the word by others. A minister cannot control the hearts of hearers, manufacture genuine faith through persuasion, or promise numerical results as though conversion were a predictable commercial transaction. His responsibility is to proclaim the gospel truthfully and faithfully. This does not excuse laziness, careless preparation, or indifference toward reaching people. It places the results in their proper relationship to the work. The preacher is commanded to sow the seed, not paint imaginary fruit upon the branches so the congregation will admire the harvest report. A manufactured conversion statistic is not an evangelistic victory. It is dishonest bookkeeping concerning eternal matters.

A faithful assembly must also reject the temptation to measure its worth through comparison with other congregations. Second Corinthians 10:12 warns against those who measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves among themselves. Such comparisons can produce pride in larger churches and discouragement in smaller ones, even when neither judgment reflects actual doctrinal faithfulness. A congregation should examine whether it preaches Christ clearly, teaches the Scriptures accurately, exercises responsible stewardship, supports legitimate gospel work, and cares for its members. Growth may provide additional opportunities for service, but it also brings greater responsibilities. Small size does not automatically establish purity, and large size does not automatically establish compromise. A tiny congregation can be as proud of its smallness as a megachurch can be proud of its crowds. Both have missed the point if they are measuring themselves instead of obeying the Lord. The question is not how impressive the church appears, but how faithfully it serves the Christ who purchased it.

**Conclusion**

The Great Commission was never a marketing campaign, and the local church was never established to become a religious competitor in the entertainment industry. Jesus Christ commanded the proclamation of His truth, the teaching of the nations, and the instruction of those who respond in faith. Acts 1:8 demonstrates the expanding apostolic witness through the power of the Holy Ghost. Romans 10:13–17 establishes the necessity of hearing and believing the word of God. Second Corinthians 5:18–20 describes the ministry of reconciliation, through which believers represent the message concerning Christ. These responsibilities cannot be replaced by advertising strategies, numerical manipulation, emotional pressure, or the cultivation of religious personalities. The gospel is not a product requiring a better sales pitch. It is the announcement that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. A church that cannot explain that message has no business congratulating itself upon its marketing expertise.

Congregations must therefore recover the difference between reaching people and merely attracting spectators. A sound church should proclaim salvation by grace through faith, encourage personal witnessing, support responsible missionary labor, distribute biblical teaching, and disciple those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. It should use modern communication without allowing technology to determine its doctrine. It should maintain financial accountability without treating contributions as evidence of personal righteousness. It should welcome genuine growth without manufacturing impressive numbers or pressuring people into professions they do not understand. Its members should recognize that evangelism is not the exclusive responsibility of a professional preacher, while its leaders should remember that faithful instruction remains necessary

after conversion. The congregation that teaches sinners how to be saved and then teaches saved people how to understand the Bible is accomplishing something more substantial than the church that attracts an enormous audience and never moves beyond religious entertainment.

And now the matter comes down to a question every congregation must answer before the Lord Jesus Christ: Are we preaching the gospel, or are we promoting ourselves? A church can possess an enormous auditorium, professional musicians, sophisticated advertising, a powerful digital presence, and financial resources beyond anything the early believers could have imagined. None of those advantages is inherently sinful, but none can substitute for obedience. Another assembly may gather in a modest building with limited resources and a preacher whose name never becomes famous. If that congregation faithfully proclaims Christ, instructs believers, supports the work of the gospel, and remains accountable to Scripture, its labor possesses value that no public relations department can manufacture. Jesus Christ did not die to become the mascot of a religious corporation. He died for sinners, was buried, and rose again. The Church does not need to make that message fashionable, entertaining, or commercially competitive. It needs to make that message known. The preacher is not a salesman, the congregation is not a customer base, and the gospel is not merchandise. We are ambassadors for Christ, not advertising executives for an earthly kingdom. Preach the word, proclaim the Saviour, teach the converts, support the laborers, and leave the increase with God. When the final accounting comes, heaven will not be impressed by how successfully a church marketed itself while neglecting the message it was commanded to deliver.

**10 of 10 — The Local Church — No Lone Rangers in the Body of Christ: Why Saved Sheep Still Need a Flock**

Key Passage: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." (1 Corinthians 12:27)

The Christian who believes his denomination is the exclusive doorway into heaven has made an idol out of an institution, and the Christian who believes he needs absolutely nobody but himself and his Bible has made an idol out of his independence. There stand two opposite errors, both wearing the clothing of biblical conviction while contradicting the Scriptures they claim to defend. One man bows before a religious organization as though its membership directory were maintained by the angels of God. Another sits comfortably at home, announces that all churches are corrupt, and congratulates himself upon

possessing sufficient spiritual maturity to avoid every other Christian on the planet. The first has confused the local church with the Saviour. The second has confused personal salvation with permission to disregard the brethren. Both need an open King James Bible and considerably less confidence in their own arrangements. The church cannot save a sinner, but the sinner who has been saved should not spend the rest of his Christian life pretending that God's instructions concerning the church were written for somebody else.

The Apostle Paul declared, "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." (1 Corinthians 12:27). His statement appears within a sustained explanation of spiritual unity, diversity, and mutual dependence among believers. He was addressing the Corinthian congregation, where divisions, spiritual pride, and the misuse of gifts had produced unnecessary disorder. Paul did not describe Christianity as a collection of independent religious experts who occasionally agreed upon theological conclusions. He described a body possessing different members, different functions, and an essential relationship to its Head. Christ alone supplies that headship. The members belong to Him, and their relationship with one another carries genuine responsibility. Yet modern Christianity has produced religious institutions that demand devotion belonging to Christ and independent believers who behave as though the other members of His body were unnecessary equipment. A hand cannot declare itself independent of the arm without becoming useless, and a congregation cannot declare itself independent of Christ without becoming something other than a biblical church.

The local church is neither a substitute for salvation nor an optional religious accessory to be discarded whenever participation becomes inconvenient. It is an assembly of believers gathered under the authority of Jesus Christ, instructed by His word, and responsible for worship, fellowship, evangelism, discipline, service, and mutual encouragement. No congregation is perfect because no congregation consists of sinlessly perfect people. Some assemblies contain genuine believers struggling toward maturity, while others have surrendered biblical doctrine to religious tradition, entertainment, financial manipulation, or authoritarian leadership. Christians must therefore exercise discernment without using discernment as an excuse for permanent isolation. The purpose is not to defend every organization bearing the word church, but to establish what Scripture requires from a sound assembly and from those who belong to Christ. A saved sheep does not need a religious corporation to become a member of Christ's body, but it does need to remember that the Shepherd who saved it also gave instructions concerning the flock.

**1. Born Into Christ, Not Registered Into a Religious Corporation**

First Corinthians 12:13 establishes the supernatural foundation of the believer's membership in Christ: "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be

Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit." This is not a church secretary recording a name or a preacher administering water baptism. It is the work of the Holy Spirit placing believers into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ. The distinction matters because religious establishments have repeatedly claimed authority to confer, maintain, or revoke salvation through institutional membership. Yet Ephesians 2:8–9 declares that salvation is by grace through faith, not of works. The sinner's standing before God is secured through Christ, not through denominational paperwork. Heaven does not require a membership certificate bearing a pastor's signature, and the Holy Spirit does not consult the church office before placing a redeemed sinner into the body of Christ.

The spiritual body of Christ must nevertheless be distinguished from the identifiable local assemblies described throughout the New Testament. Paul addressed "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2), while Galatians 1:2 refers to the churches of Galatia. Romans 16:5 mentions a church meeting in a house, demonstrating that a congregation's identity does not depend upon elaborate property or impressive religious architecture. These were assemblies where believers gathered, received instruction, maintained fellowship, and exercised responsibility toward one another. Membership in Christ's spiritual body comes through salvation; participation in a local assembly concerns earthly fellowship and service. Neither truth cancels the other. A genuinely saved Christian does not lose eternal life because he moves away from a congregation, and a religious organization cannot make an unbeliever spiritually alive by voting him into membership. A church roll identifies a human relationship; the new birth establishes a divine one. Confuse the two, and religious administration becomes a counterfeit gospel.

The distinction also protects the Church from being confused with Israel or with an earthly religious kingdom. Paul wrote, "Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God:" (1 Corinthians 10:32). Israel's national covenant promises remain distinct from the spiritual blessings believers possess in Christ. Ephesians 2:11–16 reveals Jews and Gentiles reconciled in one body through the cross, not a Gentile denomination inheriting Israel's earthly identity. Likewise, no modern congregation can claim exclusive possession of Christ merely because it maintains an ancient tradition, impressive hierarchy, or elaborate statement of institutional authority. The Lord purchased His Church with His own blood, as Acts 20:28 declares. The body of Christ is not the private property of Rome, Canterbury, Geneva, Nashville, or the largest Baptist church in the county. Christ purchased His people, and no denominational headquarters has been appointed heaven's exclusive membership department.

**2. Christ Gave Pastors and Teachers, Not a Religious Audience Without Responsibilities**

Ephesians 4:11 declares, "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." Paul was addressing believers concerning the unity and growth of Christ's body, explaining how the ascended Lord provided for its instruction and edification. The apostles and prophets possessed foundational significance, as Ephesians 2:20 establishes, while the work of evangelists, pastors, and teachers serves the continuing needs of believers. These provisions were not intended to manufacture a clerical aristocracy whose members could claim spiritual superiority over ordinary Christians. They were given for a definite purpose. Ephesians 4:12 identifies that purpose as "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." The pastor is not supposed to become the congregation's permanent substitute for spiritual maturity. His responsibility includes helping believers grow until they can understand the Scriptures and serve Christ faithfully themselves.

Ephesians 4:13–14 explains that this ministry promotes maturity, stability, and resistance to doctrinal deception. Believers are not supposed to remain children, "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine." That expression describes precisely the danger confronting Christians who substitute religious personalities for biblical understanding. Some follow whichever preacher possesses the greatest audience, while others abandon every congregation because nobody agrees with every opinion they have developed through years of independent study. Neither arrangement guarantees maturity. The answer is the faithful teaching of God's word, rightly divided, with Jesus Christ remaining the Head. Pastoral instruction should establish believers in salvation by grace through faith, eternal security, Christian conduct, dispensational distinctions, and the responsibilities of fellowship. A congregation where nobody can explain the gospel without consulting the preacher has not produced mature disciples. It has created a theological nursery where the same infants have occupied the cribs for forty years.

The ultimate goal appears in Ephesians 4:15–16, where believers are instructed to speak the truth in love and grow up into Christ, the Head. Paul describes the whole body as joined together, with every part contributing to its increase and edification. The passage does not teach that every believer possesses identical abilities or must perform the same work. One Christian may teach, another may give, another may encourage, and another may offer practical help during serious difficulty. Their contributions differ, but their responsibilities arise from their relationship to Christ. The local assembly provides opportunities to exercise those responsibilities among identifiable believers rather than merely discussing them in theory. God did not give pastors to manufacture audiences, and He did not give

spiritual abilities so Christians could admire themselves in private. A functioning body requires contributing members, not a collection of detached specialists congratulating themselves upon how unnecessary everybody else has become.

**3. A Body With Many Members Cannot Function as a One-Man Island**

First Corinthians 12:12 declares, "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ." Paul's comparison is deliberate. A human body possesses different members whose functions are distinct but mutually dependent. The foot does not cease belonging to the body because it is not the hand, and the ear does not become unnecessary because it cannot perform the work of the eye. Paul was correcting spiritual pride and division among the Corinthians, particularly their tendency to elevate certain abilities while diminishing others. His argument concerns the spiritual body of Christ, but it has unmistakable practical consequences for believers serving together in local congregations. A Christian who announces that he needs no other believers has made an extraordinary discovery: apparently his particular member of Christ's body possesses abilities that Paul forgot to describe. Scripture, however, does not share his enthusiasm for spiritual self-sufficiency.

The apostle continues by exposing the folly of dismissing supposedly inferior members. First Corinthians 12:21 declares, "And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you." Verse 22 adds that members appearing more feeble are necessary. This destroys the assumption that only prominent preachers, accomplished teachers, wealthy contributors, and publicly recognized workers possess meaningful value. The elderly believer praying faithfully, the quiet member assisting a struggling family, and the Christian providing patient encouragement may perform work that never appears in a church announcement. Yet their service matters. The congregation must not become a stage upon which a few talented personalities perform while everyone else is treated as disposable furniture. The body of Christ does not consist of one enormous mouth surrounded by thousands of unnecessary ears. The Lord gave differing members because the work requires more than a preacher talking and everybody else watching.

Paul concludes his illustration by commanding mutual concern. First Corinthians 12:25–26 teaches that there should be no schism in the body and that members should demonstrate the same care for one another. When one suffers, the others suffer with it; when one receives honor, the others rejoice. These responsibilities cannot be fulfilled through doctrinal agreement alone. A Christian may possess an impressive understanding of biblical prophecy while knowing practically nothing about the struggles of believers sitting nearby. Another may defend sound doctrine publicly but become strangely unavailable

whenever somebody requires personal assistance. The point is not that every believer must participate in every difficulty or surrender reasonable boundaries. It is that Christian love must produce something beyond an accurate theological vocabulary. A sheep that can identify every wolf in the surrounding countryside but refuses to recognize another wounded sheep beside it has developed considerable knowledge while missing the practical responsibility of belonging to a flock.

**4. Shepherds Must Lead Without Crowns, and Sheep Must Follow Without Blindfolds**

Hebrews 13:7 declares, "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." The verse establishes recognizable spiritual leadership, but notice the qualifications attached to the instruction. These leaders have spoken the word of God, their faith is worthy of imitation, and their conduct is to be considered. Hebrews 13:17 subsequently commands obedience and submission to those watching for souls as men who must give account. The passage does not establish unlimited personal authority, nor does it permit members to reject legitimate oversight merely because correction becomes uncomfortable. Leadership involves teaching, warning, protecting, and guiding believers according to Scripture. A shepherd without authority cannot properly lead the flock, but a shepherd who mistakes authority for ownership has forgotten whose sheep he is watching. Biblical submission recognizes responsibility without surrendering the conscience to another man's opinions.

First Peter 5:2–3 commands elders, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock." There is the pastoral job description without denominational embroidery. Feed the flock. Exercise responsible oversight. Refuse dishonest gain. Lead by example rather than domination. Verse 4 identifies Jesus Christ as the Chief Shepherd, establishing the ultimate authority before whom every earthly pastor answers. These commands protect the congregation from religious tyranny while requiring members to respect genuine pastoral responsibility. A pastor should be supported in faithful labor, not treated as a hired entertainer expected to change doctrine whenever attendance declines. The congregation cannot hire a preacher to deliver God's word and then demand that he remove every verse that makes the membership uncomfortable. That arrangement produces a religious employee, not a faithful shepherd.

Nevertheless, biblical leadership must remain accountable. Acts 17:11 commends the Bereans for examining the Scriptures, while Galatians 2:11–14 records Paul confronting Peter concerning conduct contrary to the truth of the gospel. First Timothy 5:19–21

establishes safeguards concerning accusations against elders and requires impartial correction when wrongdoing is established. No pastor becomes infallible because he possesses ordination papers, occupies a respected pulpit, or has served for several decades. Members must not circulate malicious accusations, but neither should credible concerns concerning financial corruption, abusive conduct, or false teaching be buried beneath demands for loyalty. Serious criminal wrongdoing requires appropriate reporting and protection, not a private religious arrangement designed to preserve reputations. A church where nobody may question the preacher has exchanged spiritual oversight for personal rule. A church where nobody will listen to a faithful preacher has exchanged liberty for rebellion. Scripture condemns both, because neither places Jesus Christ where He belongs.

**5. Know When to Stand Faithfully and When to Walk Away**

A sound local assembly deserves faithful participation, even when its members occasionally disappoint one another. Acts 2:42 describes believers continuing steadfastly in apostolic doctrine and fellowship, demonstrating that congregational life involves perseverance rather than temporary enthusiasm. A church may possess an imperfect building, limited financial resources, ordinary musical ability, and a pastor whose preaching style is not universally admired, yet remain doctrinally sound and spiritually responsible. Christians must learn to distinguish serious biblical errors from preferences concerning architecture, schedules, personalities, or traditions that Scripture has not commanded. Some believers leave churches because the gospel has been corrupted; others leave because someone moved their preferred chair. Those are not equivalent reasons. If a Christian demands a perfect congregation before participating in fellowship, he should remember that his arrival would immediately destroy its claim to perfection. Saved sinners must learn to exercise patience toward other saved sinners.

There are also circumstances when separation from a congregation becomes necessary. Galatians 1:8–9 condemns the preaching of another gospel. Second Peter 2:3 warns concerning false teachers who make merchandise of people through covetousness. First Peter 5:3 forbids leadership that behaves as lords over God's heritage. A congregation that persistently corrupts salvation by grace, protects serious misconduct, manipulates its members, or demands obedience contrary to Scripture cannot claim unlimited loyalty merely because its entrance displays a familiar religious name. Acts 5:29 establishes the superiority of obedience to God over obedience to men. Leaving a corrupt assembly is not necessarily rebellion against biblical fellowship. It may be an act of obedience to the authority that fellowship itself is supposed to recognize. No believer is required to remain

beneath a wolf merely because the wolf has learned to preach, purchased a suit, and installed a sign identifying the building as a church.

The believer must therefore evaluate congregations by Scripture rather than reputation or convenience. Does the church proclaim salvation through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Does it teach the King James Bible faithfully and rightly divide the word of truth? Are its leaders qualified, accountable, and willing to answer legitimate questions? Does its worship honor God rather than merely entertain an audience? Are baptism and the Lord's supper administered according to biblical understanding rather than presented as instruments of regeneration? Does the congregation practice fellowship, correction, restoration, evangelism, and responsible stewardship? These are meaningful considerations. No earthly assembly will satisfy every human preference, but a sound congregation should demonstrate fidelity to the essential truths of Scripture. The believer who leaves every church over minor irritation has made personal preference his authority, while the believer who remains beneath serious corruption merely because of tradition has made institutional loyalty his authority. Neither has submitted the matter properly to the word of God.

**6. Fellowship Means Carrying More Than a Bible Through the Church Door**

Hebrews 10:24–25 commands believers to consider one another, provoke unto love and good works, and avoid forsaking their assembling together. The passage does not teach that church attendance earns salvation, nor does it authorize condemnation of believers who face genuine obstacles involving illness, disability, isolation, persecution, or the absence of a sound congregation. Modern communication can provide tremendous encouragement to Christians who cannot regularly gather in person. Nevertheless, the availability of sermons online does not eliminate the responsibility to assemble where circumstances reasonably permit. The emphasis in Hebrews involves mutual encouragement, not merely sitting in the same building. A believer may attend faithfully while remaining indifferent toward everybody around him, and another may accumulate enormous biblical knowledge while refusing every opportunity for fellowship. The church door is not a magical entrance that produces spiritual maturity, but neither is the computer screen an inspired replacement for every responsibility God established among the brethren.

Galatians 6:2 commands believers to bear one another's burdens, while Romans 12:10–15 instructs Christians concerning brotherly affection, hospitality, practical generosity, and rejoicing or weeping with others according to their circumstances. Those commands demand something beyond religious vocabulary. A brother facing serious illness may need prayer, encouragement, transportation, or assistance with ordinary responsibilities. A

struggling family may need practical provision rather than a lecture about financial management. A newly saved believer may require patient biblical instruction, while someone overtaken in a fault may need restoration in the spirit of meekness described in Galatians 6:1. These responsibilities must be exercised with discernment, without turning fellowship into intrusive control over private lives. A congregation that knows how to discuss brotherly love but never practices it resembles a restaurant with an impressive menu and an empty kitchen. The descriptions may be excellent, but somebody eventually needs to be fed.

The local church also provides a setting for worship, the ordinances, missionary concern, and spiritual accountability. First Corinthians 11:23–29 instructs believers concerning the Lord's supper, while Acts 13:1–3 records the assembly at Antioch participating in the sending of missionary laborers. Second Corinthians 5:18–20 describes the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to those representing Christ. These responsibilities show that the congregation exists for more than preserving its own comfort. It must proclaim the gospel, strengthen believers, and maintain faithful testimony. Yet all such service remains distinct from the purchase of salvation. Second Corinthians 5:10 establishes that believers will appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, where their works will be examined. The Christian who is eternally secure in Jesus Christ is not thereby relieved of accountability for his service. Grace secures the believer's salvation; it does not transform the remaining Christian life into an extended vacation from obedience.

**7. The Flock Belongs to Christ, and the Flock Must Never Replace Christ**

First Corinthians 3:11 establishes the foundation: "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Everything concerning the local church must return to that declaration. Membership cannot regenerate a sinner. Baptism cannot wash away guilt. The Lord's supper cannot repeat Calvary. Pastoral authority cannot replace the authority of Scripture. Religious traditions cannot overturn the gospel of grace, and denominational allegiance cannot secure eternal life. First Corinthians 15:3–4 identifies Christ's death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection as the central saving message. Ephesians 2:8–9 establishes salvation by grace through faith, apart from works. A sound assembly must proclaim those truths without compromise. The local church is a gathering of people who need the Saviour, not an institution that has become the Saviour. When the congregation begins claiming authority over redemption itself, it has attempted to occupy a throne that belongs exclusively to Jesus Christ.

Yet the same Scriptures that protect salvation from institutional corruption also establish the responsibilities of believers toward one another. Acts 2:42 describes continuing in doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. Colossians 3:16 connects

congregational singing with the word of Christ dwelling richly among believers. First Corinthians 5 requires responsible correction concerning serious wrongdoing, while Galatians 6:1 emphasizes restoration in meekness. Matthew 28:19–20 establishes the Lord's commission to teach the nations, and the apostolic ministry subsequently carried the gospel beyond Jerusalem. These responsibilities cannot be replaced by impressive buildings, popular personalities, or an unlimited supply of religious entertainment. Neither can they be dismissed because someone has experienced disappointment with imperfect Christians. The local church is neither a spiritual amusement park nor a religious prison. It is supposed to be a place where redeemed sinners gather beneath the authority of God's word and learn to serve the Lord together.

The ultimate perspective is supplied by the coming of Jesus Christ. First Thessalonians 4:16–18 describes the Lord descending from heaven, the dead in Christ rising first, and living believers being caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air. Paul concludes by commanding believers to comfort one another with these words. That blessed hope belongs to those saved in Christ, not merely to those whose names remain on a particular congregation's earthly membership roll. Denominational records will not determine participation in the Rapture. The Lord knows His people. Yet the expectation of His coming should strengthen our desire for faithful Christian living rather than encourage spiritual isolation. The Church is waiting for its Bridegroom, not for the completion of another building campaign. And while we wait, we ought to be found encouraging the brethren, defending the faith, preaching the gospel, and serving the Saviour whose appearing will bring every earthly religious ambition into its proper perspective.

**Conclusion**

The local church is what Scripture declares it to be, not what religious tradition, denominational ambition, or personal convenience wishes to make it. It is an identifiable assembly of believers gathered beneath the authority of Jesus Christ, instructed by His word, and responsible for fellowship, worship, service, discipline, and evangelism. It is not the spiritual body of Christ in its entirety, not the nation of Israel, not the physical building in which believers meet, and certainly not an institution possessing independent authority to confer eternal life. Its pastors are shepherds rather than monarchs. Its members are servants rather than customers. Its ordinances are testimonies rather than instruments of regeneration. Its doctrine must come from Scripture rather than popular opinion. Its fellowship requires practical responsibility rather than occasional religious enthusiasm. When the local church understands its proper place, it becomes a valuable instrument of Christian service. When it attempts to replace Christ, it becomes an idol demanding devotion that belongs to the Lord alone.

Every believer must therefore examine his relationship to biblical fellowship without hiding behind either religious tradition or personal independence. If you belong to a sound congregation, serve faithfully, receive instruction, demonstrate patience, and contribute according to the opportunities God provides. Do not abandon the brethren merely because their personalities differ from yours or because ordinary fellowship occasionally requires inconvenience. If you belong to a corrupt assembly, examine the Scriptures, refuse false doctrine, and seek faithful fellowship without surrendering your conscience to intimidation. If illness, disability, isolation, or other serious circumstances prevent regular attendance, use the opportunities available to receive sound teaching and maintain meaningful Christian relationships. But if you possess reasonable access to biblical fellowship and simply prefer a Christianity without responsibility, your independence deserves examination. A believer who refuses every imperfect church because he has discovered flaws in human beings has made a remarkable observation, but he has not discovered a biblical justification for abandoning the brethren.

And so this examination of the local church reaches its final conclusion. Jesus Christ is the foundation, the Head, the purchaser, and the Chief Shepherd of His people. He saves sinners through His finished work, seals believers through the Holy Spirit, and calls His people to live according to the Scriptures. No pastor can replace Him, no denomination can own Him, no ceremony can improve His sacrifice, and no congregation can claim authority greater than His word. Yet the Lord who saves individuals also commands those individuals to love, encourage, instruct, forgive, and serve one another. The Christian life was never designed to become a religious empire ruled by men, nor was it designed to become a lonely exercise in personal superiority conducted from behind a locked door. The church building may be small, the congregation may be imperfect, the preacher may be unknown, and the earthly rewards may be few, but where believers faithfully gather beneath the authority of Scripture, they possess something far more valuable than institutional prestige. They possess opportunities to serve the Lord by serving one another. You do not need a denomination to reach heaven, a membership card to secure eternal life, or a preacher to complete the salvation Christ has already accomplished. But do not confuse freedom from religious bondage with freedom from biblical responsibility. A Christian does not need a church to become saved, but being saved is no excuse for pretending he does not need the brethren.

**The Local Church**

**Conclusion**

After examining the foundation, membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, fellowship, ordinances, discipline, evangelism, and accountability of the local church, one conclusion stands above every religious tradition, denominational argument, and personal opinion: **Jesus Christ never established His Church so that men could turn it into an idol, a business, a dictatorship, an entertainment industry, or an excuse for spiritual laziness.** He purchased His people with His own blood, made Himself the Head of the body, and gave clear instructions concerning how believers should gather, worship, learn, serve, and care for one another. Paul declared, "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." (1 Corinthians 3:11). That settles the foundation before somebody starts arguing about church government, membership requirements, building programs, or whose name belongs on the sign beside the highway. A church can possess a magnificent sanctuary, a respected denomination, a charismatic preacher, and a treasury large enough to finance a small government, yet remain spiritually bankrupt if it has abandoned the authority of Jesus Christ and the teaching of His word. Conversely, a handful of Bible-believing Christians gathering faithfully in a modest room may possess something more spiritually substantial than an auditorium packed with people who have come to admire a religious performance. **God never commanded His people to build the most impressive religious institution in town. He commanded them to remain faithful to the Saviour who purchased them. The size of the building does not determine the soundness of the foundation, and the number of people occupying the seats does not establish that the truth is being preached.**

The first great error exposed throughout this examination is the belief that belonging to a religious organization somehow establishes belonging to Jesus Christ. It does not. A name written upon a membership roll is not the new birth, water baptism is not regeneration, and denominational loyalty is not a substitute for the blood of the Lamb. Ephesians 2:8–9 declares, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." The sinner is saved through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, who died for our sins, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3–4). No preacher can improve that sacrifice, no priest can complete it through ceremonial administration, and no church committee can manufacture eternal life by voting somebody into membership. The spiritual body of Christ is established through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, not the organizational accomplishments of men. First Corinthians 12:13 declares that believers are baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Gentiles. Israel remains

distinct in God's prophetic purposes, and the Church is not a Gentile denomination that somehow confiscated Israel's national covenant promises. These distinctions matter because doctrinal confusion begins when religious men stop respecting what God actually said. **A church secretary can record your name, a pastor can baptize your body, and a denomination can issue enough certificates to wallpaper your house, but none of those things can wash away one sin. Heaven does not operate according to the paperwork maintained in a church office. If your confidence for eternity rests upon anything other than Jesus Christ, you have mistaken religious association for redemption.**

The second great error is the elevation of pastoral leadership into an authority that belongs exclusively to the Lord. The New Testament pastor is not a pope operating with a smaller congregation, a corporate executive collecting religious customers, or a spiritual monarch surrounded by subjects who dare not question his decisions. First Peter 5:2–3 commands elders to feed the flock of God, exercise oversight willingly, reject filthy lucre, and refuse to behave as lords over God's heritage. The qualifications established in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 demand godly character, doctrinal understanding, personal responsibility, and freedom from covetousness. Yet the religious world has produced an impressive collection of preachers who want the authority of apostles, the financial privileges of kings, and the personal accountability of nobody. Some treat legitimate biblical questions as rebellion, manipulate offerings through intimidation, and demand unquestioning loyalty while refusing to explain their own conduct. That is not shepherding. That is religious domination. Nevertheless, the opposite error must be confronted just as firmly. Church members who despise legitimate authority, undermine faithful preaching, and reject every scriptural correction have not discovered Christian liberty. Hebrews 13:17 establishes responsibilities toward those exercising spiritual oversight, but that oversight remains subordinate to God's word. **The preacher is supposed to feed the sheep, not fleece them, and the sheep are supposed to recognize faithful leadership, not spend their lives kicking every shepherd who attempts to lead them. The pulpit is not a throne, the offering plate is not a private treasury, and the congregation is not merchandise. Christ owns the flock, and every earthly shepherd will answer to the Chief Shepherd for how he treated it.**

Then comes the matter of doctrine, where the modern religious establishment has developed an astonishing talent for avoiding the very thing it was established to teach. Paul commanded, "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." (2 Timothy 4:2). He did not command motivational speeches, religious entertainment, political commentary, psychological theories, or an endless collection of personal stories intended to keep the congregation

comfortable. Acts 2:42 identifies apostolic doctrine among the continuing priorities of the early believers, while 2 Timothy 3:16–17 establishes the inspiration and sufficiency of Scripture for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness. The local church needs the King James Bible opened, explained, rightly divided, believed, and obeyed. Second Timothy 2:15 commands believers to study and rightly divide the word of truth. That means distinguishing Israel from the Church, law from grace, earthly covenant promises from heavenly blessings, and the believer's eternal standing from his practical responsibilities. Salvation by grace through faith must never be transformed into salvation through religious performance, and eternal security must not be surrendered to preachers who believe threatening the congregation produces better offerings. **A church can survive without a choir, a coffee shop, a building campaign, or a multimedia department, but it cannot remain spiritually sound when the pulpit abandons the Bible. A preacher who refuses to correct error because somebody might leave has already surrendered his message to the audience. The congregation does not need another professional entertainer holding a Bible as a stage prop. It needs a man who will open the Book and tell the truth.**

Worship must likewise be rescued from the religious performance industry without being buried beneath lifeless ceremony. The Lord Jesus Christ declared, "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24). That statement should settle the question of what governs acceptable worship. It is not the number of musicians onstage, the sophistication of the lighting system, the emotional intensity of the congregation, or the ability of somebody behind a soundboard to manufacture an atmosphere. Colossians 3:16 connects singing with the word of Christ dwelling richly among believers, while 1 Corinthians 14 emphasizes understanding, edification, and order. Genuine worship includes singing, prayer, thanksgiving, reverence, preaching, and submission to biblical truth. It may produce tears, joy, conviction, and heartfelt gratitude, but those reactions do not establish whether the worship was scriptural. Goosebumps are not a doctrinal test, and a musical crescendo cannot confirm the presence of the Holy Spirit. Neither should reverence be confused with a religious funeral where everybody appears afraid to demonstrate the slightest evidence of Christian joy. **One congregation tries to manufacture the Holy Spirit with smoke machines and amplifiers, while another seems determined to preserve a silence so complete that even a heartfelt amen might require disciplinary action. Both need to remember that worship belongs to God. When the performers receive the glory, the preacher becomes the attraction, and the congregation remembers everything except the Scriptures, somebody has forgotten why the church assembled in the first place.**

The ordinances expose another serious confusion, because religious tradition has repeatedly attempted to transform biblical symbols into instruments of salvation. Water baptism publicly identifies the believer with Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection, but the water itself possesses no power to regenerate the soul. Acts 8:36–38 records the Ethiopian professing faith before Philip baptized him. The Lord's supper commemorates Christ's sacrifice and proclaims His death until He comes, as 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 establishes. It does not repeat Calvary or produce another offering for sins. Hebrews 10:14 declares, "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified." One offering! That should silence the idea that redemption requires an endless succession of sacramental transactions administered by religious officials. Yet the believer who understands salvation by grace must not use that truth as an excuse for disregarding the Lord's instructions. The ordinances matter because Christ established them, but their meaning depends upon His finished work rather than any imaginary saving power within the ceremonies. **The baptistry is not the fountain of eternal life, and the communion table is not a replacement for the cross. Water can make a man wet, bread can satisfy his physical hunger, and religious officials can perform ceremonies until their arms become exhausted, but only Jesus Christ can save a sinner. The symbols point toward the Saviour. When a church begins trusting the symbols instead of the Saviour, it has exchanged the substance for the shadow and then congratulated itself upon possessing superior religion.**

Fellowship, however, is where the proud individualist begins discovering that biblical Christianity requires more than possessing correct doctrinal information. Galatians 6:2 commands, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ." Hebrews 10:24–25 instructs believers to consider one another, provoke unto love and good works, and avoid forsaking their assembling together. These passages describe practical relationships involving patience, encouragement, correction, hospitality, sacrifice, and genuine concern for the brethren. An online sermon can be a tremendous blessing, particularly for Christians facing disability, illness, persecution, geographical isolation, or the absence of sound congregations. Digital ministry can carry biblical instruction across oceans and reach believers who might otherwise possess very limited opportunities for sound teaching. But convenience must not become a theological argument against fellowship. A Christian can spend six hours debating the precise meaning of a Bible verse with strangers on another continent while remaining completely indifferent to the struggling believer living a few miles down the road. **There is something seriously wrong when a man possesses enough spiritual energy to fight fifty theological battles online but cannot find thirty minutes to encourage a sick brother, help a struggling family, or pray with somebody who genuinely needs assistance. A computer can deliver biblical**

**instruction, but the Christian must eventually get out of his chair and obey it. Sheep need feeding, but they also need a flock.**

Church discipline presents another test of whether a congregation is governed by Scripture or human preference. First Corinthians 5 confronts serious public wrongdoing within the Corinthian assembly, while Galatians 6:1 instructs spiritual believers to restore one overtaken in a fault in the spirit of meekness. Matthew 18:15–17 establishes principles of responsible confrontation, and 2 Corinthians 2:6–8 demonstrates the necessity of forgiveness and comfort when sufficient correction has occurred. These instructions do not authorize the church to become a religious courtroom where every disagreement produces a trial, nor do they authorize leaders to humiliate members, conceal serious misconduct, or protect influential personalities from accountability. The congregation must confront genuine wrongdoing without becoming a machinery of personal revenge. It must recognize repentance without pretending that serious misconduct carries no consequences. It must protect vulnerable people, examine credible accusations fairly, and refuse to confuse institutional reputation with the honor of Christ. **A church that never corrects sin eventually teaches its members that holiness is negotiable, while a church that never forgives repentance eventually teaches them that grace is merely a decoration hanging above the entrance. The preacher who disciplines ordinary members while protecting his own misconduct has not established biblical authority. He has established a double standard with a pulpit attached. Truth and mercy were never intended to become enemies, and a congregation faithful to Scripture must possess the courage to practice both.**

Evangelism brings the entire purpose of the local assembly into sharper focus. The risen Lord commanded His disciples to teach the nations in Matthew 28:19–20, while Romans 10:17 declares, "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." The gospel is not a religious marketing campaign, and conversion is not a numerical achievement manufactured through emotional pressure, sophisticated advertising, or clever invitations. A congregation may attract thousands of spectators through professional entertainment while producing remarkably little biblical understanding. Another assembly may gather a modest number of believers beneath an ordinary roof and faithfully proclaim Christ crucified, buried, and risen again. Heaven does not measure spiritual success according to auditorium capacity. First Corinthians 4:2 declares, "Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful." Faithfulness involves proclaiming the gospel, teaching believers, supporting legitimate missionary work, exercising responsible stewardship, and making sound biblical instruction available wherever opportunities exist. Written publications, recorded sermons, online Bible teaching, and broader evangelistic ministries can serve tremendous purposes without

becoming substitutes for every function of the local assembly. **The Great Commission was not an invitation to build a religious audience around a celebrity preacher. It was a command to make Jesus Christ known. A million impressions on a computer screen cannot regenerate one sinner, but the gospel communicated through that screen can direct a sinner toward the Saviour who can. The machinery carries the message; the message concerns Christ; and the glory belongs to God.**

And so the final question is not whether every Christian should belong to a particular denomination, support an impressive religious establishment, or surrender his conscience to the nearest preacher possessing an ordination certificate. The question is whether believers are willing to obey the Scriptures concerning the local assembly without confusing that assembly with Jesus Christ. No earthly congregation is perfect, and no pastor is infallible. Some churches have become corrupt, some leaders have abused their responsibilities, and some religious institutions have earned the criticism directed toward them. A believer should not remain beneath false teaching, spiritual manipulation, or serious corruption merely because the building has an attractive sign and the preacher insists that leaving would constitute rebellion against God. But neither does the existence of corrupt congregations justify abandoning the biblical pattern of fellowship altogether. A Christian who refuses every imperfect assembly because imperfect people attend it has discovered something astonishingly obvious without discovering anything that cancels God's commands. **The answer to a counterfeit church is not the abolition of the local church. The answer to a dishonest preacher is not the rejection of every faithful shepherd. And the answer to religious bondage is not a lifetime of spiritual independence in which the believer becomes his own congregation, his own pastor, his own accountability committee, and his own final authority. Jesus Christ has already occupied the position of Head, and He has not announced a vacancy.**

There is also a solemn matter of future accountability that should remove much of the religious pride surrounding this subject. Second Corinthians 5:10 declares, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." This concerns the accountability of believers before Christ, not the Great White Throne judgment of the lost. Salvation is secure through the finished work of the Saviour, but Christian service remains subject to examination. First Corinthians 3:11–15 reveals that the foundation is Christ while the works built upon that foundation will be tested. Some labor will endure and receive reward, while other work will suffer loss. The preacher who built a personal empire, the congregation that worshipped its institution, the member who refused every opportunity for service, and the religious worker who pursued applause rather than faithfulness will not determine the final value of their accomplishments through earthly recognition. **The**

**Judgment Seat of Christ will not be a denominational awards ceremony where the largest building receives the first trophy and the most famous preacher delivers the keynote address. The Lord knows the difference between gold and stubble, faithfulness and performance, obedience and religious ambition. A crown of glory cannot be purchased with church offerings, and heaven is not impressed by earthly titles printed in gold lettering.**

Above all, the Church must remember whom it is waiting for. First Thessalonians 4:16–17 declares that the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven, the dead in Christ shall rise first, and living believers shall be caught up together with them to meet the Lord in the air. Paul concludes, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The blessed hope belongs to those who are in Jesus Christ, not merely to those whose names appear in a particular religious organization's records. The Lord is coming for His redeemed people, not for an earthly corporation claiming exclusive possession of His grace. Yet the expectation of His coming should produce faithful Christian living rather than lazy independence. Believers ought to be found proclaiming the gospel, defending sound doctrine, encouraging the brethren, practicing biblical fellowship, and serving according to the opportunities God has provided. **Christ is not returning to inspect the quality of the church carpeting, count the parking spaces, or admire the latest improvements to the fellowship hall. He is coming for His people. And until He comes, those people ought to be concerned about something more important than preserving their religious traditions, collecting personal recognition, or winning another argument over matters they have never bothered to put into practice.**

The final verdict is therefore unmistakable. **The local church is not the Saviour, but it belongs to the Saviour. The preacher is not the Head, but he is accountable to the Head. The congregation cannot purchase salvation, but saved believers possess responsibilities toward one another. The building is not holy because of its architecture, and the assembly is not faithful because of its attendance figures.** Biblical Christianity begins with Jesus Christ, rests upon His finished work, submits to His revealed word, and produces practical obedience among those who belong to Him. The local church matters because doctrine matters, worship matters, truth matters, holiness matters, evangelism matters, and the brethren matter. It is neither an institution to be worshipped nor an inconvenience to be despised. It is an assembly of redeemed sinners learning to stand together beneath the authority of the Lord who purchased them. We should reject corrupt religious systems without rejecting biblical fellowship, honor faithful pastors without worshipping personalities, defend sound doctrine without becoming arrogant brawlers, and embrace Christian liberty without turning it into an excuse for selfishness. **A church cannot save your soul, a preacher cannot secure your eternity,**

**and a denomination cannot improve upon the blood of Jesus Christ. But the Lord who saved you did not command you to spend the remainder of your life pretending that His other sheep do not exist. You do not need a church to become saved, but being saved is no excuse for pretending you do not need the brethren. Christ is the foundation. His word is the authority. His people are the flock. And until the Chief Shepherd appears, the sheep ought to remember that they belong to Him—and that they were never commanded to wander alone.**

