

SERIES Operating the Church (part 1)  
 SERMON **Body Belongs to Christ (Matthew 16.13–18)**<sup>1</sup>  
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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This morning, we begin a new series called, “Operating the Church”—and yes, that has a double-meaning. The primary focus is to stress the identity, nature, and purpose of the church as a God-designed living body (*i.e.*, *how it is to “operate” in healthy, faithful, and Christ-reflecting ways*). The secondary focus is—while recognizing the good, healthy, and strong areas of church life—to address areas that might not be as healthy, strong, or have become injured. Thus, we need to “operate” so as to restore health and strength. Our particular focus this morning is the church as the body the belongs to Christ. An identity and purpose that defined by who He is and all that He has done along with who we are now because of Him and all that we do for Him as His renewed and redeemed people.

—PRAY—

## 2. RALPHIE AND RANDY ATTITUDES

One of our favorite holiday movies is, *The Christmas Story*, and something about it jumped out at me recently as an intriguing illustration. Throughout the movie, the two kids—Ralphie and Randy—can’t wait for Christmas. But their impatience is displayed in different ways. Randy, the youngest, is largely quiet and says very little about what he wants for Christmas. He really only speaks when he’s whining, complaining, or upset about something. On the other hand, Ralphie, the oldest, can’t stop talking and thinking about, or coming up with ways to sway his parents to buy him what he wants: the Red Ryder BB gun.

And as the story progresses, Randy stays basically the same, whereas Ralphie grows more impatient—but in a different way. It’s one that leads to giving up on trying to get what he wants, because it feels like he’s never going to get it. For weeks on end, it’s roadblock after roadblock, and no one seems to care about what he wants as much as he does. Then Christmas morning arrives, and we see two responses from the kids. Randy, who had been grumpy and silent, is suddenly overjoyed and an instant chatterbox. More to the point: for the kid who said nothing about what he wanted for Christmas, suddenly everything under the tree is his—claimed with the shouted phrase, “**Ooo, that’s mine!**”

Then there’s Ralphie. The one who couldn’t muzzle his excitement, words, and thoughts is now virtually mute—and seemingly oblivious to everything else in the room. Why? Because he’s concerned with only one thing. Everything else that’s been given doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is whether or not he got the one gift that would make his Christmas worth the time he put into it. The Red Ryder BB gun. And because that’s the only thing that matters and all he wants; he forces his way around the tree and bumps Randy out of the way as he frantically searches. The trouble is: he doesn’t find what he wants to find. And because

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations will follow the New English Translation (NET).

he doesn't find it, he winds up going through the rest of the morning in silence—except for when he gets a bit grumpy about certain things. Then, when his parents ask him what he thought of this year's Christmas, he shrugs it off with a blasé, “Yeah, it was pretty nice.”

Now, to be fair with what happens in the movie (*and thus, to spoil it if you haven't seen it*): Ralphie discovers that his dad bought him the BB gun. It had been kept hidden for last. Instantly, Ralphie's Christmas moves from the blasé “pretty nice” to excitingly better. All because he got the one thing he wanted. The only thing that mattered to him, and the only thing that would make everything else he endured worth it. From this we could say: his definition and criteria for what makes Christmas “better” were validated not because they agreed with or were derived from some objective, big-picture standard. Instead, they were validated because they were fulfilled in the subjective, self-interested ways he had already determined to be the only standard for what makes Christmas “better.”

Here's why this jumped out as an intriguing illustration—one that is admittedly risky, but crucially necessary. As I'm sure we all know, there are people who treat the church in a Randy or Ralphie sort of way. There are those who, like Randy, show very little interest in what the church truly is or even being an active part of it. Their daily lives just carry on as usual, and often with no real sense of urgency or expectation for or from the church. But when the moment comes to be present (i.e., *they show up for church*), suddenly everything about it is theirs—claimed with the phrase, “Ooo, that's mine!” All of it is their possession, and only theirs. The stuff of church—especially their experiences—is to be their reward. One they feel they deserve simply because they showed up or they feel some sense of entitlement.

Then there are those who, like Ralphie, are super-excited about church and can't wait for the chance to be present. However, their passionate feelings are often fueled by the expectation of finding the one thing that matters most to them. (*Nearly always, it's a personal preference about one part or aspect of the entire service*). And if they get the one thing they've decided they want (*often only known by themselves*), then church is great and the time put into it was completely worth it. But if they don't get the one thing they've decided they want, then church is not such a good thing (*or at least that particular church is not*). And so they might sit in silence (*stewing about the upset*), shrug off the whole experience (*possibly thinking they've wasted their time and energy*), or leave to find something (*or somewhere*) else that might fulfill their (*existing*) desired want.

It shouldn't take much thought to see why such attitudes about the church are wrong,<sup>2</sup> and are in fact unhealthy for the life of the church. For the sake of time, we should recognize two of the bigger problems involved. First, such views or understandings of the church revolve entirely around the person (*or, in some cases, groups of likeminded people*). This represents what's been dubbed, the “Me Church.” Where it's all about the individual. Everything is self-determined, self-defined, self-organized, self-run, and self-seeking. All of it being done so that the self can feel happy, honored, or even glorified. Thus, such people believe: “The church must do what I want it to do, and cater to my desires in the way I feel I deserve.” And more times than not: these attitudes focus on the minutiae rather than the meaningful. Personal preferences about the service take priority over the gospel and the Great Commission.

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<sup>2</sup> Although, sadly enough, there are some today who claim it's wrong to call such attitudes wrong.

And that brings us to the second problem: such views or understandings are informed by weak and unbiblical ideas about the church. But this is no surprise. When the definition and criteria for what makes the church “church” are predetermined by some subjective, self-interested standard of measure; what Scripture says about the identity, nature, purpose, and mission of the church doesn’t matter. In fact, in these cases: what Scripture says is often not allowed into the conversation because it’s known that the authority of Scripture unseats and overturns the authority of the self. So, to preserve what the self wants for its own honor and glory, what God reveals as necessary is marginalized or kicked to the curb as being irrelevant. And when that happens, the church becomes “all about me,” instead of “all about Him.”

As people faithfully and resolutely committed to God and His truth, we know this view is not biblical, healthy, or good. We know this cannot be how we see and understand the church—let alone strive to operate as the church in the world. But there’s often a struggle with that knowledge. While we might see and know not only the depth of the problem caused by the unhealthy and unbiblical view, but also the breadth of its effect on modern churches; we often wonder: “What can we really do about it? How can we make good, meaningful changes?” Well, the first step is: we need to be ready for the long-haul. This means, and contrary to cultural preferences: the needed changes will not be a quick-fix or overnight solution. It’s going to take time. And that leads to a second step: we need to start small. Or to borrow the toothsome image: “How do you eat an elephant?...” But “small” doesn’t mean “minor” or “insignificant.” Thus, the third step is: we need to return to the basic, foundational truths of Scripture. We need to allow what God defines, reveals, and teaches to be our standard.

### 3. RESTORED IDENTITY

Now, for those familiar with American church history, that last step might ring a bell. It’s one of the core characteristics of what’s known as the Restoration Movement,<sup>3</sup> in which Church of Christ as Manor Woods has its roots. The gist of the characteristic is: we resolve to speak biblical truth and do things in biblically-defined ways. Hence the Movement’s motto: “Where

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<sup>3</sup> Let me offer an extremely general picture of what this is—knowing full well that the details of the history and nature of this Movement are far more involved and nuanced than any rough description could ever convey. While Barton W. Stone (1772–1844) and Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) are often prioritized for the establishment of the Movement (so much so that it’s often dubbed, the Stone-Campbell Movement), others such as James O’Kelly (1735–1826), Elias Smith (1769–1846), and Abner Jones (1772–1841) played vital roles in laying the foundation proper for the Movement (and often independently of each other, in the early days). I say “foundation proper” because the origins of the Movement likely date back to at least the time of the English Puritans after their arrival in America (c.1640s), mixed with the religious fervor caused by the First and Second Great Awakening (1730–55 and 1790–1840, respectively). The Puritans wanted to return to the “primitive” church, with regard to its structure, practice, and life; and in conjunction with the two Awakenings, there was an honest recognition about only a number existing denominations and splits within them, as well as a heightened priority given to the powerful (and freeing) work of the Holy Spirit—especially as sign or seal of unity. Thus, there came a desire to reassess one’s identity and life as God’s people, yet the reassessment had to be done through different means. Instead, of denominational creeds being the standard of measure (and even test of fellowship), Scripture and the confirming work of the Holy Spirit were to be the standard. These ideas and tenants became the raw material for the foundation proper laid by O’Kelly, Smith, and Jones, and then later Stone and Campbell. All of that to say: this Restoration Movement represents an identifiable shift in Christendom akin to that of the 16th century Reformation, but it is distinct from it. The Reformation sought to repair and heal the damages and corruption found within the established church at the time. A repairing and healing to be done on the basis of clear Scriptural teaching alone, rather than the man-made, authoritative sacred traditions that had been built around (and in most cases contrary to) God’s revealed Word. Thus, if we are to be faithful to God alone as His people (i.e., the church), then reforming our ways is necessary so that they faithfully align with His will, ways, and expectations. The Restoration, operating on a similar foundation and intent, but especially responding to the growing number of various denominations particularly in America, sought to take the church back to its original roots—i.e., to restore it to its picture and pattern as found in the NT, specifically the book of Acts and beyond. Thus, if we are to be the faithful and united people of God (i.e., the church), then restoring our identity and existence in Christ alone along with being built upon the one true foundation of Scripture alone are necessary for our alignment with His will, ways, and expectations.

the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are silent” (Thomas Campbell).<sup>4</sup> This not only called for respectful critiques of the existing man-made catechisms and creeds prevalent in the church at the time, which tended to be defined more by tradition and traditionally held beliefs about theological ideas. (*Thus, the tradition had become greater and more necessary than the revelation*).<sup>5</sup> But the motto also modeled the very thing it advocated. It calls for fidelity to the truth of Scripture alone, and that same call is found in Scripture itself. True prophets only declare God’s revealed truth. False prophets declare what is not of God.

And the same is true for all disciples of Jesus. In Mt 15 we hear Jesus say this about those who do not belong to Him, because they’ve rejected Him: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me, and they worship Me in vain, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt 15.8–9). They’ve made what they prefer to believe (*their sacred traditions*) to be more authoritative than what God has revealed and expects of them. And for what it’s worth: in this passage, Jesus is quoting Isa 29.13. Thus, Jesus speaks where Scripture speaks (with us remembering that, as God, Jesus is the authoritative source and author of what’s said). And if we jump ahead to 2Jn, we hear this reminder: “Everyone who goes on ahead and does not remain in the teaching of Christ does not have God. The one who remains in this teaching has both the Father and the Son” (2Jn 9). We don’t get to define God’s Word. Instead, God’s Word defines us.

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<sup>4</sup> Spoken in 1809, during a house-meeting held at the home of Abraham Alters—as recorded in Robert Richardson, *Memoirs of Alexander Campbell*, 2 vols. (Standard Publishing, 1897), 1:231–36, quoted in 236.

<sup>5</sup> We see an example of this in Thomas Campbell’s early ministry in America. Not long after his appointment in March of 1807, between 1807–08, Thomas Campbell was on trial (twice)—once before the local Presbytery of Chartiers, under whose oversight he served, and once before the Presbyterian Synod (in Philadelphia)—on the charge of “heresy.” Seven “heresies,” to be precise, with a preceding one that seemed to kick-start the search for the others. The kick-starter “heresy” was that Campbell—seeing that various churches (of other Presbyterian branches [or denominations]), who did not have presiding pastors, were regularly going without the Lord’s Supper—decided to offer the Lord’s Supper to the members of such churches. As an ordained Presbyterian minister (of a particular branch of Presbyterianism), this practice was entirely unacceptable as defined and established by the Synod—to which Campbell was accountable. And the opposition was not just tied to the fact that Campbell was not assigned to pastor/preside over those churches. It had more to do with his actions conflicting with their views on the Lord’s Supper, where were entirely in keeping with existing traditions found within their particular form of Presbyterianism—known as the Seceder Presbyterian Church. They practiced “closed communion” (i.e., only legitimate, verified members of their branch [or denomination] could receive the Lord’s Supper), and the basis of their practice was their traditional belief about the meaning of 1 Cor 11.28: “But a man must examine himself, and in doing so he is to eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (NASB). They understood “examine” to mean: test one’s theology to see if it aligns with the “right theology” (i.e., the teaching of the Seceder Presbyterian Church). Thus, in October of 1807, Campbell was charged with heresy because he dared to give communion to those outside of his charge as well as those outside the Seceder Presbyterian Church—i.e., those who did not have the “right theology.” This, then, set into motion a decision to have what amounts to “spies” attend Campbell’s services to see what else he might do in defiance of established teaching and practices. This recon-work served as the source from which the seven “heresies” were formed and voiced against Campbell. When on trial during the early part of 1808, in answering each of the charges laid against him, Campbell voiced not only his commitment to following Scripture as the only authoritative word on all matters of faith and practice, but also that he could not find any legitimate proof that what he had done violated the clear teachings of Scripture. In fact, and in a move similar to that done by Martin Luther, Campbell effectively called upon the accusers to show him—from Scripture alone—where he went astray and ventured into heresy. The Presbytery gave no such response or Bible-based evidence. Instead, because they deemed nearly all of his answers as “evasive, unsatisfactory, and highly equivocal,” and saw him as having violated the “Secession Testimony,” Campbell was found guilty and censured. He rejected their decision and appealed to the Synod in Philadelphia. After nearly a month of trials, five out of the seven “heresies” were dropped—largely because they found his explanations before them to be satisfactory—and he agreed to being rebuked and admonished for the remaining two “heresies,” and even promised to avoid declaring them openly in the midst of his pastoral duties. When sent back to the Presbytery of Chartiers, in late 1808, Campbell was rejected, denied ministry appointment, and left without pay. Why? Because the local Presbytery disagreed with the Synod’s decision about and light treatment of Campbell. The former viewed him as a greater trouble (if not threat) to all that they held dear, and the latter failed to share that view. But instead of criticizing the Synod openly, the Presbytery conspired against Campbell (even created false testimony) so as to win the Synod’s favor and thus a better judgment and outcome—i.e., give Campbell the full boot. While the play to win the Synod’s favor backfired, the local Presbytery stuck to their resolve to oust Campbell from ministry. While, in April of 1809, they made their pronouncement against him, Campbell had already committed himself to leaving the Presbyterian ministry—and not just because of the events he endured, but primarily due to his faithful resolve to study Scripture as the sole and final authority for the church. A resolve that inspired the idea of forming a body of believers devoted to biblical teaching and unity. An idea that got its footing during the house-meeting at Abraham Alters home, and then (in late 1809) a more formalized structure enunciated in [The Declaration and Address](#).

That’s a truth that even applies to something seemingly simple, like the word “church.” I think if we did something like Jay Leno’s, “person on the street” and asked people what “church” means, we’d get an interesting mix of answers. Things like: “church” refers to a building or place; an event or experience; a religious organization or institution; a certain denomination—hence: the Catholic Church, the Methodist Church, the Baptist Church, etc.; or the ostensibly more recent one: the “church” is an oppressive ideology that’s a danger to society.<sup>6</sup> But what would happen if we tabled those views (*and opinions*) about the “church” and asked Scripture to answer the same question? How does it speak? Or: how does it define “church”? And from that definition, what do we learn about its identity, nature, purpose, and mission? More to the point: how does what we learn affect how we speak and live as God’s people in the world?

### a. Word on Words

Well, let’s find out. And to do this, we need to nerd-out a bit and do some word-study. This has a purpose, I promise.... Let’s begin with a term most commonly known and employed in Christian circles: ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*).<sup>7</sup> This appears c.130 in the NT, with only two of those happening in only one of the four Gospels—and both from Jesus’ mouth (Mt 16.18; 18.17). We’ll come back to one of those shortly. This was a long-standing and familiar term, going back to at least the 5th century BC. What’s important to realize is that ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*), when used found in the NT, does not refer to a building, a place, an experience, an institution, a denomination, or even some oppressive and dangerous ideology (*although, Rome would have disagreed with that*). Instead, and in keeping with its familiar, historical meaning, ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) refers to an assembly, gathering, community, or congregation of people. Human beings. Not a lifeless thing.

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<sup>6</sup> I say “ostensibly” because, contrary to what its current mouthpieces believe, the rhetoric that Christianity (or the “church”) is an oppressive ideology that’s a danger to society has been used by numerous tyrannical regimes throughout history (beginning with the Roman Empire) in order to silence the message and messengers of the gospel.

<sup>7</sup> We need to make something clear. I cannot begin to tell you how many times I’ve read, seen, or heard Christian authors, leaders, pastors, and even scholars say: the Greek word, ἐκκλησία is made up of two words—ἐκ (*meaning “out of”*) and καλέω (*meaning “I call”*); thus, the Greek word for “church” means, “called-out ones.” C.I. Scofield popularized this idea back in the early 1900s—see e.g., *Scofield Bible Correspondence School*, 3 vols. (Bible Institute of Los Angeles, 1907), 2:221, 3:416; *Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1909), 34 n.2, 1021 n.2, 1158 n.1, 1170 n.1 (continued), 1189; *Addresses on Prophecy* (A.C. Gaebelein, 1910), 33; “The Doctrine of the Last Things as Found in the Gospels,” in *The Coming and Kingdom of Christ* (Moody Bible Institute, 1914), 116; *What Do the Prophets Say?* (Marshall Brothers, 1918), 50; *Things Old and New: Old and New Testament Studies* (Publication Office “Our Hope,” 1920), 268. What has to be borne in mind—and I say this very carefully—is that Scofield received no formal education in biblical studies, he was not a properly recognized scholar, and he was certainly not trained in biblical exegesis or translation work based on original languages—despite the “Dr.” / “D.D.” title he likely gave himself and others accepted without checking/verifying its legitimacy. (But the checking will prove fruitless, because there is no record or evidence of any College or University ever awarding him an honorary doctorate [the “D.D.”]—which is not an earned degree, by the way). More to the point, Scofield’s abilities with the Greek language were only limited to knowing how to pronounce words (and teaching other pastors to do the same). Suffice it to say: getting Greek lessons from Scofield would be like getting theology from TikTok. Just not a good idea. But unfortunately, such advice goes unheeded, and so the claim and its problems persist. One of the problems is: those who say it means “called-out-ones” have misunderstood both the Greek word and how language works. Technically speaking: they’re committing what’s known as the root word fallacy, which fallacy is the “[presupposition] that every word actually has a meaning bound up with its shape or its components” (D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* [Baker Books, 1996], 28). (*And committing fallacies in interpreting Scripture is never a good practice*). They think a word’s meaning is always determined by its root and/or particular parts. But that’s not always the case. As one of my College professors would often point out: “if words are defined by their root and parts, then we would have to conclude that the term ‘butterflies’ means ‘airborne dairy fat’?” But that would be absurd. We know what “butterflies” means, what it refers to us, and even how it’s properly used. The trouble is: the absurdity is accepted as truth by those say, ἐκκλησία means, “called-out ones.” And more times than not, people will stick to this catchy-definition because they think, “Hey, that’ll preach.” To which we could say, “So does the prosperity gospel, but it’s also wrong. So, stop preaching it.” But more to the point: just as we know what “butterflies” means, those who spoke Greek in the time before, during, and after the NT: they knew what ἐκκλησία meant, what it referred to, and how it was used. It means: assembly, gathering, community, congregation, and church. To put a finer point on it: Christian scholar and historian, Everett Ferguson says the term ἐκκλησία is “referring to what was done and not where it was done.... The emphasis was on the concrete act of assembly, not a separation from others” (E. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* [Eerdmans, 1998], 130—emphasis added). So if you hear someone using the “called-out-ones” definition, kindly tell them that they’re wrong.

Thus, and especially in Paul’s letters, the term refers to individual assemblies in particular cities (*i.e.*, *the church in Antioch, Derbe, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome*), as well as a group of them in particular regions or provinces (*i.e.*, *the churches in Galatia and Judea*). And that leads us to a much deeper and more meaningful point about the term—namely, the people it describes or how they are identified. ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*) also carries a “universal” sense. Meaning: it refers to an identifiable group of people who (*collectively*) are united as the “church,” despite their particular, spread-out geographical locations. And the thing that identifies and unites them is faithful belief in Christ. Thus, the NT speaks of all faithful believers throughout the Empire as the “church.” Or to borrow the teaching of Eph 2: the faithful everywhere are the new people of God in Christ. Now, before we unpack that any more, we need to give some attention to the OT and two key words it often uses for identifying God’s people.

The first is the term, קהל (*qahēl*),<sup>8</sup> which appears c.120 times, and refers to a mass of people—without much concern for the size. Generally, it’s used for a crowd, assembly, congregation, multitude, nation, or even a group of nations. In most cases, the term serves as a separator—it distinguishes one group from another (*i.e.*, “*this people, not that one*”). Also, there’s no moral value associated with the term. It can be used for good or evil people. But specifically, קהל (*qahēl*) in the OT refers to a particular mass of people: God’s chosen people. Israel. What’s important to realize here is that: while Israel, as קהל (*qahēl*), is distinct from other peoples or nations (*in identity*), as God’s chosen people—who are to live in a covenant relationship with Him: they are to be faithful in their identity as God’s people as well as their obedience. An identity and obedience that reflect His holiness and His designs for holy living. Thus, קהל (*qahēl*) has a God-given moral component added to it.

The second word is עדה (*‘edah*), which appears c.150 times. This generally refers to a specific or exclusive group of people—often a family unit. And similar to the general use of קהל (*qahēl*), there’s no inherent moral nuance associated with עדה (*‘edah*). When it’s used as an identifier of God’s people (often connected with קהל [*qahēl*]), עדה (*‘edah*), it’s typically translated into English as “assembly,” or “gathering,” or “congregation.” And because it identifies Israel—God’s chosen people, who are to be distinct from all other people in the world; עדה (*‘edah*) carries the same God-given moral nuance found with קהל (*qahēl*). And that nuance becomes stronger when we realize the tightening of the reference. Israel is not just a קהל (*qahēl*)—people or nation. To use the family image: they are a specific עדה (*‘edah*)—a specific gathering of people. They are God’s children. Thus, they belong to God—not simply by His choice but primarily through the familial, covenant relationship. Now comes the payoff....

In the late 3rd century BC, the OT was translated from Hebrew into Greek—a translation that came to be known as the Septuagint, and was accepted as God’s authoritative Word well into the 1st century AD. It was the Bible of Jewish synagogues and the Temple, thus making it the Bible of the Jewish people—including Jesus, the apostles, and the disciples. Of all the times קהל (*qahēl*) is used for Israel in the Hebrew, c.90% are translated into Greek as ἐκκλησία.

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<sup>8</sup> **NB:** I realized, post-sermon delivery, that I misspoke and mistyped. During the sermon, קהל (*qahal*) was used throughout, but it should have been קהל (*qahēl*). As you can see, the Hebrew looks the exact same, whereas the transliteration reveals the difference. And that difference is a single vowel, which changes the term from a verb (*qahal*) to a noun (*qahēl*). The overall meaning remains the same; the only change this makes in translation is one of emphasis—*i.e.*, *qahal* is “to assemble people,” whereas, *qahēl* is “assembly of people.” For the sake of accuracy, this manuscript has been amended so that the proper spelling is used. Also, and this applies to something that will come later: this change of spelling (in this manuscript) does not alter the findings related to the usage numbers or to how the term is proportionally translated into Greek. In my original research, *qahēl* was the term studied.

Thus: Israel is an assembly, gathering, community, or congregation of God’s people. They are His “church.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, along with the particular or regional references to the ἐκκλησία of Israel, Judah, Jerusalem; there is the more “universal” identification: the ἐκκλησία of God (or the Lord). All of those who distinctively and exclusively belong to God alone. Not simply because He chose them and set them apart from other nations, but primarily through the familial, covenant relationship. A relationship defined and sustained by true faithfulness.

Thus, like Abraham, they come to belong to God through faithful allegiance to Him alone. And from that allegiance, which reflects their new identity from God, they commit to living for God in faithful obedience to His ways of holy and righteous living. A God-defined distinctive way that necessarily separates God’s people from the rest of the world. A separation maintained only through faithful allegiance to God alone and the new identity and life He graciously provides for those who faithfully belong to Him. But here’s a detail that cannot be overlooked or explained away because it’s uncomfortable. In the OT: the identity, “God’s people” (i.e., His לַהֲקָה [qahē], עֵדָה [‘edah], or ἐκκλησία)<sup>10</sup> does not apply to those who do not belong to Him or those who disbelieve in Him. It also does not apply to those who claim to belong to Him (*in identity*) yet reject Him by their beliefs, mindset, lifestyle, or behavior.

God never honors, affirms, or blesses such duplicity. He never praises it as a good thing. It not only throws disdain on God’s ways for holy and righteous living, but it also defiles their identity from and relationship with God. A state of being that’s portrayed by the prophets as adultery and even harlotry. That’s not living as God’s chosen people. That’s living as people who choose the self over God. More to the point, as revealed in places like Isa 29.13, that’s a people who want a life of their own making (*self-determined, self-defined, self-organized, self-run, and self-seeking, and all done for their own pleasure, honor, and glory*) and then present themselves as though God approves, celebrates, and blesses such a life. Unashamed duplicity mixed with unashamed hubris is a basic recipe for faithless rebellion.

But it doesn’t stop there—bad enough as that is. When the self is the lord of life and the measure of all things, the heart grows cold and callous, and it has no problem accusing God of not being loving, caring, just, or fair. We see this in the OT book of Malachi. God tells those who are meant to be His people: “**I have loved you,**” to which they say: “**How have you loved us?**” (1.2)—in the sense of: prove it, because we don’t believe You. Or when God rebukes them for dishonoring or disrespecting His name and offending Him, they fire back with: “**How have we dishonored, disrespected, or offended you?**” (cf. 1.6–7)—again, in the sense of: prove it, because we don’t believe You. To which, we could say: “**Should God respond chronologically or alphabetically?**”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This evidence (and conclusion) causes problems for the somewhat modern teaching in some circles of Christianity that the “church” (ἐκκλησία) is purely a NT concept—i.e., it’s nowhere found or taught in the OT. This is only true if one relies on (1) the Hebrew text of the OT and (2) the use of the English word “church”. With regard to the former, ἐκκλησία would obviously not appear in that form since it’s Greek and not Hebrew—let alone transliterated into Hebrew. With regard to the latter, “church” is a decision made in English translations of the NT and not an indication of the absence of a term in the OT that could legitimately be translated as “church.” The Jewish translators of the Septuagint would soundly disagree. Thus, the somewhat modern teaching has no lexical grounds to say: “church” (ἐκκλησία) is purely a NT concept. More to the point, that same teaching has no lexical (not mention no logical or theological) grounds to say (as it emphatically does): “church” (ἐκκλησία) represents a different group of God’s people, one that is completely separate from and therefore not identifiable with God’s people in the OT.

<sup>10</sup> To be clear: in bracketing the key terms after “people,” I’m not saying that’s what the terms mean. The more commonly used terms for “people” are the Hebrew, אָמ (‘am) and the Greek λαός (laos)—both of which also carry the nuance of a particular gathering. The point of bracketing the key terms after “people” is to identify them as God’s gathering/community/congregation/assembly.

<sup>11</sup> Adapting a line from the movie, *Sherlock Holmes* (Warner Bros., 2009).

But here's the deal: when the people respond in these ways, they are not reflecting who they are meant to be in their identity; nor are they reflecting a commitment to living life according to God's ways and expectations. They're not even reflecting true belief in who God is and what He does. Instead, as we can see in the text: the definitions and criteria for what it means for God to be loving, caring, just, or fair; they're being determined by the self and how the self expects (*if not demands*) such things to be fulfilled. The people are requiring God to belong to them and rubber-stamp their preferred way of life rather than realizing they belong to God and are called to live in accordance with His holiness and righteousness. Thus, they are defining God instead of God defining them. Something has to change. But that something is not God.

### **b. Word on Covenant Renewal**

The something is the heart and life of people—especially those who truly desire to be God's people. And the severity of the situation is graphically portrayed in Ezek 37. Here, God drops Ezekiel into a valley full of bones. This is not a graveyard. It's a place of ruin and rejection. And the bones in this dark place represent Israel—those meant to be “God's people” (i.e., His לְקַהֵל [*qahēl*], עֵדָה [*edah*], or ἐκκλησία). But they're bones in this valley of death because they cut themselves off from the giver of life through their faithlessness and rebellion against God. After God asks Ezekiel if these bones can “[come back to life](#),” and Ezekiel rightly says, “[Lord God, you alone know that](#)” (Ezek 37.3, NASB); God then commands Ezekiel: “[Prophecy over these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.' Thus says the Lord God to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the Lord'](#)” (Ezek 37.4–6, NASB).

Notice the incredible love and graciousness that defines all of this, as well as the One who gives it. Notice the One initiating and carrying out what's necessary for healing, restoring, and giving them new life. And notice the One who's most desirous to re-establish the covenant relationship—despite the cold-hearted harlotrous treatment He's received for centuries on end. It's God, pursuing His people—those meant to belong to Him, as His children in His eternal household. But also notice what must happen. The people cannot remain as they are and where they are. They cannot remain dead in their sin. They cannot remain cold and lifeless in their heart. They cannot remain rebellious in their belief and lifestyle. They cannot remain in a state of being that doesn't distinguish them from the rest of the sinful world.

As God's people, who belong to Him alone: they must be holy and separate in who they are and how they live. And for that to happen, there must be a transformation of the entire self. A transformation that cannot do for themselves, but one God promises to do for them. A promise declared in Ezek 36: “[I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances](#)” (Ezek 36.25–27, NASB). Again, notice who's the primary mover in all of this restorative work, and the reason for its necessity. But also notice how this echoes the promise given through Jeremiah:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of



Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Jer 31.31–33, NASB).

When taken with the prophecy in Ezekiel, we see God as the One who alone has the power and gracious love to remake (*renew, restore*) His people entirely. He overhauls everything about them, inside and out. But we also see God remaining entirely faithful to His original covenant promise to His people—His קהל (*qahēl*), עדת (*‘edah*), or ἐκκλησία; those who belong to Him through faithful allegiance, obedience, and holiness in heart and life. The promise that He alone will be their God, Lord, King, Provider, Healer, Sustainer, Savior, and Redeemer, and that He alone will bless not only them (*because of their covenant faithfulness*) but also the rest of the world through them. Or to quote His promise to Abraham: “I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you...and through your offspring all nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed Me” (Gen 12.2, 22.18, NIV). Notice who does the making. God. Notice the blessed reward and purpose. They will belong to Him, be defined by His holiness, and live for His purpose and glory. And notice the expectation: faithful obedience.

#### 4. THE BODY BELONGS TO CHRIST

When we come to the NT, and especially the life and ministry of Jesus, we discover the fulfillment of God’s promises and prophecies for His people. Not just the emergence of the promised true Messiah and King, or even the One who comes to bring salvation from sin and death and thus new life. Those are absolutely central and necessary, to be sure. But there’s something else that necessarily goes with those central absolutes. We’re also seeing the fulfillment of the promised new covenant people of God. Those whose lives are completely transformed by the powerful, redeeming, restorative, and life-giving work of God. A work that provides a renewed name, identity, heart, lifestyle, and purpose. All defined and established by God alone and what He expects for those who belong to Him in faithful allegiance and obedience. Those faithfully desiring to live in accordance with His holiness and righteousness.

And all of this fulfillment, especially the renewal and restoration of God’s people, takes place in and through the person of Jesus Christ. The One who inaugurates the new covenant age for God’s people. An age announced and prepared for in the ministry of John the baptizer, who calls God’s people not only to a baptism of repentance but also to a hopeful readiness to receive the coming Messiah, King, Savior, and Lord. And it’s not just John’s preaching that declares this turn of the ages. Near the start of His own public ministry, Jesus—in the synagogue—reveals and announces its fulfillment. Moreover, not only is the rest of Jesus’ teaching saturated with messages about Him bringing forth God’s kingdom for His people, there is also Jesus’ rather evocative decision to call 12 apostles. Those who will serve as His commissioned heralds and leaders of the kingdom. They are the new 12 sons of Israel. Then there are the later events that cannot be explained way. Two big ones stand out the most.

First, there is Jesus using the Passover meal to declare the establishment of the (*promised*) new covenant. Not made through the breaking of animal bodies and shedding of animal blood—either in Exodus or (*more deeply*) in Gen 15—but through the breaking and shedding of His own body and blood. The one and only sacrifice able to make perfect atonement and forgiveness for sins. And second, there is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon those who

belong to God through faithful allegiance and whose hearts and lives are transformed by Him. This outpouring and transformation not only redefine who people are in their identity—one that needs to be redeemed and changed because faithlessness and sin—but also empowers the new people of God to live in accordance with His holiness and righteousness. A way of life that reflects who they now are and necessarily distinguishes them from not only who they once were but also the rest of the world. They must be separate from the world.

This is an understanding of life that comes from the knowledge that—as God’s people—they no longer belong to the world, and they are no longer defined by its broken and impotent definitions for identity and life. Because of the loving, gracious, redeeming, and transformative work of God, they can know that they now belong to God, and they are to be defined by His perfect and powerful definition for a holy and righteous identity and life. A definition He did not simply declare from on high, but one that He personally embodied on earth below. A truth that John captures in the opening of his gospel when he says: “**He was in the world, and the world was created by Him, but the world did not recognize Him. He came to what was His own, but His own people did not receive Him. But to all who have received Him—those who believe in His name—He has given the right to become God’s children**” (Jn 1.10–12). Thus, as in the OT: new identity, life, and blessing of God requires a faithful response.

To come right out with it: only when we faithfully know who God is can we belong to Him and be His people—His קהל (*qahēl*), עדת (*‘edah*), or ἐκκλησία. Only then can we be His children. Wrong definitions, conclusions, preferences, and even false piety won’t work. Our definitions of God do not define God. Instead, God’s self-revelation declares who He truly is and that revealed truth must redefine everything about us. And that’s something we discover in Mt 16, where Matthew says: “**When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, He asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ They answered, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets’**” (Mt 16.13–14). These are the perspective of those who only have loosely formed, vague ideas about Jesus—i.e., He’s merely a prophet or some powerful religious teacher. And while there’s mention of Jesus being crucial for God fulfilling the messianic prophecies, He’s not identified as the promised Messiah. He’s merely “Elijah,” the promised forerunner (see Mal 4.5).

After hearing the responses of those who are only casually interested, Jesus said, “**Wonderful, let’s go with that! I’ll certainly gain a reputation amongst the people if I campaign with those images.**” No, wait...that’s not right. Oh yeah, He said: “**Aww, those people are so nice. It’s sweet that they think I’m like my cousin, John, or even Elijah or Jeremiah. If the people want to see me that way, that’s perfectly fine with me. Those are some great men of God.**” Oh wait, that’s not right either.... What did He say? Look at v.15: “**He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’**” (Mt 16.15). Confirmed by what Jesus will say in a moment, the obvious implication here is: such answers are insufficient. They do not reflect a faithful awareness of who Jesus truly is. Now, please understand: this does not mean such people are out of luck, because they only had one shot to get the answer right. They certainly have the chance to get it right, but it has to start with a change in understanding. They need a better definition. One that Jesus expects His disciples to have because of their personal relationship with Him and their acceptance of what He’s revealed to them.

Look at what happens next: “Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’ And Jesus answered him, ‘You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven!’” (Mt 16.16–17). For what it’s worth: “flesh and blood” is a roundabout way of saying, “humans.” So, in the context, this means: Peter’s knowledge did not come from rather flimsy and ill-formed human-defined ideas of who Jesus is—i.e., those in the previous answers. Truth be told: such ideas would never reach the conclusion Peter did. Instead, as Jesus says, the only way this right conclusion could be reached is by God’s revelation. Unfortunately, we’re not told exactly how that happened in this case. But fortunately, Paul gives us a bit of help when he says such a revelation is made possible by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2.1–16; 12.3).

And notice Jesus’ response to Peter’s answer: “You are blessed.” Jesus praises and affirms this response and not the others. Why? Because only this understanding of who Jesus truly is receives God’s blessing. The others don’t because they fail to know who Jesus truly is. Or to pick up something from Acts 4: only this right confession of who Jesus truly is results in not only salvation but also adoption into God’s household. “There is salvation is no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among people by which we must be saved” (Acts 4.12). And “no other name” means, no other name. Period. Not Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, John the baptizer, Peter, Paul, or Mary; and not any pope, pastor, preacher, author, or some self-made YouTube expert. There is only One who is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and He is the only One who can save us from our sins and give us new life in His perfect name. And so it is to Him alone that we are to give our faithful allegiance. It is to Him alone that we belong. And it is from Him alone that we are to live the renewed, redeemed, and transformed life He graciously gives to His people.

And that brings us to the final part of the passage we’ll consider for this morning. Look at how Jesus continues His reply: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Mt 16.18). We can do the name-change to “Peter” and the meaning of “on this rock” stuff at another time. What’s crucial for us to see is what Jesus declares. He begins with, “I will build.” Notice that He is the builder. That gives us a heads-up for what comes next. Now, while in saying, “I will build,” He uses a term that often refers to the construction of a house; Jesus has something else in mind for what He will build. He’s going to build an ἐκκλησία. Not a church-building, a place, an event, an experience, an ideology, but a people. A people that He defines as “My” people. Those who belong to Him alone in faithful allegiance because they know who He truly is, and they submit to having their identity and life define by Him, so as to reflect His identity and life.

A submission that knows: if we are to belong to Christ as His people, we cannot remain as we were and where we were. We cannot remain dead in our sin. We cannot remain cold and lifeless in our heart. We cannot remain rebellious in our belief and lifestyle. We cannot remain in a state of being that doesn’t distinguish us from the rest of the sinful world. We must be holy and separate in who we are and how we live. And for that to happen, there must be a transformation of the entire self. Everything about us—inside and out—needs to be remade. But this is a transformation that we cannot do for ourselves. However, God has promised to do it for us and, in fact, has done it in Christ. And so if we are to be truly God’s people, those who are truly new creations through His powerful, saving, and transformative work, then there must be a complete surrender to who God truly is, what He can do, and how we are to live.

A surrender that involves the rejection of self as god and lord over life, and the full acceptance of the only One is who is truly God and Lord over all things. More to the point: there must be a dying to self—along with all of its creature-centered desires, wants, definitions, ways of thinking and lifestyle. And from that dying, we are to be raised to a new, recreated, God-given self—one that's been remade in the image of Christ, the One who is the perfect definition of holiness, righteousness, and truth. And along with that recreation, there is to be a transformation of mind, heart, life, and purpose. Things no longer belonging to or defined by the ways of the world, which are sinful and foolish. Definitions and ways that separated us from God and confined us to the valley of dry bones. But now, because of God's redeeming and restorative work in Christ, the giver of life, they have been changed by Him who is the perfect definition of wisdom—the same wisdom that is to define everything about who we are and how we live. As Paul says: [“it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me”](#) (Gal 2.20).

This is a roundabout way of declaring the truth: we don't get to redefine Him. He redefines us. A redefinition that not only identifies us as belonging to Him alone but also requires us to live separate from the world. A state of belonging made real because He paid the ultimate price for our freedom from sin and death and adoption into His eternal household of salvation and life. And a state of separateness made possible because He provided the ultimate provision for holy and righteous living: the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The blessing that fills our very life with God's presence—not just as the new and true temple of God, which His people in Christ are now (cf. 1 Cor 3.16; 6.19; Eph 2.21–22)—but also as the restored creation we were meant to be in the beginning. We were designed to be God's image-bearers—His icons, filled with His presence and made alive through Him.

And as understood and believed concerning the arrival of God's kingdom, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit performs and affirms the fulfillment of God's promises for those who belong to Him in Christ. Moreover, the blessing of the Holy Spirit restores within us the very life we were called and designed to have and live. The life of holy, righteous, and personal communion with not only our gracious, loving Creator. But the transforming work that the Holy Spirit accomplishes within us in how we live also affects our definitions and expectations for that new life. He is the One who gives us a new mind, to have new understanding, and a new capacity to people whose lives reflect God's definitions for [“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”](#) (Gal 5.22–23). Things that cannot be embodied and lived out in a lifeless building, organization, or ideology. But they are things can be (and must be) embodied and lived out in people. And the people who are specifically chosen, set apart, equipped, and empowered to do so, are those who belong to God in Christ. His people. His church.