

To The Church Outside The Camp

By Alan Richardson

There was a time once, when I used to wish that God would overnight remove every church building. Sovereignly and supernaturally. A sort of church building "rapture" if you can imagine it. If that happened, I reasoned, both the world and Christians would have to discover what "church" really is. . Think about it! There would be nowhere to "have church" any more. We would have to BE it instead. We would no longer be able to pass our act of "service" off on to an hour or two's attendance at a religious ritual, and worship could no longer take place in the "sanctuary."

Phew! We might just have a chance to discover what new covenant worship really is! And we could be confronted with the reality of having to find out what "church" really means! It could even mean that ultimately, the world might be faced with the reality of an invisible God in a visible people! On the down side, certain people would lose their personal parking spaces. And - a little more seriously - a lot of well meaning people will have lost thousands if not millions of dollars they had dumped into projects that have no eternal value. On the up side however, they would see afresh the opportunity to place both their treasure and their heart in things which do have eternal value. And with all of this - We might even have a reformation!! I've changed my mind. I've realized that would never be enough.

Over the past ten years of being "outside the camp," I have come to learn that there is a process needed which must be far more radical ("to the root").. And far more uncomfortable. You see, its not the things which are outside of us that need to be impacted. It's the things INSIDE of us. And those things go far deeper. They are buried beyond the roots of our traditions and culture in the things which actually CREATE culture and tradition. The desire for identity, the need to belong, the fulfillment of finding a tangible purpose, acceptance from our peers, the comfort of being organized and finding our place - Powerful driving forces! "But hold on a second here," you might be thinking. "Church is completely biblical. . . isn't it?" Yes, the word "church" is in the bible. Yes, it's what Jesus said He would build and the devices of Hell would be unable to overcome it. But let's take a look at that word "church," and its biblical context. Lets see if we can for a moment put our conceptions aside and approach this word "church" objectively. I'm sure most of you know that we translate "church" from the Greek "ekklesia." Its where we get our word "ecclesiastical (pertaining to the church)" from.

But just what were the disciples saying when they used the term "ekklesia" back in the first century? (For the record, it appears 115 times in the New Testament, translated 3 times as "assembly" and 112 times as "church.") It's a compound word consisting of 2 parts. EK meaning "from" or "out of." KLESIS meaning "calling." Thus the interpretation generally agreed upon from EKKLESIA is "that which is called out."

Now keep in mind that in the first century, this term had no religious significance. Whatsoever. Check it out. Acts 19 32-41 the riotous assembly at Ephesus is three times referred to as an "ekklesia." Church? No, this is the mob that's out to bury Paul alive or dead! They were called out for a purpose! Any group that is called together for a purpose can be an ekklesia. Yes, that means the Democratic or Republican Party can be an ekklesia. But so too is a car club. The Girl Scouts would be "that which is called together." So would the VFW or the Country Club. But would you call a bunch of drunken stag night party goers a "church"? Because that's what they are. They too would be an ekklesia. You could call it a club. (Wayne Jacobsen does! - go to "Lifestream.org") Clubs reflect a desire to belong. But that doesn't make them biblical. There is another Greek word believers used to describe "coming together." But guess what it is? "Synagogue" is the Greek word. OK, so what about THE text to hang our hat on. . . the one where Jesus says "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." Isn't that what church is all about? Let's take a look at the word "church" and the context it's in.

The word again is "ekklesia" - called out. A correct literalization of this text however would be. . . "I Jesus will build those who are called out from this world upon a foundation of myself. . . and the strategies of hell will be unable to stand against them." You may have noticed, the literalisation above begs a question. Where does "church" come into it? Where does the WORD church come into it, let alone our present practices which that same word defines? The honest answer is that it doesn't. Which begs an even deeper question. How did the word church get there in the first place? For those of you grammatically inclined, how did a descriptive phrase become a noun? How did something that was LIFE become an institution? You see, in the beginning, the word "ekklesia" was simply a description of something that was happening. It was a people whose eyes had been opened to the reality of eternity. Who saw the two spiritual realms as a now and were living in the good of that. A people called out from this world and its Kingdoms into The Kingdom of God - yet remaining in this world because the Kingdom of God is all about this world! If we'd left it alone at that, who

knows. . . we may have remained a spontaneous body of people called out from this world. But we're not. The word "church" has somehow gotten mixed up with our club mentality - desire to belong/find purpose/identity - resulting in the word "church" taking on a life out of all proportion to its original definition. The word has become a life in itself. A life that sustains itself. A life that rules our relationship with God and overrules our relationships with each other. AND WORST OF ALL, AN IMAGE THAT PREVENTS US FROM SEEING WHAT GOD HAS IN MIND.

The concept of "church" has become a model so deeply embedded in our thinking processes that we are unable to comprehend God outside of it. And whenever we seek to discover God's purposes on earth, we interpret them through this model we have become stuck with. It's an industry spending billions of dollars upon itself. At its worst divisive, controlling, legalistic and self-perpetuating. It is often said that most of our churches could carry right on if God's presence was withdrawn. And yet God has often come with His manifest presence to draw us out of the comfort of our institutions to Himself in a new and dynamic way. Such visitations have often been fiercely opposed by the institutions of the day. For a while, they have burned brightly, and even brought fresh revelation to the wider Body. But the irony is that every revival in history ended up right back where it began. In church. In another denomination. In another division. You see, it doesn't matter how radical our measure of revelation, how new our "new thing," how strong our call for reformation or revival, the model within us is still "church." And church remains the direction and focus of our ultimate goals. If you started a totally new thing, preaching completely clear revelation to a bunch of people. . . what would be their model? I'm not questioning the accuracy of the revelation, or the reality of the vision. I'm asking what the model is. Because the model you demonstrate is eventually what you will produce. And if that's no different, you will simply have gone once more round the mountain.

True, you will have imparted revelation, but all it has become, is simply more information. It won't matter what you say about "organic" or "relational" church. If what you are doing is standing in front of a bunch of people every week, what do they see? What's their model? One man standing in front of a bunch of people. . . Everything focused towards the performance of one man - the man at the front. And that's what you'll end up building. That's the model. Not what you say, but what you DO! But you say. . ."but that's the way its always been done. . . ." And you're right. Except back in the very beginning. And no, I'm not talking about Jerusalem. Jerusalem's model was

TEMPLE. That had a lot of positives. Living stones were built together - it was relational. It was there for the whole world to see - it was witness.. It was built together for the glory of God - it was a bastion of the Kingdom on earth. But a temple is still focused on what goes on inside it. The operative word to the world around it is "come" rather than "go." It tends inevitably towards "spectator" mentality and the performance of the few, which in turn leads to a hierarchical system. It must of necessity have programs - times when you knew you could show up and find something happening. And of course it needed a lot of maintenance. . . It was still church. And it's as far as we've got after 2000 years. But there was another man. He was misunderstood, generally rejected. Not one of the original apostles. Had never seen Jesus with them. Not even seen The Master crucified. But he had the audacity to say he had a different model. More, he claimed to have been caught up to Heaven to see it. And it wasn't Temple, it was, he said A Body.

A Body was like Temple in that it was relational - every piece was built together. But there was a major difference. In a Body, every part had to function. No one part was more important or necessary than others. Unlike Temple, it wasn't focused inwards. It looked outwards. And more. . . it moved. It WENT. Every part was completely in touch with the head. There were no special times or days - it performed all the time because it WAS (and IS). This wasn't information or performance. This was a LIFE. Because it WAS Life. Therefore it brought LIFE. It drew Life continually from the head. It could feel, it was in touch with the world because it was IN it, although not OF it. It didn't have a "refuge" mentality. It wasn't here to create its own Kingdom to hold on against the snares of this world. Its goal was to take the Kingdom of God - the LIFE it expressed - into The Kingdom of This World and overcome it. To bring light into darkness, hope into despair, love where there was fear, acceptance where there was rejection, purpose where there was hopelessness. This was - and is to be - the living embodiment of Jesus upon the earth. Thus this man wasn't afraid to leave a bunch of new believers alone without back-up. Sometimes within days of seeing them enter The Kingdom.

One other thing about Body. A temple can't become a Bride. But a Body can. So what do we do? Please! It won't wash to do church but call it Body. You'll fool nobody including yourself eventually. One suggestion. Try dropping the word "church" from your vocabulary. You'll be astonished initially at the effort it will take. But it will force you to think again. And then perhaps this is what God is doing right now all over the

world. . . He's drawing men and women to Himself. Not in an organization, but usually FROM organizations.. And yet not to be independent, but in time as He leads us together, to learn inter-dependence. It's one thing to come out of the camp. But many of us have learned the reality that it's another thing altogether for the camp to come out of us. But as we continue to embrace the process, we will be made ready for the reality! As you have received Christ Jesus, so continue to WALK in Him! Col.2:6
Welcome to the pilgrimage!

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