

## Conversations for Change

### *Article One:*

#### *Getting the Conversation Started*

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If you have been a part of the church for any length of time, you have heard pastors and teachers refer to the “true church.” There is a true church versus a false church, to be sure. There are true believers and there are false professors. There are true churches that adhere to the gospel and there are false churches that have abandoned it. But that is not how I mean to use the phrase “true church” here.

I have often used the phrase “true church.” When I use the phrase, what I am thinking is every pastor’s desire to fashion his church according to the model of the New Testament. Every pastor wants to pastor a true NT church. “Folks, we need to be a true NT church.” Have you heard it used this way? This kind of usage usually precedes any recommendation for change. “Folks, we need to more closely align ourselves with the way the NT church did things. If you will follow this proposal we will become a true NT church.” Of course! Who would not want to follow? And I have led many conversations like that over the past thirteen years. Everyone gets afraid of Acts 2-3. People begin to wonder what the pastor is going to wind up doing. Perhaps they begin to murmur thoughts like: “The next thing you know, Pastor is going to be telling us to sell our houses and bring the money to lay at his feet!”

The charismatic types, the seeker-sensitive types, the emergent church types, the Reformed types, the Fundamentalist types – they all claim to be aligning their philosophy of ministry with the true NT model. I have searched for that true church model and have not found it. Today, I am declaring the search to be officially off. Why?

#### ***The Reason I am Calling OFF the Search***

I am calling off the search for the true church model not because I’m tired (although that’s true), not because I’m frustrated (although that too is true), but because this true NT church does not exist. I set out on a mission that is not able to be completed. I started to play a game that is not able to be won. ***There is no true NT church model to follow.*** That is my conclusion from the past 13 years and the premise of everything I will set out to do for the next 13 years.

Admittedly, I have couched this introduction in a cynical fashion. Right now, it may sound to you that I am acting like a 3 year old who doesn’t like the way the game is going so declares she is taking her ball and going home. Or the 8 year old who searched his closet for that shirt his mother told him was there and declares not that the shirt isn’t in the closet but that the shirt doesn’t exist. I framed it this way so that you could somehow feel the frustration and thus the sheer relief by the time you finish this article. It is not simple immaturity that led me to declare the search as off. I came to see in the light of Scripture that some of my theological presuppositions regarding this search were flawed.

First, there was one glaring realization that led to this declaration. In a word: the *nature* of the church. What is the church? This is a question we all assume we know and consequently, think very little about. If we could think clearly about this topic, so much of the tension between what we ought to do and want to do would be erased. But second, there was growth in my own understanding with regard to handling Scripture. I said

earlier that we all want to follow that true NT church model. That means we assume there is one to follow. If this true NT model is there, where do we find it? If the assumption is that we must align ourselves as closely as possible to the NT church, then how closely must we align ourselves? Should we be selling our houses and living in a communal society? That certainly is what they were doing early on in Acts. So the question becomes one of hermeneutics. How do we know what to align ourselves with and what to ignore? Big question!

Let's tackle these two issues separately. We will examine in this article the nature of the church. Then in the next article we will address the nature of hermeneutics.

### ***The Nature of the Church***

The church is a real and vibrant entity. In fact, it is a powerful reality that exists on the earth. It is being built and forcefully advancing the cause of Christ throughout the world. The church proclaims the gospel, restrains evil and promotes virtue and truth. The church is actively being built. But let there be no doubt as to who it is that is doing the activity of building. Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 16:18, "I will build my church." Jesus is the one who builds the church. He is the active one, which makes us the passive builders.

The first thing to be said about the nature of the church is that Jesus is building only one church. While there are many individual local churches throughout the world, they are not institutions in themselves. That was a remarkable revelation to me. The local church is not an institution in itself. Instead it is a microcosm of a much larger unit – the body of Christ.

Much damage is done to Christ's body because of an abuse on this very point. When one church thinks it has more closely aligned itself with that "true NT church model" they automatically start to reflect on other churches as what...false churches? Pretty soon, the only people who have the truth are the people who are just like them. Authority and Holiness then are seen to pass through the church. For example, in order for any ministry to be deemed as a valid work it is assumed that the ministry must be sanctioned by "the church." The problem is that when one views the church in this way, it is no longer really viewed as part of the larger body of Christ but as a single local church that has become an institution in itself.

The second thing to see about the nature of the church is that membership is by Divine initiation. We are acted upon by Christ. Christ joins people to His church by issuing his Divine effectual call (1 Cor. 1:9, 24, 26). The very nature of conversion and justification demands this. The work of justification is done solely by Christ himself (John 1:12-13). Jesus picks sinners out of the world, rescues them from their sin and God's wrath and places them inside his care. So you do not join the church. You are joined to the church.

The Scriptures use three main metaphors when speaking of the church: body, building, family. Think about each of these as metaphors for the church. How does any single part of the body get joined to the other parts? How does any single brick get attached to his place in the wall? How does any new family member come in? Not by their choice but by the activity of another.

When we examine the reality that all Christians (all believers) in the NT were called by God, we discover that the church is that body of believers called by God and assembled into his Body, the church. So Paul speaks of the reality that Christ died for his bride – “the church” in Ephesians 5:25. The church is all those for whom Christ died. **“That means a believer does not join a church; they are joined to the church by being ‘in Christ.’”**<sup>1</sup> Think of it this way. It is impossible to have a lost person in the Body of Christ – the Church; and it is impossible to have a saved person who is not a member of the Body of Christ – the Church. The reality, or actual spiritual entity, that is created by the calling of individual sinners is the spiritual Body of Christ and it cannot possibly have anything to do with a physical organization. It must first be a living spiritual entity – an organism. The church that Christ is building is NOT an institution but a collection of people from every language, tribe, tongue and nation.

Here is the rub. If the church is primarily a spiritual entity and not a physical entity, we do great harm when we come to see the church as primarily a physical institution. There are three factors that have contributed to the rise of the institutional church. The first is the powerful presence of the Roman Catholic view of the church throughout history. Rome believes the exact opposite of what I just said. They believe the church is an institution. The institution has its duly appointed governing board that is the very presence of God on earth. The pope is Christ’s Vicar, which means Christ’s presence. To go against the institutional church is to go against God himself. I won’t say more here lest I really bore you, but the Reformers did not and we have not done a sufficient job in changing this mentality. The Puritans embraced it and we have continued in its weakness to the present. We really need to keep the Reformation moving forward.

I will instead focus on the other two factors.

### ***Vanity Fair***

The first is the market place. We live in a culture inundated by the free market. Anything of substance and value will survive and thrive in the marketplace. The church has put up a booth in Vanity Fair. That’s the problem. We are now just as much a part of corporate America as any other industry. Is the church an industry? We have our own publishing companies, record labels, law firms, architects and builders, educational systems, etc. The church has become main-stream in our culture. It is impossible to survive in corporate America without institutional characteristics. We must have articles of incorporation, governing boards, tax identification numbers and the whole cup of tea just as any other business institution would. Now these things aren’t wrong. They simply contribute over the long-haul to a wrong view of the church – an institutional view.

We have said nothing about the financial pressures the church has put on itself with the buying and selling of land and the building of edifices for corporate gatherings. This is perhaps the single most damaging thing the church has done. If you are going to buy land and build buildings by going into the market arena for money loans then you have just put yourself under the pressure for survival. Now you have to keep the crowds coming so you can keep the payments flowing, etc. Institutionalized churches get

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<sup>1</sup> John Reisinger in an unpublished article, “The Ekklesia of God” from his website [www.soundofgrace.com](http://www.soundofgrace.com)

measured by buildings, bodies and bucks. How many buildings? How many bodies? How many bucks? Is success in ministry tied to these? Only in the market place. The market place has contributed to our demise. The church has bought the lie of Vanity Fair: success is measured institutionally. False!

### ***Doctrinal Precision***

The second factor that contributes to an institutional mentality is the desire for doctrinal precision and uniformity. For the earliest churches there seemed to be no subcategories for Christianity. While there were disagreements and divisions at times, there was still a sense of unity. Believers were viewed as either members of the world or members of the Church. The only kind of divisions approved by the Apostles was over the gospel, not side issues (even important ones). There were schisms, but they still recognized each other to be part of “the” church. But today, many have defined and re-defined themselves based on their doctrinal precision. And more to the point, they have sought unanimity in their congregations. Their Statements of Faith have become the litmus for membership. That breeds an institutional view of the church when they speak in terms of membership requirements: “You cannot be a member of this church unless you agree with us on the millennium, or the sign gifts, or on baptism, etc.”

If the nature of the church is a spiritual reality comprised of all those who have been called, regenerated, and justified by His activity, then the one and only unifying reality we have in common is the gospel of Jesus Christ. When we start forbidding or embracing people into our fellowships based upon their adherence to things other than or lesser than the gospel, we have institutionalized our church. How can we forbid entrance and membership to any person who has been called by, regenerated by and justified by Christ?

Well, we are just getting the conversation started. I hope you can already see some of the implications and applications we need to address. The church, by its very nature as the body of Christ, the family of God, and the building of God is much more dynamic and much less institutional than many have made it.

Next week, we will continue with a look at the hermeneutical questions as to how we should align ourselves with that first church in Acts.