

The background of the image is a dense field of 3D-rendered houses. Most of the houses are a light grey color, arranged in a grid-like pattern. In the center of the image, one house is highlighted in a vibrant red color, making it stand out from the rest. The houses have simple, clean lines with visible windows, doors, and chimneys. The overall scene is brightly lit, creating soft shadows on the ground.

Simply Church

Advancing His Kingdom

A simple attempt to explain
simple church

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So what is simple ... relational ... organic ... missional ... home church? Glad you asked. Let us take you on an inspiring yet sobering – hopefully simple – crash course into the why? and the what? of simple church¹.

As we all fondly know, God poured out His Spirit in an unprecedented way on 120 believers on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). The result was the explosive birth of the church that Jesus had predicted (Matthew 16:18), and it got off to a flying start with 3,000 people **“added”** on the first day (Acts 2:41). Within a few days, the number of men came to 5,000; putting the total number of believers, including women and children, anywhere between 15,000 to 25,000 people (Acts 4:4)!

Jerusalem at the time only had around 30,000 local residents, but this number would swell to nearly ten times that number over the Jewish festivals: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Hundreds of Jewish communities existed among the Gentile cities outside Palestine and devout Jews were expected to make the journey from these cities to participate in the Festivals in Jerusalem; in this case, Pentecost. Many of the new believers in this fledgling, early church were from these surrounding countries and chose to delay their return home to enjoy the incredible sense of “God in their midst” (see Acts 2-6).

Yet God’s intention was that these early believers return to their homes and cities with the fire that they had just received. God intended Jerusalem to be a launch-pad; initially, the early church viewed it as a festival-resort. God would finally allow persecution to arise forcing them to leave Jerusalem and carry His love to the ends of the earth (Acts 8:1-4).

As this persecution lashed into the early church, it served to jumpstart the apostolic heart of God’s people. Jesus had promised: **“you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”** (Acts 1:8). Now that persecution had spoilt the early-day indulgence of this promise and crashed their party, **“those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word”** (Acts 8:1, 4). But an often overlooked incident needs to be spotlighted. Luke tells us that all these early believers left Jerusalem to carry the fire to the world, **“except the apostles”** (Acts 8:1). Except the apostles? Huh? Weren’t they supposed to lead the way? Luke does not explain why they remained, only that they did. And this choice proved to be ingenious.

The early church exploded off the back of **every believer** carrying the fire wherever they went. Wild-fire! This was not a leadership directive. Philip did not receive papal permission to evangelize Samaria; he was led by the Lord. The early church was birthed on the shoulders of the priesthood of all believers, not on the back of some clever leadership initiative.

Once the fire of God had swept through the known world, the apostles – discovering their role – began to add the leadership component necessary to facilitate the life and ministry that was **already** flowing. As spiritual fathers – not organizational CEO’s – they fed, supported and, when necessary, corrected this wonderfully out-of-control fire-storm of holiness and love. By Acts 9:31, we get a glimpse of the power of God at work: **“Then the churches...walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit ... were multiplied”**.

¹ This article is taken from chapter one of our ebook entitled “From our Homes to the Nations, The Church – Then and Now”. For more information, see www.crosswaveglobal.com

The apostles were by this stage planting churches with an awesome sense of God's favour and anointing. We get an inside peep into the strategy of a typical apostolic team² at work in Acts 14:21-23. Paul's team firstly penetrated a new people group (v. 21), secondly, nurtured the new community of believers (v. 22) and thirdly, appointed elders to continue the work (v. 23).

But what did these "**churches**" look like? How did they operate? It is easy for us to read our bias into the passage and assume that they looked like what we know as "church" today. We may assume that they had a congregation, as we know it? They more than likely had a church building and presumably they had a pastor leading the work? The truth is that this was not the case at all! The early church did *not* operate on a "congregational model," *nor* did it have large buildings called "churches" and it did *not* have a person called the "pastor" leading it!

This is often a frightening realization to people. Two responses are common. The first is to deny this fact with a "You-can't-be-serious" attitude and an attempt to move on with "business as usual". However, putting his head in the sand never did help the ostrich in the face of the lion's charge. The second response is to soberly take stock of our current misconception of church, understand why we have adopted it and then humbly search for truth determined to embrace the implications of such a quest. If this second response describes your bent and persuasion, this article may arm you in your journey.

The Components Of The Early Church...

First, let's describe what these "churches" historically and Biblically looked like before we amplify on each aspect. God's people, in the first century, were a Kingdom-advancing phenomenon ...

- (1) loyal to the Body of Christ,
- (2) devoted to a communal family and
- (3) intentionally aligned to apostolic vision.

The (capital B) Body of Christ

The Kingdom of God was Jesus' essential message, motivation and mandate; the King and His Kingdom is, in fact, **the** Gospel (Mark 1:14, 15). Thus it was and ought to be the essential message, motivation and mandate of the church too (Matthew 6:9, 10; 6:33; 16:18, 19; 24:14; 28:18-20 c. Acts 1:3-8). The church is not the Kingdom. The church is who we are as God's people – our identity – while the Kingdom defines the Father's "business" we are to be given to – our message, motivation and mandate.

In fact, the word "**church**" (Greek: *ekklesia*) literally means, the "called out or selected ones;" technically, "a civil body of selected officials". In the language of the day, the word referred to a King's cabinet; those authorized to represent the King and enforce His Kingdom rule. Thus we are, in a phrase, God's **Kingdom Enforcers**; communities of the King who usher in His Kingdom rule; *not* with a sword but with a basin ... *not* to manipulate and control but to love and serve ... *not* to rule over people but to overcome the powers of darkness that rule over them. This is very different to the traditional picture that forms in most Christians' minds when they hear the word "**church**". For the record, "**church**" is *not* a building, a meeting on Sunday or an organization with a Statement of Faith.

Rather the "**church**" refers to every believer irrespective of place or time; including every believer without distinction to race, location, age or church background. Every believer is immediately a part of the church in this universal sense. Being saved means that, whether we find our primary relationships with one spiritual family or another, we are all members of the (capital B) Body of Christ. Whether you are a follower of Christ in my city or on the other side of the world, we – you and I – are brothers and sisters in Christ. And that means, wherever we travel on God's green earth, we should experience the oneness of God's love when we find ourselves in the presence of other believers ... for Jesus manifests **His Presence** when just two or three meet (Matthew 18:20).

² The phrase, "apostolic team" is a helpful umbrella term in referring to a team of Ephesians 4:11 equipping gifts – apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher – facilitated by the leadership of an apostle(s).

Jesus said, **"I will build My church"** not "I will build My churches". His high-priestly prayer was specific and powerful: **"I do not pray for these alone [the disciples], but also for those who will believe in Me through their word [us, me]; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me"** (John 17:20, 21).

The only Biblical boundary to define the (capital B) Body of Christ is along city-lines. When Paul addressed believers within a specific city, for example in Thessalonica, he referred to **"the church of the Thessalonians"** (1 Thessalonians 1:1; also see 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1 and 2 Thessalonians 1:1).

The church **of** the city.

Thus our commitment to the (capital B) Body of Christ should be outworked in the church in our city. For me, it is the church **of** Melbourne. This is not an exclusive commitment but it is a substantial one. My commitment is to the (capital B) Body of Christ all around the world, but it must play out in a substantial, meaningful way in the city God has put me in. Through intercessory prayer, servant-hearted love and the complete abandonment of sectarian attitudes, we ought to trust for God's glory to fill our cities so that His Kingdom will be done.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul explained that the **"mystery of His will"** is **"that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times, [Father God] might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him"** (Ephesians 1:9, 10). Then, of course, **"comes the end, when [Jesus] delivers the Kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power"** (1 Corinthians 15:24). Jesus – as Head of the church and Lord of the harvest – will subdue all under His righteous rule: **"the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord"** (Revelation 11:15). He will **gather together in one all things** and then present it all back to His Father!

Having established the centrality of the Kingdom purpose of God as the point of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul then reveals how the church is indeed God's chosen means to usher in His Kingdom rule. He uses the metaphors of **"body"** (Chapters 1, 4), **"temple"** (Chapter 2), **"family"** (Chapter 3), **"bride"** (Chapter 5) and **"army"** (Chapter 6) to do so expressing God's intention to fulfil His **"eternal [Kingdom] purpose"** in and through **"the church"** (Ephesians 3:10, 11). God desires to reveal His glory, as He gathers together in one all things, in and through His people.

With his mind filled with the glories of the Kingdom, Paul then exhorts us to unity. Unity of what? He begins Chapter 4:1 with a sober call to the **"unity of the Spirit"** (v. 3) and then belabours the point that there **"is one body and one Spirit ... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all"** (vv. 4-6). This is not some dry, musty first-century creed but a rallying point for unity within the (capital B) Body of Christ.

This statement is unsettling clear, chilling in fact. Having highlighted repeatedly that the Kingdom Rule of God is to **"gather together in one all things"** (1:9-23; 2:18-22; 3:1-21) this passage then is a clear statement of application for how we flesh out our understanding of unity not just in a simple church or in our apostolic stream but in our view of the "Body of Christ".

This does not mean we should look to initiate a unity movement accommodating every pastor / denomination in an Anglican / Catholic / Presbyterian / Methodist / Pentecostal / Charismatic (Oops! ... must have left someone out!) lowest common denominator "unity of man". Bringing different church affiliations together in an attempt to amalgamate all our institutional trappings into a new super-organization is certainly not what we are envisioning, nor is it what the early church was about.

While city-wide events declaring the glory of the King and expressing the unity of the Spirit will and should undoubtedly happen, the importance of forsaking our sectarian attitudes and renewing our allegiance to the King and His Kingdom – repenting of our man-made distinctions

– is the key issue of course. Then only we can find our corporate identity as the Body of Christ in the Head, Christ Jesus.

I can recall a story of a man who walked out onto a construction site where several bricklayers were at work in the heat of the sun. Two men in particular grabbed his attention. Both were working hard, but their demeanours were completely opposite. While one huffed and puffed, every effort laboured, his whole attitude one of grimace and sweat; the other bricklayer did his work with a sense of grace and beauty, every effort done creatively as if he was an artist crafting a masterpiece.

Walking over to the first, disgruntled bricklayer, he asked: "Hi ... can you tell me what you're doing?"

Irritated, he replied, "Can't you see? I'm laying bricks!"

Shocked by his abrasiveness, the man apologized for disturbing him and wandered off to see the "artistic" bricklayer at work. A little more hesitantly, he asked this second bricklayer: "Excuse me, sir ... can you explain to me what you are doing?"

The bricklayer stopped what he was doing; stepped back as if to view something ... paused ... then looked over to this obviously ignorant inquirer.

"What am I doing?" he teased. "I am part of building the most magnificent, state of the art theatre the world has ever seen! Sydney Opera House nothing!"

He continued to stare at the completed picture in his mind, absolutely fulfilled in the privilege he had to be part of "something awesome".

Thus, the first component of church – God's "something awesome" – is an essential commitment to the (capital B) Body of Christ specifically fleshed out in a love for **"the church of"** our city, free from sectarianism and tribalism (1 Corinthians 1:2). In a phrase, ***the city church***.

However, I'm not advocating some mother-of-all mega-church. Oh, no! Nor am I talking about some theoretical acknowledgement of a "mysterious connection" to the Body of Christ that absolves one of any responsibility or accountability. Rather, in following Christ, He brings us into a meaningful, substantial sense of belonging in a spiritual family with whom we do life deeply...

The church in the home

The second way in which the Bible uses the word **"church"** is, for example, when Jesus spoke of the relational church in Matthew 18:17, referring to consistent, accountable interaction with other believers. Paul also referred to church in this way referring to believers in relational families, living out the intimate responsibilities of Scripture together.

The New Testament contains over 30 direct exhortations to be responsible to one another, the vast majority of them can only be meaningfully fulfilled in family (community) life: for example, **"exhort one another daily"** (Hebrews 3:13), **"consider one another"** (Hebrews 10:24), **"members of one another"** (Romans 12:5), **"be kindly affectionate to one another ... giving preference to one another"** (Romans 12:10), **"rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another"** (Romans 12:15, 16).

Within the church of a city, believers found life in smaller, spiritual families fathered by parent-leaders. Paul wrote, on four occasions, **"greet the church that is in their house"** (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15 and Philemon 1:2).

The church ***in*** the home.

Thus, as we trust for God's glory to fill the Body of Christ, we ought to choose to do life deeply with a community of fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters; where we are known, where we are accountable, where we serve and give ... and where we grow into Christ's likeness. It is here, in this setting of life, that the priesthood of all believers is released in life-giving discipleship, ministry and mission. It is here, in this environment of love, that we learn to dig our roots deep into the soil of organic community (Psalm 92:12-15); knowing that unless we allow our hearts to be knit together in love, we will never unlock the full treasure to be found in Christ (Colossians 2:2, 3).

It is in the spiritual family of simple church that we refuse to box the life of God into a programmed meeting or two a week in which the "pastor" or "guru" must perform and pull another rabbit out of the hat. Rather we come to realise that God's commanded blessing rests upon us when we **"dwell** – not just meet – **together in unity"** (Psalm 133:1-3). Then meeting regularly to minister to Him and to minister to one another is simply the cherry-on-the-top for a community **alive in the Spirit, in love with one another** and **about their Father's mission** (Matthew 18:20, Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 Corinthians 14:26).

In His provocative parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus taught that it is His express intention to sow the **"sons of the Kingdom"** as seed into the world (Matthew 13:36-43). Yes, He doesn't just want to sow the Word; He wants to sow us, in whom the Word is fleshed out, so that others may taste the fruit of our lives and see that He is good. John explained that the world beheld the glory of God when the Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us (John 1:14). The world will only continue to behold the glory of God to the degree that the Word is fleshed out in our Christ-centred lives and Christ-filled communities.

And herein lies the point. The question is: Where do **"sons"** come from? **"Sons"** don't come from Bible schools or training courses ... **"sons"** come from families! While training is obviously important, and Bible Schools may have their place; they are only valid (and effective) to the degree that they compliment the incubator of the simple church family.

Home church is *not* an end in itself; it is the "safe place" of covenant community in which we learn to **"know God"**, become **"strong"** and carry out Kingdom **"exploits"** (Daniel 11:32). It is the "launch pad" from which secure fathers release and serve faithful sons into their destiny purpose³, and thus we carry God's life from our homes to our neighbourhoods, to every niche of society and to the nations. This "safe place" of simple church is thus also the "launch pad" for Kingdom advance.

Different words are used to describe this component of church: house church, home church, church in the house, simple church, organic church, missional church, relational church ... (want to add another suggestion?).

Actually I'm not really in favour of adding any defining prefix to the word "church" as it can become a restrictive term. Definitions that help us now may hinder us later. However, while I look forward to the day that "church" means what Jesus intended, working definitions and phrases are helpful to define where we are in our journey to date. I have also found it helpful to think of the distinctions in the phrases: church **of** the city and church **in** the home.

One day a pig and chicken were talking ... forgive me, I have two young daughters; in my home, all animals talk.

They were discussing how best they could contribute to mankind. They envied the cow that provided milk. They admired the sheep for contributing wool. What could they do to serve mankind?

Suddenly, the chicken had a light-bulb moment: "I know ... we can provide mankind with breakfast ... bacon and eggs!"

Well, the pig was excited for exactly 0.2 seconds.

³ I use the words "father" and "son" here to refer to both men and women. Ladies, if I can be the Bride of Christ, you can be a son of God or father in the Lord.

His light-bulb fused at the thought: "No way! You just have to give a few eggs ... breakfast would cost me my bacon!"

Covenant relationships cost us our bacon. The world builds Kleenex relationships on **convenient contributions** that are conditional and as flimsy as toilet paper. God calls us to build relationships on **covenant commitment** that stand the test of time (and the numerous tests that are a part of living life together).

Thus, the second component of church is an essential commitment to be part of a spiritual family of believers, parent-led by fathering elders, whose covenant life revolves around **"the church in"** a home (1 Corinthians 16:19). In a phrase, **the simple church**.

Viewing these groups as just a Bible Study Group or as just a Cell Group certainly misses the Lord's full intent for them. They are **"church"** nothing more and nothing less – and in fact, they are the basis of New Testament church life. However, they are not independent entities in themselves; rather they enjoy a vital, life-giving connection together as...

The church with apostolic vision

Committed to the Body of Christ; alive, in love and on mission as a spiritual family, the early church was essentially connected to God's Kingdom purposes through being aligned to apostolic vision. They did not settle for just an independent "house church" experience, nor for an in-word-only commitment to the (capital B) Body of Christ. They were vitally connected through the servant input of an apostolic team with whom they partnered in missions and church planting to see the Kingdom of God come in their geographical region and to the corners of the planet.

For example, Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to benefit from all that God was doing in their city, but reminded them that he was their spiritual father in the apostolic vision they were apart of (1 Corinthians 4:15). Also, he fondly thanked the church in Philippi for their **"fellowship in the Gospel"** (Philippians 1:5), a statement referring to the meaningful, defined and affirmed partnership they enjoyed with Paul's apostolic vision and team. In both these examples, Paul ensured that he sent members of his team to them to build on the relationship he enjoyed with them (1 Corinthians 4:16, 17 and Philippians 2:19-30 respectively).

The church with apostolic vision.

An apostolic team appoints the parent-leaders of these simple churches (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1; Titus 1:5) and these parent-elders remain accountable to this team; seeking their counsel and inviting their continued input (Acts 20:17ff; 1 Timothy 1:3; 5:17-22). This is an **invited** not **imposed** relationship. We are certainly not referring to some sort of "papal control". Consider even when Paul had to sort out the terrible problems at the delinquent Corinthian church, he did not cancel their denominational affiliation or threaten them with removal from the organizational roster. Rather he **appealed** to them based on his **parental relationship with them** (1 Corinthians 4:15, 16) and his **apostolic calling to them** (2 Corinthians 10:12-17).

The issue is simply this: if a simple church starts to slide into various problems such as unresolved conflict within the group, spiritual abuses or heresy, where is the God-appointed point of accountability? If the actual leadership of a simple church lapses into moral failure (which happens) or becomes burnt out (which also happens), where again is that God-appointed safety net of counsel and accountability? We believe without question that a vital, defined and affirmed relationship with an apostolic team is the Biblical "checks-and-balance" answer to these important questions.

Of course, the apostolic team is not just a catch-all for problems; a team who merely exists to "put out fires". Indeed, meaningfully aligned to an apostolic team, regularly inviting their counsel and input, will avoid many problems arising in the first place.

The church simply cannot become all God intends unless the Ephesians 4:11 grace gifts meaningfully play their vital role in equipping the church according to Ephesians 4:11-16; not as top-of-the-pile controllers but in servant-hearted parenthood, revealing the Father-heart of God (for example, 1 Thessalonians 2:7-12, 19, 20).

Thus the third component of the church is a defined and affirmed relational connection to an apostolic vision overseen by an apostolic team who serve them as **"fathers"** (1 Corinthians 4:15). In a phrase, ***apostolic alignment***.

- They were loyal to the Body of Christ.
- They were devoted to a spiritual communal family.
- They were intentionally aligned to an apostolic vision and team.

You're a vital member of the church of Jesus Christ, a ***body part of the Body***. How does your "church" experience compare?

For the remainder of this article, we are going to use the phrase "apostolic church" to refer to the early church enjoying these three essential components. (It's probably a limiting phrase – "apostolic church" – but is easier than repeating the mouthful above every time!)

Okay, let's see what happened...

Where Did It All Go So Wrong?

When we look at the landscape of today's church we see the continued influence of the second and third century slide away from the rich apostolic life of the first century; a slide that was in fact pre-empted at the end of the first century in some of the later epistles (3 John 9, 10, Revelation 2:6, for example). The first factor was the loss of most of the church's key servant leaders to a martyr's death. All of the first apostles, and most of their spiritual sons, had paid the ultimate price for following Jesus. A dearth of godly leadership further exasperated the second factor.

Heresy was a disease the apostles had tenaciously kept in check. But in their passing, the disease mutated into forms and cultic expressions that threatened the apostolic faith. Rather than trusting the Head of the Church to intervene; in fear, the church began to centralize and control what had been an organic, free-flowing community of life. The church God intended started to slide off the foundation of God's delight.

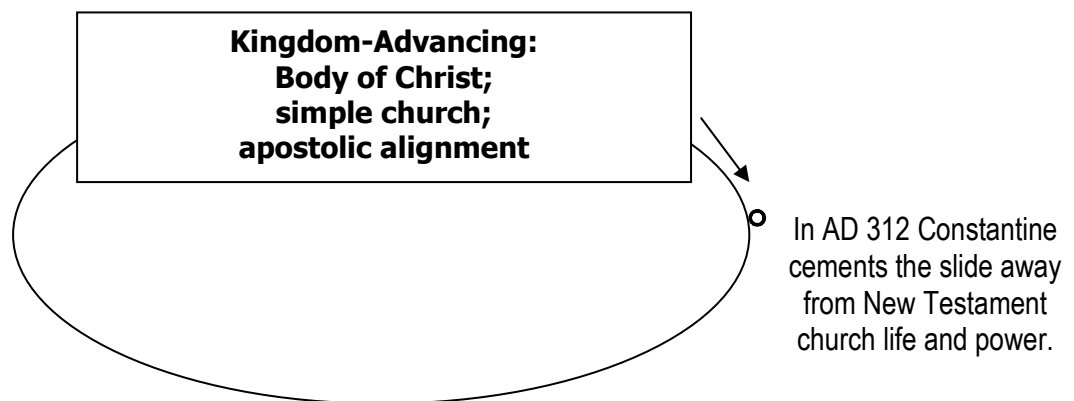
But worse was still to come ... By the time the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced the church for his own political benefit (A.D. 312), he was the final agent in confirming the church's doom from those awesome early days of power. After Constantine claimed to be converted, he made Christianity the state religion in his Edict of Milan. He realized that a huge majority of his empire were Christ-followers and that they were his most moral citizens. Whether it was through a shrewd political move or just naïve intentions he politically embraced the church, and while a few discerned the compromised alliance, most of the church bought into his deceptive intentions. After centuries of martyrdom and years of blood-shed, few could blame them for the promise of relief and recognition.

Bent on merging Christianity with pagan chaos, Constantine and the Emperors to come cemented the change in the structure of the church away from ***organic*** "apostolic church" to an ***institutional*** "congregational model" ... and, of course, opened the door for a whole host of other atrocities, such as the idolization of Mary and the saints.

Influenced by the pagan religions of the time, Constantine (and the Emperors to follow) confirmed the change in the structure of the church in three vital moves:

- They built large temples that became known as “The Church,” which sadly restricted and began to define the essence of what church was. ***The organic life of the church fossilized in the institutional tomb of the cathedral!***
- They deployed the “clergy” – professional ministers/priests – to minister to the “laity” – the common people. ***The priesthood of all believers was lost and a specialized group of priests merged as mediators between God and the “common man”!***
- They established a “congregational model” of church which revolved around the “temple,” “altar” and “priests”. Rather than the freedom of worship expression that characterized the early church. ***The church service deteriorated into the “laity” watching the “clergy” perform religious activities on their behalf!***

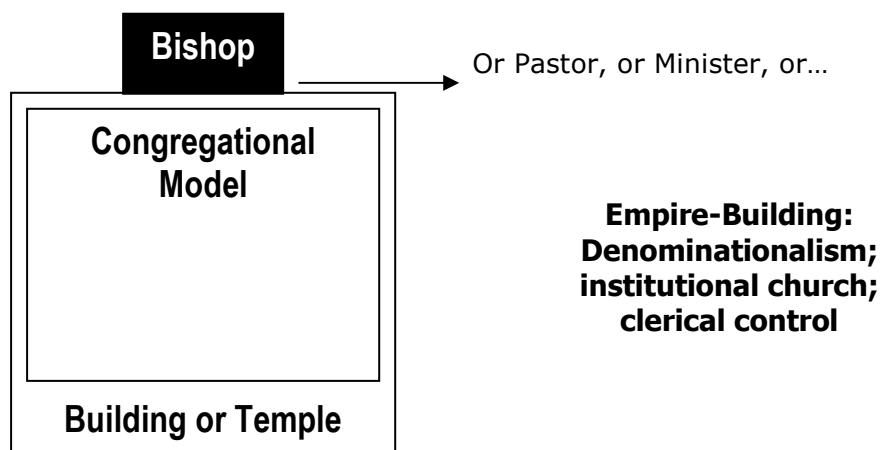
Thus the church was knocked off its apostolic foundation...



Incredibly, the concept of meeting in homes was not just ignored at this point; it actually became illegal! By AD 380, every Roman citizen was forced to believe in the “Orthodox Church” and the ***church in the home*** was forbidden. Sadly, within three hundred years of the birth and expansion of the apostolic early church, the church fell into an institutional “congregational model” led by a “bishop”.

Consider the interesting development of this unbiblical character, the religious professional, who single-handedly leads a congregation. The first title used to elevate him over the common people was “Bishop,” but over time it changed to “Priest,” then “Father,” then “Minister,” then “Reverend,” (depending on one’s denominational affiliation) until today, “Pastor” is the most popular version. It is interesting, if not tragic, that today some are again calling themselves “Bishop”!

Diagrammatically we can depict the result as follows...



Oh, How We Love Our Buildings!

Let us consider for a moment the overwhelming emphasis, energy and resource that is placed on the physical, brick and mortar building today. Obviously there is nothing wrong with a building; a building is just a building. But the place where we congregate on a Sunday or the large celebration service that takes place in this building defines what "church" is to most people. And it is certainly the key meeting for church leaders. The last decade has seen the greatest outpouring of resources into the building of new church premises history has ever known.

And this is despite God clearly and repeatedly saying, "**the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands**" (Acts 7:48). Stephen became the first martyr for making such a claim and in some circles; reputations are still lost for repeating this claim.

Today our buildings define who we are and how we worship. Every Sunday morning, parents pass on this misconception as they urge their children: "Hurry up! Or we will be late for church". And thus, we fail to teach another generation of Christ-followers that we are the "**temple**" of the Holy Spirit both individually (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20) and corporately (1 Corinthians 3:16, 17). ***The New Testament is about a spiritual temple built from the sacrificial worship and ministry of our covenanted lives*** (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4, 5). In describing the difference he saw in Western Christianity as compared to his Christ-centred way of life, a third world believer said, "It seems that we serve a different Jesus to the god that they worship. Their god lives in buildings, while our Jesus lives in us". Ouch! Amen or O-me?

Biblically the primary life of the early church took place in their homes. Corporate gatherings were a secondary blessing they enjoyed. The worship celebration, which is built on gift ministry, thus should support and enrich the essential body-life ministry through the simple churches. Sadly too often the Sunday morning "show" becomes a life-support system without which the bed-ridden body of believers would stop breathing.

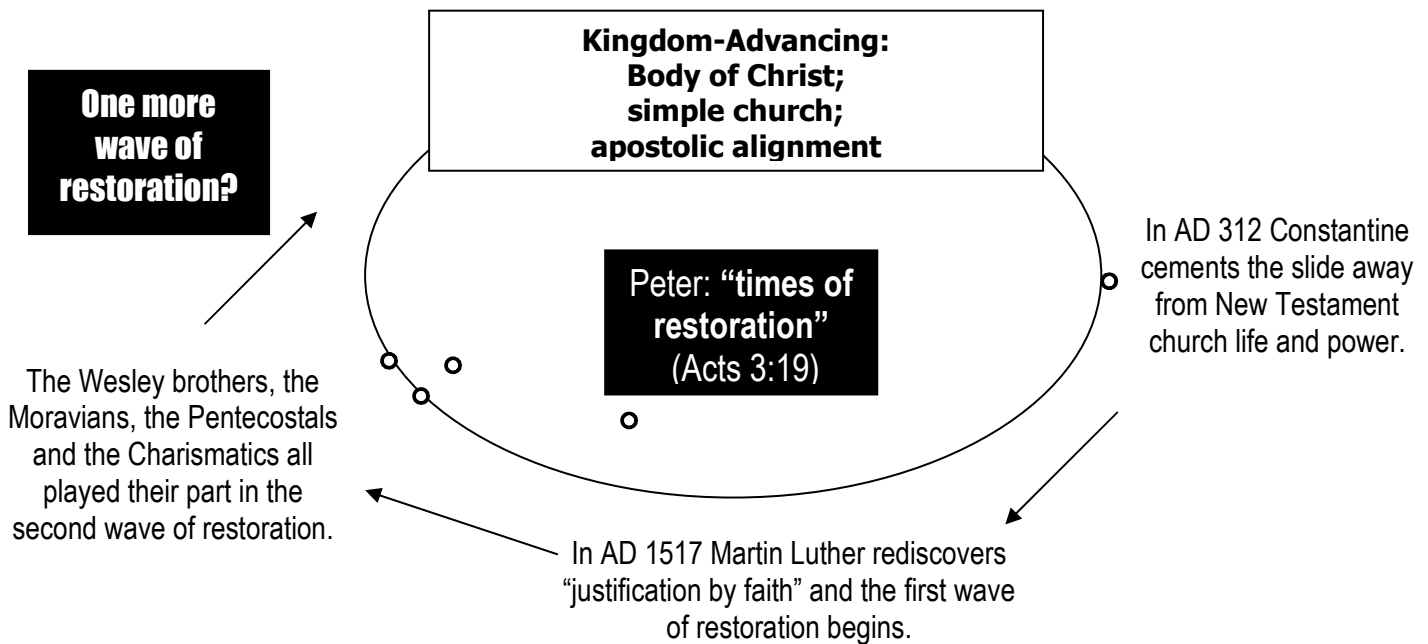
As we were dismantling this misconception of church we had some interesting incidents. We were drumming into our minds the truth that we are the church; we do *not* go to church. One of our leadership couples told the story of how their children learnt the concept a little too well. One Saturday morning, Darryl went to a men's meeting we were having. His six-year old son, Jaden asked his mom, "Where's dad?" When Suzanne answered that he had gone to a meeting, four-year old Kyle was quick off the mark: "No mom ... he hasn't gone to a meeting. We *are* the meeting!"

There Is Light At The End Of The Tunnel...

Can we recapture something of the dynamic of the early church? Oh, yes ... we are part of a five hundred year come back! Peter prophesied concerning the "**times of restoration of all things**" (Acts 3:21). How he understood what the Spirit spoke through him at this stage is anyone's guess. Surely he could not have envisioned how the "glorious" early church would fall into the dark ages? But God did know, and gave us this promise: before Jesus' second coming, He would restore His church to her former glory and more.

From the sixteenth century, Martin Luther opposed the Roman Catholic Church with his 99 theses; the principle truth of "justification by faith" being restored. This was the first wave of restoration, one of theology. God gave His Word back to His people. Following this, the second wave of restoration, one of spirituality, swept the earth through the Wesley brothers, the Moravians, the Pentecostal revival and the Charismatic renewal. God gave His Spirit back to His people.

Many are sensing a third wave of restoration, one of wineskins, to build on the first two waves and restore His "glorious church"! God is giving back His church to His people. Clearly, we are heading back towards the Biblical, apostolic pattern and power...



Living On The Edge of Time...

We are to live in such a way as to cooperate with God's unfolding plan in this present age, **"then the end will come"** (Matthew 24:14). Peter taught that we must not just look for the coming of Christ but actually live in such a way as to usher it in! Listen to his soul-charging words: **"since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God"** (2 Peter 3:11, 12).

This is the answer to a piece of the puzzle that eluded me for a long time. The early church lived in expectation of Christ's soon return. He did *not* come **that** soon ... 2,000 years on and we are still here. Were they deceived? The apostolic writers exhorted the early church to live large for God in anticipation of His second coming? Were they also deceived ... or worse, were they being manipulative? Did they use this teaching to compel the early church to a certain quality of life when they knew it was not going to happen? The answer is: No! They were not deceived or manipulative. In fact, they understood something we need to rediscover ... and reclaim fast ... or is that "soon"?

The early church lived with a sense of destiny and responsibility; **they lived believing that they could be the generation that Jesus would return for**. They gave themselves in such a way as to be the Bride who would wow Jesus' heart that He might say, "Father, she's ready! I'm going!" In a phrase, they were a "given generation".

Every generation should live with this hope and responsibility. Peter said Jesus was "being held back" – the literal meaning of **"whom heaven must receive"** – **"until the times of restoration of all things"** (Acts 3:21). Jesus will return when His bride is ready ... when she is fully prepared ... and we are to live holy lives **"looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God"** (2 Peter 3:11, 12).

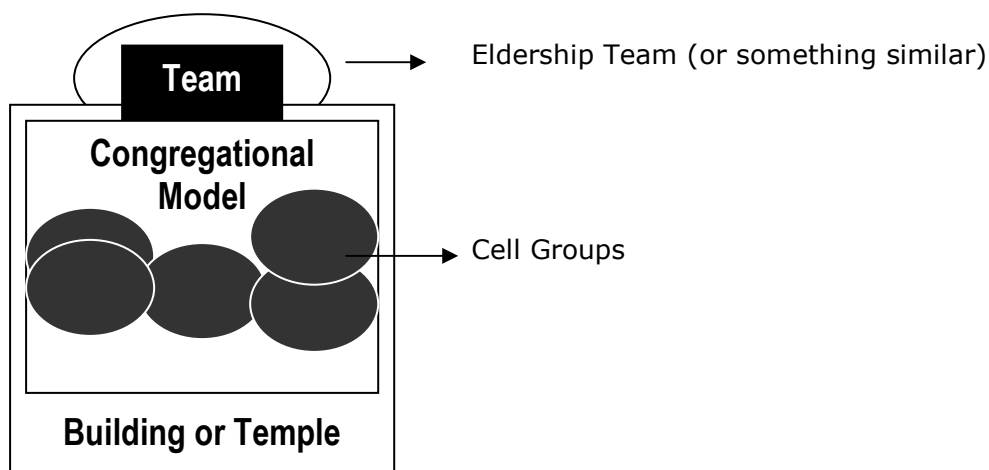
We're not being disloyal to the heroes of the faith when we press out from what they've restored in the past. The best way that we can honour Luther, Wesley and co. is do be loyal to God in our generation as they were in theirs. We are to stand on their shoulders and reach further, not camp in their shadows and hold the fort.

Restoration Or Cosmetic Face-Lift?

The Lord has, without doubt, been restoring His church ever since, just as Peter predicted. However, by and large, our structures remain in the same rigid, static form that Constantine established to some degree or another. We may have the doctrine and Spirit of the early church, but we still do not have their liberty.

Even vital principles that have been recovered by the modern church remain only cosmetic changes to a wrong structure. One principle recovered, for example, is "team ministry" as opposed to "one-man ministry". Today many churches have recovered this vital principle and now have an eldership team or something similar leading church. Another principle recovered is "community" and specifically, small groups or "cells". Again these amendments have been vital, but have only been adjustments to the old, unbiblical wineskin.

Again, diagrammatically these adjustments have been good but not complete ... we have covered some ground but we have not gone the whole nine yards...



Clearly, ***we are still frozen within a wrong pattern!*** The incorrect "congregational model" still underlies our recovery attempts. In order to recapture the New Testament liberty and power, we must rediscover the ***apostolic mindset*** of the New Testament. We are *not* just talking about a new way of doing small groups. We are *not* just talking about "super-duper" Cell Groups. No! We are talking about a whole new way of church life and structure. And let us remind ourselves; while structure, in itself, does not create spiritual life – only the Father can do that – wrong structure does stunt and restrict spiritual life. ***Biblical structure facilitates the life that the Father creates!*** Jesus made this point very clear: "new wine" needs "new wineskins" (see Luke 5:37, 38).

The Swing Factor...

The next few thoughts are in no way intended to be unnecessarily controversial. I am fully persuaded that it is indeed true and do not want to wimp out now in an article that is so important. Here goes: I am convinced that the incorrect understanding of the pastor is the single most restrictive factor in our quest for New Testament power and liberty. If we are ever going to deliver the church from over-dependence on our current unbiblical structures, it is going to require radical change to how we view the "pastor". Though the flaws to this wrong view are numerous, we will only point out here that the current concept of a "pastor" leading an entire congregation is simply not Biblical. The reality is that many recognize that this is so – yet few are prepared to change it.

Now that I have blurted it out, let's be crystal clear. The figure-head called the pastor or "senior pastor" is the piece of the puzzle that holds the whole Constantine-shaped, institutional church together. And God never intended His people to settle for another mediator outside of Christ. The incestuous co-dependency between pastor and congregation has been well documented; rehashing these facts is beyond the scope of this article. The point here is this: to walk into a post-Constantine future will require the fortitude to turn this sacred cow into a juicy hamburger!

And for the record, I am not saying this bitter-and-twisted from some bad church experience. My wife and I were ourselves "senior pastors" and we know that most senior pastors have a genuine calling in God, are sincere followers of Christ and have an authentic love for people. They have the most noble of intentions ... as, I would like to believe, we did a decade ago. However, the system we prop up is wrong. The positional pastor-role on top of the church hierarchy is simply not Biblical

Again, please don't misunderstand me. We are not anti-authority; in fact, we are champions of true Biblical authority having being the recipients of leadership anchored in the Father-heart of God. We have been, in a sense, sheltered from abusive leadership as we have walked with true apostolic men and women. Sadly, we have seen so many who haven't enjoyed the protection we have had. In God's grace, we have found great pleasure in serving and supporting many in their recovery and restoration. Thus, we are calling for a return to the Biblical context that views leadership essentially as spiritual parenthood and church essentially as a spiritual family. We have for well over a decade now witnessed the blessedness of godly leadership ... when we remain true to this vital context.

To be clear then...

On the one hand, we are calling for the full and proper functioning of the Ephesians 4:11 gifts as servant-hearted parent-equippers, including the rediscovery of the true grace gift of pastor ... without which the church will be notably weaker. On the other hand, we are calling for the full investment of authority into simple church elders to parent their self-governing simple church families. For both of these Biblical truths to be restored, it will require that the institutional figure-head of the positional pastor be removed. Only then can parent-elders be fully released to shepherd and oversee their simple churches, while the true grace gift of pastor is rediscovered within the context of servant-hearted apostolic teams.

What we are saying here is no easy task. Firstly, those who occupy the senior pastor position in the institutional church have so much to lose. And it is important that we all understand just how difficult it is to make the changes necessary. We know this cost intimately but can honestly say that what we lost pales into insignificance compared to what we have gained! Huge obstacles needed to be overcome but a decade down the road we live in greater freedom in team ministry and personal well-being than ever before, knowing too that the churches birthed through our journey live in a renewed apostolic era anticipating the greatest outpouring of the Spirit to come! What is remarkable is that literally thousands of pastors – all across the globe – have been making this sacrifice too. We hear stories of these heroes of faith all the time.

Secondly, believers have to re-establish their essential dependency on God rather than "man" and man's institutional systems. Having a "pastor" gives us a sense of security: "He will feed us. He will protect us. He will serve us. He will visit us. He will do this ... and he will do that". Yet the Bible is completely against this dependence on a "man," which keeps the rest of the church spiritually immature while burning out the person called "pastor".

This then creates second-class believers as the Biblical expectations for all believers are transferred to the "religious professional". However, the expectations that we tend to have of the "pastor" – that he must have a clear sense of calling, that he must hear the voice of God, that he must know the Word of God, that he must be a person of faith, that he must walk in the Spirit, etc. etc. – **God desires for us all!**

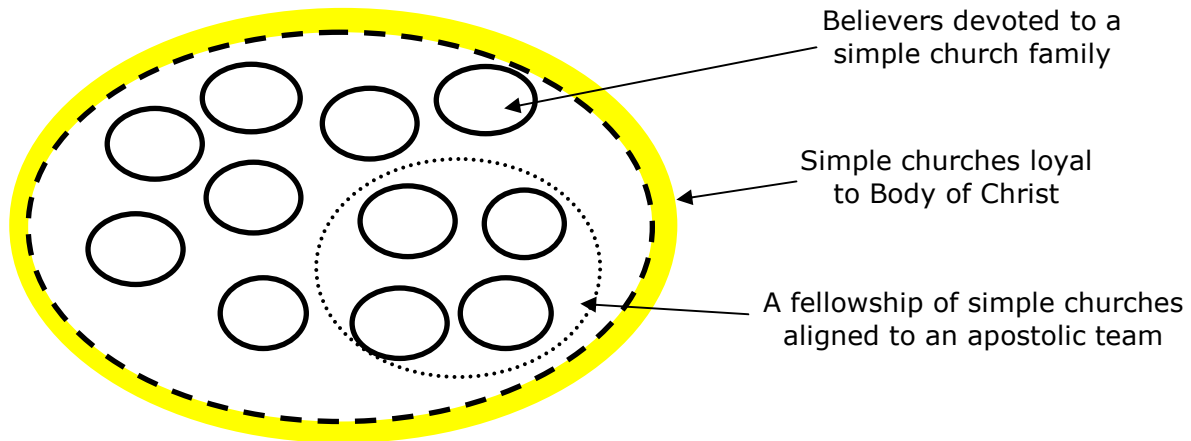
In your journey to first re-establish your dependency in Christ alone and to find life-giving community in a simple church family, resolve to be gracious, prayerful, generous and supportive of those in staffed pastoral positions ... and especially those making the costly changes necessary. The Constantine system – and the devil's ability to exploit it – is the enemy, not well-meaning Christian leaders.

Yes, there may be those leaders who knowingly abuse the system and use the system to feed their own ego and manipulate God's people to build their own empires. But let's not add to the pain they cause by tarring every pastor with the same brush. As we press out for the new

thing in God, let us appropriately honour the past. As Jesus taught, those **“instructed concerning the Kingdom”** are **“like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old”** (Matthew 13:52).

The Real Deal...

Below we diagrammatically depict the fluid, organic apostolic wineskin of the church.



As we worship the King and carry His Kingdom message, motivation and mandate, the church consists of three vital components:

- An essential commitment to the (capital B) Body of Christ specifically fleshed out in a love for **“the church of”** their city, free from sectarianism and tribalism (1 Corinthians 1:2, 12, 13).

Suggestion:

Fall in love with Jesus afresh and renew your love for His Body ... His Bride. Repent for where you have allowed sectarian and human-divisions to separate yourself from your brothers and sisters in Christ. And while this primarily deals with the motivations of our heart, identify the ways in which you can pray and contribute towards a Kingdom-shaped (capital B) Body of Christ, refusing to allow empire-building agendas to sow discord and to foment an “us versus them” attitude.

For more, see our blog article entitled, “What is essential for unity?”
<http://crosswaveglobal.wordpress.com/2010/05/01/what-is-essential-for-unity/>

- A meaningful community of believers, parent-led by fathering elders, whose essential covenant life revolves around **“the church in”** their home (1 Corinthians 16:19).

Suggestion:

Identify your primary relationships and ensure that you become a meaningful part of a spiritual family in which you find fatherhood and brotherhood (gender neutral terms, of course). If you have been burnt out through your church experience, we highly recommend that you allow yourself a sabbatical detox period. Please enquire after our article entitled, “Help! The church is killing me!”

For more, see our blog article entitled, “What is simple church?”
<http://crosswaveglobal.wordpress.com/2010/06/01/what-is-simple-church/>

- A defined and affirmed relational connection to an apostolic vision overseen by an apostolic team who serve them as **“fathers”** (1 Corinthians 4:15, 16).

Suggestion:

Ask the Father to align you and your simple church to a servant-hearted apostolic team. Define this relationship and affirm it regularly. Refuse to settle for a loose meaningless affiliation. By apostolic alignment we are certainly not referring to finding a “covering”. Apostolic alignment involves a relationship and the recognition of apostolic government. Every relationship takes time to come together ... and allowing apostolic fathers to invest into the foundation of who you are and what you do is a reflective, life-shaping

experience. The important thing is to not short cut the process. We have found that a period of intense engagement over at least twelve months can accomplish this marriage in God.

For more, see our blog article entitled, "What is apostolic alignment?"
<http://crosswaveglobal.wordpress.com/2010/09/01/what-is-apostolic-alignment/>

Then let us resolve to...

- seek first His Kingdom,
- pray His Kingdom come,
- demonstrate the Gospel of the Kingdom and
- look for and hasten the return of the King.

"Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

What's Your Garden?

God entrusted Adam and Eve with a global, dominion mandate (Genesis 1:26-28). But then He put them in a garden (Genesis 2:15). Within the boundaries of their God-appointed "garden," they were to be faithful, fruitful and fulfilled. And ... they were to keep the devil out! Adam and Eve were to be focused on their "sphere of influence" – their garden – but needed to be connected to their world. An essential connection to the world delivered them from becoming self-centred; from thinking that their "garden" was all that there was.

Paul also refers to his **"sphere of influence"** (2 Corinthians 10:12-17). Again, he was essentially connected to God's eternal purpose but was clear about what the boundary lines of his "garden" was. Likewise, we are entrusted with His global, Kingdom mandate (Matthew 28:18-20); however, it is crucial that we discern and affirm our own "garden" ... our own "sphere of influence".

Our "sphere of influence" includes all our God-given relationships. No one has our relational connectivity; our circle of impact is as unique to us as our retinal scan. And God has uniquely graced us with gifts and talents and equipped us with lessons and experiences to uniquely reveal God in our "sphere of influence". Within this "garden," we are to be faithful, fruitful and fulfilled.

However, sometimes in the grand scheme of things we can feel as insignificant as plankton. But if you ever think that small means insignificant, try spending a night with a hungry mosquito! We have to embrace this clear and liberating perspective: **"I refuse to be overwhelmed by what I cannot do – rather I choose to be inspired by what I can do!"**

If you ever have reservations that a small group of people can change the world, consider a ragtag group of hill-billy fishermen living in the most obscure, dusty part of the ancient world ... living under the oppression of the most powerful, military regime ever to rule this planet, the mighty Roman Empire. Yet two thousand years later we call our children Peter, James and John – and we call our dogs Caesar, Brutus and Nero.

Jesus said: **"As the Father has sent Me, I also send you"** (John 20:21). There we have it; not just from the horse's mouth, but from the One who created the horse! Plus ... earlier in his gospel, John taught us this famous truth: God so loved the world that He gave us Jesus (John 3:16).

Here's rocket-fuel to launch you into action:

"For God so loved YOUR world that He gave it YOU"

Please see the sister article, "Frequently Asked Questions" as a practical companion to this article. It can be downloaded from www.crosswaveglobal.com.

This article is one of several tools and resources available.

For other resources please contact us...

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